Between Dharma and Desire: Psychological Androgyny in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

This paper examines the plays of Mahesh Dattani, renowned contemporary Indian dramatist, through the lens of psychological androgyny, with special focus on the conflict between dharma defined as duty and collective ethical code—and individual desire, or the striving for self-expression and authenticity, within a modern context. By employing Sandra Bem's theory of psychological androgyny, the study argues that Dattani portrays such characters through his plays, who embody a blend of masculine and feminine psychological traits. These characters act as ethical agents who subvert patriarchal and heteronormative expectations. By analysing selected plays such as "*Bravely Fought the Queen"* and "*Dance Like a Man"*, this paper argues that psychological androgyny is a catalyst for ethical agency, allowing characters to reinterpret dharma through the lens of emotional integrity and self-awareness. This paper contributes to literary and cultural criticism by situating psychological androgyny

as a critical framework for understanding Indian dramas, ethics, and gender identity in a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: Psychological Androgyny; Mahesh Dattani; Dharma; Gender Identity; Indian Drama; Moral Conflict; Literary Ethics

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is widely recognized as one of the most influential Indian English playwrights and holds the distinction of being the first playwright writing in English to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademie Award. Born in 1958, Dattani began his professional life as an advertising copywriter before joining the family business, eventually finding his voice in theatre (Chaudhuri, 2012). His plays are known for challenging entrenched social structures, particularly the deeply embedded patriarchal ideologies that govern Indian society.

Dattani's dramaturgical style is both globally resonant and deeply rooted in Indian socio-cultural realities. His narratives are known to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries while maintaining a sharp focus on contemporary Indian life (Dattani, 2000). Through his plays, Dattani consistently interrogates socio-psychological issues, particularly those concerning gender, sexuality, and identity. Some of his most acclaimed works include: *Where There's a Will (1988), Dance Like a Man (1989), Tara (1990), Bravely Fought the Queen (1991), Final Solutions (1993), and Thirty Days in September (2001),* among others.

A recurring theme in Dattani's dramaturgy is the conflict between dharma—understood here as moral and social duty—and desire, or personal fulfilment. Traditionally, dharma in the Indian context is seen as an inherited set of moral responsibilities that often demand conformity and self-sacrifice. Dattani, however, does not treat this conflict as a philosophical abstraction but as a lived reality, particularly for individuals navigating rigid gender roles and social expectations (Chaudhuri, 2012).

This paper argues that Dattani employs the concept of psychological androgyny as a dramatic tool to explore the tensions between dharma and desire. Drawing on Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory, psychological androgyny refers not to biological sex but to an individual's ability to integrate both traditionally masculine and feminine traits. According to Bem (1974), androgynous individuals display higher levels of adaptability, empathy, assertiveness, and emotional resilience—traits that enable a more fluid and ethical approach to complex life situations beyond traditional gender binaries.

Dattani's theatre is distinctive in its representation of marginalized voices and repressed desires, often dramatizing the inner turmoil of characters fragmented by societal norms. His protagonists frequently grapple with fractured identities in an equally fractured society, allowing his plays to function as both psychological case studies and social critiques (Chaudhuri, 2012; Dattani, 2000).

Characters such as Jaya in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Jairaj in *Dance Like a Man* exemplify psychological androgyny. These characters challenge gender norms not only through their actions but also through the emotional and psychological conflicts they endure. Rather than being reductive symbols, they are fully realized human beings negotiating the pressures of societal expectation while striving for personal fulfilment. Their emotional strength arises from embracing a balance of traits—sensitivity and strength, autonomy and compassion—thus redefining the meaning of dharma in more individualistic and ethically nuanced terms (Bem, 1974).

The primary aim of this paper is to examine how Dattani constructs psychologically androgynous characters to dramatize the struggle between ethical duty and personal desire. Through the lens of Bem's theory of androgyny, these characters are reimagined not merely as gender non-conformists but as morally and psychologically evolved individuals capable of

resisting oppressive binaries. In doing so, Dattani opens up a space for rethinking gender identity and ethical agency within contemporary Indian theatre.

Although Dattani's contributions to the exploration of gender and sexuality have attracted considerable scholarly attention (Chaudhuri, 2012; Dattani, 2000), the specific application of psychological androgyny as a critical interpretive framework remains largely underexplored. This study addresses that gap by integrating Bem's psychological theories with Indian philosophical ideas of dharma, thereby offering a more layered understanding of Dattani's dramaturgy and contributing to wider discourses in gender studies, Indian theatre, and ethical philosophy.

Research Question

1. How does Mahesh Dattani utilize psychologically androgynous characters to explore the ethical tensions between *dharma* (duty) and personal desire in his plays?
2. In what ways can Sandra Bem's theory of psychological androgyny be applied to interpret the moral and emotional complexity of Dattani's protagonists?
3. How does the integration of Indian philosophical notions of *dharma* with Western gender psychology offer a more nuanced understanding of identity, agency, and morality in Dattani's dramaturgy?

Objectives of the Study

1. How does Dattani use psychologically androgynous characters to dramatize the conflict between ethical responsibility (dharma) and individual desire?
2. To apply Sandra Bem's theory of psychological androgyny as a critical framework for interpreting character development and moral ambiguity in Dattani's dramaturgy.

Literature Review

The foundational work of Sandra Bem (1974) introduced the concept of psychological androgyny through the development of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), proposing that individuals can embody both masculine and feminine traits. Her subsequent studies (1975, 1977) emphasized the adaptability and psychological well-being of androgynous individuals, suggesting they are better equipped to navigate complex social situations. Similarly, Spence and Helmreich (1978) examined masculinity and femininity as psychological dimensions rather than strict opposites, reinforcing the value of flexible gender roles. Oakley (1972) made a crucial distinction between sex and gender, framing gender as a social construct rather than a biological given, while Stoller (1968) explored the psychosexual development of gender identity, bridging psychoanalysis with gender theory. Williams (1981) further contextualized identity development, providing psychological insights into how gender roles evolve over time.

Gender Performance and Theoretical Frameworks

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) radically reshaped feminist theory by introducing the concept of gender performativity—the idea that gender is not something one is, but something one does repeatedly in alignment with social expectations. This subversion of identity challenges binary thinking and aligns closely with the struggles of characters like Jairaj in Dattani's work. S. Chaudhuri (2005), in *Feminist Film Theorists*, expands on gender representation through key theorists like Laura Mulvey and Barbara Creed, offering frameworks for analysing the intersection of gender, gaze, and cultural production. These theoretical perspectives help decode the social pressures and performative demands placed on individuals who deviate from normative gender expressions.

Gender, Patriarchy, and Indian Theatre

Mahesh Dattani's *Collected Plays: Volume One* (2000) and *Volume Two* (2006) portray characters grappling with identity, repression, and societal norms within the Indian socio-cultural context. In *Dance Like a Man*, Jairaj's passion for Bharatanatyam challenges

patriarchal expectations, while in *Bravely Fought the Queen*, Dattani exposes the emotional and ethical costs of gender conformity. A. Chaudhuri (2012) provides a critical introduction to Dattani's oeuvre, highlighting his bold engagement with themes of gender, sexuality, and marginalization. A. Lal's *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre* (2001) situates Dattani within the broader trajectory of Indian drama, acknowledging his contribution to the evolution of contemporary theatre. Classical Indian texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* (Miller, 2004) and scholarly works like Brockington's *The Sanskrit Epics* (1998) offer philosophical and historical perspectives on dharma and gender roles—concepts that Dattani interrogates and redefines in his dramatic narratives.

Dharma in Indian Philosophy

In Indian literature and drama, the concept of dharma is both intricate and layered, deeply rooted in philosophical, religious, and literary traditions. Commonly translated as duty, law, or moral order, *dharma* resists a simplistic definition. It encompasses universal principles that uphold cosmic balance, as well as the particular obligations tied to one's social role—whether as a child, parent, spouse, or citizen (Bhagavad Gita, trans. Miller, 2004). Classical Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad Gita* depict *dharma* as a dual force: while it lends order and meaning to human existence, it can also become a source of deep inner conflict when communal expectations clash with personal values or desires (Brockington, 1998; Miller, 2004).

This tension between individual aspiration and social responsibility forms the tragic core of many Indian narratives, from ancient epics to contemporary theatre. Writers and dramatists have continually explored *dharma* as a site of ethical ambiguity and emotional complexity. The theme recurs across Sanskrit drama and into modern Indian writing, often

serving as a powerful metaphor for the struggle between personal truth and collective conformity (Lal, 2001).

Mahesh Dattani's plays continue this literary tradition but offer a significant shift in perspective. Rather than framing *dharma* as a divine imperative or metaphysical truth, Dattani interprets it as a set of culturally constructed expectations, particularly relevant to the Indian urban middle class (Chaudhuri, 2012). His characters grapple not with divine law, but with socially imposed roles—expectations to marry, uphold family honour, conform to heteronormative gender roles, and sustain conventional morality. In this modern framing, *dharma* becomes less a guiding principle of cosmic order and more a confining social mechanism that stifles personal authenticity and emotional integrity (Dattani, 2000).

Dattani interrogates these inherited roles using a dramatic form that privileges emotional realism. His characters are neither heroes nor villains, but complex individuals navigating a moral landscape where *dharma* is not fixed but fluid—reshaped by psychological needs, interpersonal dynamics, and inner conscience. He replaces the absolute authority of tradition with subjective moral inquiry, portraying *dharma* as something to be questioned, negotiated, or even rejected.

This approach bears striking similarity to Sandra Bem's gender schema theory, which examines how internalized social norm's structure identity and behaviour. According to Bem (1974), societal expectations around gender create rigid psychological frameworks that can constrain individual expression. In Dattani's work, *dharma* functions in a similar way—not as a sacred duty but as a socially enforced narrative that his characters must either conform to or subvert in their pursuit of selfhood.

In this way, Dattani reconceptualizes *dharma* as a contested ethical terrain rather than a fixed ideal. His dramaturgy situates *dharma* within a contemporary critique of power, identity, and psychological conflict. While rooted in Indian literary tradition, his plays bring a

modern sensibility that emphasizes the emotional and ethical cost of conformity. Ultimately, Dattani transforms *dharma* into a dynamic space for introspection, resistance, and the reclamation of personal agency.

Gender Performativity in Indian Drama

Leveraging the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Shohini Chaudhuri, researchers have increasingly framed Mahesh Dattani's plays within a wider movement that critiques strict gender binaries and conventional cultural narratives. These scholars highlight that gender, rather than being a fixed or biologically assigned identity, is formed through repeated social performances that influence individual agency and moral identity (Butler, 1990; Chaudhuri, 2005). However, a significant gap in existing scholarship is the insufficient focus on psychological androgyny—the ability to incorporate both traditional masculine and feminine characteristics—as a potential avenue for ethical change. This notion becomes especially relevant in situations where dharma (duty) and Kama (desire) intersect, providing a perspective through which characters can move beyond normative gender roles and attain moral clarity.

Judith Butler's gender performativity theory contests the standard binary perspective that views gender as a biologically predetermined trait, instead arguing that gender is formed through repeated, socially regulated acts—such as speech, behaviour, attire, and other modes of expression (Butler, 1990). In this regard, gender is not something one possesses, but rather something one enacts, consistently performed and reinforced through repeated actions. This outlook emphasizes the influence of institutional norms and power dynamics in shaping experiences and expressions of gender, thereby challenging essentialist views of male and female identity.

When applying Butler's theories to Indian theatre, Mahesh Dattani's works provide a compelling investigation of gender as a performance interwoven with cultural and familial

expectations. In *Dance Like a Man* (1997), the character Jairaj—a male Bharatanatyam dancer—epitomizes a masculinity that challenges patriarchal standards. His artistic ambitions conflict with societal norms concerning male conduct, highlighting the consequences of straying from traditional gender expectations (Dattani, 2000). In a similar vein, *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) features the sisters Dolly and Alka, who struggle with emotionally abusive and restrictive roles within an upper-middle-class Indian family. Their narratives reveal the performative demands placed upon women to conform to idealized femininity, frequently at the cost of their autonomy and mental health.

These plays not only critique the performative aspects of gender but also imply that ethical agency may arise through the disruption of normative identities. However, the underexplored aspect remains: how characters who embody both masculine and feminine qualities—thus achieving psychological androgyny—can develop new ethical insights. This relationship between gender performance and ethical subjectivity presents a promising area for additional exploration in the context of Indian drama and gender theory.

Sandra Bem and Psychological Androgyny

The basic difference between sex and gender lays the foundational theory for comprehending Sandra Bem's idea of psychological androgyny. Sex relates to the biological distinctions between males and females, including hormonal, chromosomal, and anatomical factors, while gender involves psychological traits, personality characteristics, and roles shaped by cultural conditioning (Oakley, 1972). Generally, sex is identified with the terms male and female, whereas gender is associated with masculine and feminine terms. This differentiation, initially articulated by Robert Stoller in 1968 and subsequently embraced by second-wave feminists, enabled a more precise critique of how societal norms influence the definitions of masculinity and femininity, separate from biological sex (Stoller, 1968; Oakley, 1972).

This understanding of gender as a social construct led to the realization that gender roles are not innate but are instead products of cultural evolution and historical gendered divisions of labour. According to Williams (1981), the division of labour, influenced by both biological and socio-economic factors, solidified hierarchies where men were perceived as superior and women as inferior. These strict binaries and role expectations soon became a primary focus for feminist psychologists pursuing alternative perspectives.

In this milieu, Sandra Bem's contributions were groundbreaking. In the 1970s, during a time of heightened feminist critiques of fixed gender roles, Bem introduced the notion of psychological androgyny, which contested the binary concept of masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1974). She suggested that individuals could embody and integrate both masculine (e.g., assertiveness, independence) and feminine (e.g., empathy, sensitivity) traits, which would create a more adaptable, resilient, and psychologically sound identity. This concept stood in direct opposition to existing sex-role theory, which argued that behaviours should strictly correspond to one's biological sex.

To empirically evaluate her theory, Bem created the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI), published in 1974 in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology. The BSRI evaluated how individuals identify with culturally assigned gender traits and classified them into masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated categories (Bem, 1974). Within this framework, androgyny was not seen as a middle ground between masculinity and femininity, but as a separate category, representing the capacity to flexibly draw from both sets of traits depending on the context.

Bem enhanced the BSRI in 1977 to improve its psychometric validity (Bem, 1977). That year, Spence and Helmreich also introduced the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ), which further defined the measurement of psychological androgyny by emphasizing instrumental (masculine) and expressive (feminine) traits (Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

Together, the BSRI and PAQ became the leading instruments in research on gender-role orientation.

Central to Bem's theory is the notion that psychological well-being is greatly enhanced when individuals are not confined by stereotyped gender norms. According to Bem (1977), androgynous individuals demonstrate increased emotional and cognitive flexibility, enabling them to respond more effectively to a variety of life situations. Her model inherently critiques the restrictions imposed by traditional sex-role socialization and paves the way for a non-essentialist understanding of identity—one that is fluid, responsive to context, and socially constructed as opposed to being biologically predetermined.

Furthermore, Bem's work has acted as a conceptual link for future feminist and queer theorists who examine the essentialist links between sex, gender, and identity. By advocating a model where gendered traits can be accessed across different sexes, Bem significantly expanded the parameters of gender theory and presented a valuable framework for understanding non-binary and flexible identities in both psychological and social arenas. The key benefits of psychological androgyny, as proposed by Bem, include:

- **Psychological Flexibility:** Androgynous individuals can more easily navigate social situations because they can draw on both masculine and feminine traits, making them less constrained by traditional gender expectations.
- **Self-Esteem and Satisfaction:** Because androgynous individuals have a broader range of traits and behaviours available to them, they are less likely to feel inadequate or limited by gender-based stereotypes. This flexibility contributes to higher self-esteem.
- **Greater Social and Emotional Competence:** Androgynous individuals tend to exhibit higher levels of emotional intelligence, as they are more likely to express a variety of emotional states and engage with others empathetically.

Linking Psychological Androgyny and Dharma

Bringing Bems concept of psychological androgyny into conversation with dharma opens up a new interpretative path. While dharma tends to be role-bound and hierarchical, androgyny emphasizes flexibility and balance. Characters who embody psychological androgyny can challenge inherited duties without entirely discarding them. Instead, they reinterpret dharma not as rigid obedience but as responsibility rooted in integrity, compassion, and self-awareness.

For example, a character torn between family duty and personal passion may find resolution not by rejecting duty altogether but by redefining it in more inclusive terms. Dattani's plays dramatize this process by showing how characters who embrace their androgynous traits—empathy combined with strength; assertiveness combined with sensitivity—are able to reimagine dharma in ways that are ethically richer than blind conformity. Conversely, characters who repress their androgynous potential often fall into moral paralysis, unable to act authentically or responsibly.

Ethical Responsibility and Psychological Wholeness

The convergence of Daryl Bem's psychological theory of androgyny and Indian philosophical concepts of dharma illuminates the ethical foundations of Mahesh Dattani's plays. Bem's theory, which disputes strict gender binaries by advocating for psychological androgyny—the blending of both traditionally masculine and feminine traits within a person—highlights adaptability and emotional resilience as indicators of psychological well-being (Bem, 1974). When this idea is compared with the Indian philosophical view of dharma, typically understood as one's moral duty or ethical responsibility, a compelling framework arises for analysing Dattani's characters and their ethical decisions. In this context, dharma is concerned not only with adhering to externally imposed societal roles or standards, but also with responding authentically and responsibly to one's environment. Psychological androgyny,

therefore, emerges as a vital aspect of fulfilling dharma, as it nurtures internal balance and the ability to make nuanced moral judgments.

Dattani's dramas often centre on characters who grapple with both internal and external struggles—many of which are rooted in societal expectations related to gender and identity. These characters do not rigidly follow prescriptive moral codes. Instead, they express a richer, more fluid understanding of ethical agency, which stems from their capacity to reconcile conflicting elements of their identities. For example, in *Dance Like a Man*, the male lead Jairaj contends with traditional masculinity while pursuing his love for dance, an activity often associated with femininity. His journey transcends merely asserting a different gender identity; it is about attaining psychological completeness by accepting both masculine and feminine traits. This internal harmony empowers him to act ethically—not by adhering to societal pressures but by remaining true to himself (Dattani, 2006).

This psychological integration is essential in a cultural setting where moral authority is frequently tied to gender, with men linked to rational authority and women to emotional integrity. Dattani challenges this dichotomy by creating characters whose ethical strength derives from their emotional richness and psychological depth, rather than from their gender. Consequently, ethical responsibility in his works becomes inclusive—it is not limited to one gender, but accessible to any individual who achieves psychological integration. Thus, the interplay between Bem's androgyny and Indian dharma underscores that ethical living necessitates an internal capacity to balance conflicting desires and identities, rather than mere external conformity to strict norms.

Mahesh Dattani's theatrical realm presents a forward-thinking ethical perspective founded on psychological completeness. His characters imply that to navigate ethical living in a complicated world, one must develop the inner resources to embrace contradictions and respond with emotional insight. Analysing Dattani's work through this perspective not only

critiques societal conventions but also proposes a philosophical and psychological framework for ethical agency.

Application to Dattani's Plays

Mahesh Dattani, a pivotal figure in Indian English theatre, is recognized for his courageous engagement with themes of gender, sexuality, and social marginalization. His works, including *Tara (1990), Dance Like a Man (1997), Seven Steps Around the Fire (1999), and Bravely Fought the Queen (1991)*, delve into the hidden anguish of individuals ensnared within patriarchal and heteronormative systems. While conventional feminist perspectives often emphasize women from lower socioeconomic statuses, Dattani redirects the focus to middle- and upper-class families, where patriarchal norms are subtly yet firmly upheld. Women in these environments suffer from emotional and psychological oppression, masked by the facade of domestic stability and respectability (Chatterjee, 2005).

Dattani's examination of psychological androgyny—a fusion of typically masculine and feminine characteristics within individuals—enhances his critique of gender dichotomies. This idea, grounded in Sandra Bem's theory of androgyny, indicates that psychological health and flexibility stem from embracing both assertive and nurturing qualities, regardless of one's biological sex (Bem, 1974). The characters in Dattani's plays frequently grapple with rigid gender expectations, and through their psychological journeys, he demonstrates how identity is fluid, performative, and shaped by context. The analysed plays include *"On a Muggy Night in Mumbai", "Thirty Days in September", "Do the Needful", and "Bravely Fought the Queen"*. Dattani addresses prevalent themes in Indian society that individuals often avoid confronting. He provides a platform for these issues, allowing the public to recognize them as realities rather than merely the playwright's imagination. He advances his agenda by addressing numerous taboo subjects, bringing them to the forefront for the audience.

Bravely Fought the Queen

Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) provides a compelling critique of the gendered power dynamics present in Indian urban family structures. The narrative takes place within the Trivedi household, where the facade of affluence and social success conceals deep emotional rifts. Central to the narrative is the dramatization of the clash between personal aspirations and societal and familial moral obligations, positioning it as an excellent text for exploring psychological androgyny. Set primarily within the confines of domestic life, this choice permits Dattani to scrutinize the private-public divide associated with gender oppression. Women are confined to passive, reproductive roles while men assert dominance over domestic and professional realms, often using coercion, deception, and violence. The play explores the fragmented inner lives of both genders in a domestic context. Dolly and Alka defy conventional notions of femininity—Dolly through her quiet resistance, and Alka through her alcoholism and candidness. Ironically, Baa, the family matriarch, reinforces patriarchal values even as she herself is a victim of them. In contrast, Nitin, who hides his homosexuality, grapples with internal conflict and repression. His struggle to reveal his authentic self highlights the psychological toll of upholding a heteronormative public identity. Nitin's internalized duality—exhibiting masculine traits externally while suppressing feminine emotions—situates him within the concept of psychological androgyny (Dattani, 2006).

This fluidity challenges the rigid gender roles anticipated in a conservative Indian household, delivering a subversive critique of heteronormativity. Such duality results in a complicated layering of gender performance. Nitin's public persona aligns with traditional masculinity—married, professional, and emotionally guarded—whereas his private existence exposes non-normative desires. His reluctance to come to terms with his sexuality not only inflicts emotional harm on Alka but also mirrors the societal pressures demanding a display of strict masculinity, even if it means forgoing authenticity (Dattani, 2000). Nitin exemplifies the damaging consequences of suppressing androgynous qualities. Outwardly prosperous, he

represents conventional masculinity—wealth, authority, and domination. Beneath this facade, however, lies profound repression. His hidden homosexuality compels him to fulfil the patriarchal role while denying his genuine self. This self-denial leads to moral failure: Nitin cannot behave ethically toward his wife, family, or himself due to his entrapment within inflexible masculine norms.

In Nitin's case, dharma transforms into a psychological burden rather than a guiding moral principle. He carries out his social responsibilities devoid of conviction, resulting in alienation and dishonesty. Dattani vividly illustrates how repressing androgynous attributes—such as sensitivity, vulnerability, and openness—culminates in ethical paralysis. Among the cast, Jaya emerges as a figure of ethical androgyny. Unlike her sister-in-law Dolly, who represents passivity, Jaya displays resilience and moral clarity. She possesses a keen awareness of her family's dysfunction but remains unbowed by it. Jaya encapsulates both "feminine" qualities like empathy and sensitivity, as well as "masculine" traits such as assertiveness and independence. For instance, when faced with her husband's duplicity, she does not remain silent but challenges him with quiet strength.

Through the character of Jaya, Dattani illustrates how psychological androgyny fosters ethical understanding. She perceives that her roles as a wife and daughter-in-law do not completely define her moral duties. Her interpretation of dharma does not involve blind allegiance but instead emphasizes truthfulness and compassion. This redefinition of duty resonates with Bem's notion that flexibility enables individuals to make more balanced ethical choices. Similarly, Alka also exhibits androgynous characteristics, albeit in a different manner. She confronts her husband's authority and questions the betrayal she has faced, doing so not through submissiveness but through bold confrontation. Her audacity, dependence on alcohol, and emotional detachment from conventional domestic roles situate her beyond traditional

femininity. Alka's refusal to uphold the idealized portrayal of an obedient wife signifies a subtle yet impactful departure from established gender norms.

Dance Like a Man

In "*Dance Like a Man,*" Mahesh Dattani delves into the conflict between individual identity and societal norms through the character of Jairaj, whose passion for Bharatanatyam places him in direct opposition to traditional gender expectations. Within the conservative confines of his family and community, Jairaj's commitment to a classical dance form—often linked to femininity—is viewed as unsuitable for a man, especially by his father, Amritlal. This resistance underscores the wider struggle encountered by men who diverge from culturally endorsed representations of masculinity (Dattani, 2000).

From a psychological standpoint, Sandra Bem's (1974) theory of psychological androgyny offers an insightful framework for analysing Jairaj's character. Bem characterizes androgyny as the amalgamation of both traditionally masculine traits—such as assertiveness and independence—and traditionally feminine traits—such as empathy and emotional vulnerability—within one individual. Bharatanatyam itself, which contrasts the vigorous tandava with the graceful lasya, serves as a metaphor for this androgynous equilibrium. The dance form reflects Jairaj's inner experiences, where strength and sensitivity exist side by side, challenging strict gender binaries.

Jairaj personifies this psychological androgyny through his dedication to dance, displaying not only the emotional expressiveness often deemed feminine but also the determination and independence typically associated with masculinity (Dattani, 2000). However, his effort to assert this integrated identity is consistently undermined by patriarchal pressures. Amritlal's demand that Jairaj give up dance is presented in moral terms—as a fulfilment of dharma, or rightful duty. For Amritlal, dharma equates to adherence to traditional masculinity and the preservation of family honour through "respectable" occupations.

Nonetheless, Dattani critiques this perspective by revealing its controlling nature; when dharma is utilized to govern gender behaviour, it shifts from a guide to ethical living to a tool of oppression.

The failure to grasp a more genuine form of dharma—one grounded in creativity, self-expression, and balance—results in Jairaj's psychological fragmentation. While he exhibits qualities that align with Bem's androgynous ideal, these traits are stifled under the burden of patriarchal expectations. The internal struggle between his artistic desires and familial responsibilities leads to emotional detachment and unfulfilled potential. In contrast to Jaya in Dattani's "Bravely Fought the Queen," who actively navigates her inner conflicts, Jairaj remains ensnared in a loop of resentment and withdrawal. His dharma becomes tainted—not an ethical compass, but a weight of obedience driven by fear.

In the end, Jairaj's tragedy is not rooted in his love for dance, but in his failure to harmonize this passion with the stringent gender roles imposed upon him. Dattani portrays this failure as a critique of a patriarchal structure that restricts individuals from fully embodying the wide range of human qualities, thereby suffocating psychological completeness and personal satisfaction.

Ratna's Aspiration and Ethical Blindness

Ratna embodies another dimension of this conflict. She adopts ambition and competitiveness—traits that are considered masculine—while lacking in compassion and honesty. Her manipulation of Jairaj illustrates how the adoption of a singular set of traits without equilibrium can also lead to ethical shortcomings. Ratna is not genuinely androgynous but rather unbalanced; she prioritizes control over empathy, ambition over integrity. Through this relationship, Dattani critiques both inflexible masculinity and unbalanced ambition. True psychological androgyny would have enabled Jairaj and Ratna to support each other as artists

and partners. Instead, their failure to attain balance results in fractured relationships and moral compromise.

Conclusion

The play juxtaposes dharma as a constricting tradition with dharma as a matter of personal integrity. For characters like Baa, dharma is a strict code meant to be enforced, ensuring adherence to gender roles and familial honour. Conversely, for Jaya, dharma becomes a journey toward equilibrium: meeting obligations while remaining true to oneself. Through these differing perspectives, Dattani illustrates how psychological androgyny can lead to a reinterpretation of dharma in more humane ways. Ultimately, Mahesh Dattani's works remind us that moral living necessitates psychological completeness. By portraying the conflicts faced by characters torn between dharma and desire, he demonstrates that genuine responsibility stems not from inflexible regulations but from balance, empathy, and honesty. His theatre thus provides both a critique of patriarchal ideals and a vision for ethical renewal in modern society.

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