



## A Critical Study of *Dance Like a Man* in Modern Context

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**Abstract:** *Dance Like a Man* is a significant play in modern context because it touches upon several social issues that are still relevant today. The play's portrayal of gender roles, pursuit of passion, and tradition versus modernity provides powerful commentary on the societal norms that limit individuals' potential. It is a play that challenges social expectations and highlights the importance of pursuing one's passion, even if it means going against societal norms. It is a play that provides timeless wisdom and is still relevant to modern audiences. One of the crucial aspects of the play that is relevant in modern context is the portrayal of gender roles. The play portrays how patriarchal attitudes can limit an individual's potential and reinforce gender stereotypes. The play's protagonist, Jairaj, wants to pursue his passion for dance, but his parents, especially his father, are against the idea because they believe that men should not be dancers. The play highlights how societal norms often dictate what is appropriate for men and women, which can significantly affect individual choices and aspirations. This is a powerful message that is still relevant today, as women's and men's roles in society continue to be subject to societal expectations and stereotypes. The play challenges the audience to reflect on their own attitudes towards tradition and change and asks them to contemplate the importance of artistic expression and family relationships in nurturing a person's identity.

**Key Words:** Social Issues, Gender Roles, Tradition vs Modernity, Patriarchy, Indian Family System.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* is a significant play in modern context because it portrays several social issues that are still relevant today. The play is set in south India, and it explores the theme of societal expectations, gender roles, family dynamics, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. One of the crucial aspects of the play that is relevant in modern context is the portrayal of gender roles. The play portrays how patriarchal attitudes can limit an individual's potential and reinforce gender stereotypes. The play's protagonist, Jairaj, wants to pursue his passion for dance, but his parents, especially his father, are against the idea because they believe that men should not be dancers. The play highlights how societal norms often dictate what is appropriate for men and women, which can significantly affect individual choices and aspirations. This is a powerful message that is still relevant today, as women's and men's roles in society continue to be subject to societal expectations and stereotypes. Moreover, the play addresses the importance of pursuing one's passion and how the pursuit of a passion can be an act of defiance against societal norms.

### 2. SUMMARY OF THE PLAY:

The play's central character, Jairaj, has a passion for dance, and he is willing to fight his family's expectations and societal norms to achieve his goals. His sister, Lata, also has a passion for dance, but she is not able to pursue it because of her husband's expectations. The play underscores the importance of pursuing one's passion, even if it means going against society's expectations. The play is also relevant in modern context because it addresses the idea of tradition versus modernity. The play shows how traditional values can clash with modern ideas, leading to conflict and discord within a family. The issue of tradition versus modernity is still a relevant issue today, especially in societies that are undergoing rapid changes. *Dance Like a Man* is a significant play in modern context because it touches upon several social issues that are still relevant today. The play's portrayal of gender roles, pursuit of passion, and tradition versus modernity provides powerful commentary on the societal norms that limit individuals' potential. It is a play that



challenges social expectations and highlights the importance of pursuing one's passion, even if it means going against societal norms. It is a play that provides timeless wisdom and is still relevant to modern audiences.

### **3. SOCIETY AND GENDER ROLES :**

The play portrays the societal expectation of gender roles as most pronounced. The struggle to adhere to gender-specific roles and societal expectations is evident in Jairaj, the male protagonist of the play. His parents, Viswas and Ratna, are ex-dancers who believe that he is wasting his life pursuing dance as a profession. They argue that performing roles outside of the gender "norm" would threaten to emasculate him and, in turn, bring him a lifetime of societal ridicule. Their conservative mindset mirrors the prevalent societal norm that men should follow blue-collar jobs like engineering, medicine, and others, but not art. Additionally, societal expectations of patriarchy perpetuate gender roles and societal norms in the play. Despite having an inclination towards dance, Jairaj's father, Viswas, left dance to work for his family's business. Similarly, Viswas' disappointment and criticism of Jairaj's career prospects stem from the societal pressures of being a patriarch and having to shoulder the family's economic responsibilities. Therefore, societal expectations widen the gap between an individual's career aspirations and familial expectations. Another aspect that the play portrays is the societal expectation that individuals should conform to societal class structures. Ratna's desire for her children to move upwards in the social ladder leads her to shame her son's career prospects. She wishes that her son should elevate them out of their financial and social 'imperfections'- another example of challenging a character's personal growth and progress owing to societal expectations. Moreover, the play displays societal expectations concerning marriage as an essential aspect of an individual's life. Jairaj's sister, Lata, pays the ultimate price of societal expectations; she sacrifices her artistic passion to accommodate her husband's career, and in turn, he forbids her from dancing. Lata unleashes her anger and frustration on her niece, who also desires to pursue a career in dance, but she never objects to her husband's demands. The play highlights how societal expectations of marriage can rob an individual of their passion and potentially impact their self-worth. *Dance Like a Man* portrays societal expectations as a significant hindrance in the character's personal progress and development.

### **4. THEME OF MARGINALISATION :**

Dattani's drama explores the theme of marginalization within the context of traditional Indian society. The play highlights how cultural norms and societal pressure can lead to discrimination against marginalized groups, relegating them to a lower social status. This paper will examine how the theme of marginalization is portrayed in the play. The play examines marginalization within the context of traditional Indian society, portraying characters who struggle against societal expectations and pressures. The character of Jairaj represents the marginalization of individuals who choose to deviate from traditional gender roles. Jairaj is a male dancer who chooses to pursue contemporary dance, which is not considered a suitable career for a man according to traditional Indian societal norms. This choice causes him to be ostracized and marginalized within his community. In addition, the play portrays the marginalization of women within traditional Indian society. Ratna, Jairaj's mother, is portrayed as being trapped within the confines of traditional gender roles. Despite being an accomplished dancer, she was forced to give up her career by her husband and the pressures of societal expectations. This marginalization is further emphasized by the fact that she was not allowed to perform certain traditional dances because of her gender. The play also portrays the marginalization of homosexuals in traditional Indian society. Mohan, Jairaj's father, is not accepting of his son's sexuality and sees his non-traditional career choice as a reflection of his sexuality. This attitude reflects the homophobia and intolerance that many marginalized communities face in traditional Indian society. The play highlights how societal discrimination against marginalized groups leads to feelings of alienation and marginalization. Moreover, the play examines the impact of marginalization on personal relationships. Jairaj and his father's relationship is strained due to Jairaj's non-traditional career choice and his father's inability to accept his son's sexuality. This conflict between father and son highlights the emotional toll that societal pressures and discrimination can have on marginalized individuals and their families. The play also suggests that marginalization can lead to a loss of cultural heritage and tradition. Jairaj chooses to pursue contemporary dance, rejecting the traditional forms of dance that his father represents. The play suggests that the marginalization of individuals who deviate from societal expectations can lead to the loss of cultural diversity and heritage.

### **5. THEME OF IDENTITY CONFLICT :**

*Dance Like a Man* portrays the theme of identity conflict, where the characters face an internal struggle to define their personal and cultural identities. The play presents conflicting views on Indian culture and tradition, highlighting the tension between traditional values and contemporary aspirations. In this paper, we will explore how the



theme of identity conflict is represented in the play. The play presents the conflict within the dual identities of the characters, who are both Indian and modern. Jairaj, Mohan, and Ratna all have a dual identity, trying to bridge the gap between being Indian and being modern. Jairaj represents the younger generation striving to embrace modernity, with a desire to explore Kathakali dance, but also wanting to add new elements to it. Mohan, on the other hand, represents an older generation that is unwilling to compromise India's traditional identity. He is skeptical of modernity and wants to uphold tradition by preventing Jairaj from creating contemporary dance. This conflict reflects the broader societal conflict in India, where people are grappling with the transition from traditionalism to modernity. The play also highlights the complex identity of an artist in Indian society. Jairaj's passion for dance causes him to be rejected by his father, as Mohan believes that dancers have a low social status in Indian society. Nonetheless, Jairaj persists in his passion and struggles with the conflict between pursuing his dream and maintaining his family name. In this, the play raises the issue of identity as an artist in Indian culture, where it is often perceived as a low-status profession and seen as dishonorable. Furthermore, the play portrays the identity conflict of women in Indian society. Lata, Jairaj's dance teacher, represents women's aspirations to break out of traditional gender roles and pursue a career in the arts. However, her brother, Viswas, is allowed to pursue his passion for dance despite coming from a conservative family background. The play highlights the gender-based identity conflict that prevails in Indian society and demonstrates how gender roles often limit women's ability to define their identity in their own terms. As a result, the play highlights the conflict between individuality and cultural identity. The characters grapple with defining their identity within societal expectations while also trying to explore their personal aspirations. Jairaj struggles with the dilemma of choosing between his family's reputation and his passion for contemporary dance. Mohan, on the other hand, tries to assert the cultural identity of his family and traditions, thereby clashing with Jairaj's modernist aspirations. The play highlights the struggle between the individual's desire to assert personal identity against the backdrop of entrenched cultural norms.

## **6. CULTURAL CONFLICT :**

The play portrays the cultural conflict between traditional and modern values primarily through the relationship between Jairaj, the son, and Mohan, the father. Mohan is staunchly traditional, as represented by his views on education and his belief that men shouldn't dance, except as part of classical theatre. Jairaj, in contrast, is passionate about contemporary, modern dance, unlike his father or grandfather, who were Kathakali artists. This creates a rift between them, with Jairaj trying to convince his father to appreciate modern dance, while Mohan discourages his son's love for the art, misinterpreting it as "Western culture." Furthermore, the play showcases the conflict between having to choose between personal dreams and respective cultural traditions. For instance, Lata, Jairaj's dance teacher, lives under the same roof as her performing father, who disapproves of her dance performance, and her brother, Mohan's protégé in the traditional Thiruvathira dance, which the family considers as highly cultural. In such a situation, Lata is torn between cultural conservatism and her aspiration for modern, Indian dance. Another instance of this conflict is Ratna, Jairaj's mother, who once had a passion for dance but gave it up for marriage and traditional family life. Her advice to Jairaj must balance caution against rebelling against cultural traditions and pursuing artistic passions. Moreover, the cultural conflict is further emphasized by gender roles and patriarchy. Indeed, the play posits that traditional Indian culture has been shaped by patriarchy, which limits women's freedom and choices. It manifests in the societal expectation for women to marry at a certain age and become homemakers. Lata confronts patriarchy in a society that doesn't associate much respect with women who dance, most likely because they show off their bodies. In that sense, she is an embodiment of modernity within an overly masculine and conservative family while also representing a challenge to the dominance of patriarchal culture that quietly but confidently exists in Indian society. On the whole, *Dance Like a Man* explores the various forms of cultural conflict and the changes that are emerging in Indian society. The play delves into the theme of clashing cultures- tradition and modernity- and the conflicts that arise from this clash. The actions of the characters in the play are shaped by their respective cultural backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of Indian society as a whole. Although the characters' attempts at overcoming cultural differences and reconciling with one another is a daunting task, the play highlights the urgent need for Indian culture to be accepting of new ideas and adaptable to change.

## **7. CLASH BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY :**

Mahesh Dattani explores the theme of clash between tradition and modernity, highlighting the struggle of the characters to reconcile their traditional values with their desire to embrace modernity. The play depicts the traditional Indian society and how the traditions of the past clash with the aspirations of the present generation, particularly in their pursuit of cultural expression through dance. The conflict between tradition and modernity is showcased through the character of Jairaj, who is struggling to balance both the traditional expectations of his family and his passion for dance. Jairaj's desire to pursue his love for dance is at odds with his father's aspirations of him becoming an engineer,



representing the traditional profession in India. This clash between the past and the present is further emphasized through the characterization of Mohan, Jairaj's father, who is unwilling to let his son pursue dance, citing it as a frivolous activity that would bring disgrace to the family. Mohan is a representative of the older generation, which is traditional and believes in the existence of strict boundaries between genders, caste, and religion. In contrast to Mohan's traditional beliefs, Jairaj's mother Ratna is depicted as someone who is more open-minded and supportive of her son's passion for dance. Ratna herself had dreams of pursuing dance when she was younger, but succumbed to the societal pressure of marriage and eventually abandoned her passion for dance. Although Ratna can relate to Jairaj's struggles, she is limited in her capacity to challenge Mohan openly, illustrating the deeply ingrained patriarchal values and power structures in traditional Indian society. Lata, Jairaj's dance teacher and his former love interest, also represents the clashing of tradition and modernity. Lata is portrayed as a woman who defies traditional gender roles by pursuing her passion for dance over marriage, which is the expected path for women in traditional Indian society. However, the play also shows that her success is limited because of her gender, with her father being less supportive of her dreams compared to her brother. Lata also serves as a voice of reason in the play, serving as a mediator in the conflicts between Jairaj and Mohan. Moreover, the play emphasizes the role of dance as a symbol of modernity, freeing oneself from traditional constraints. The dance form, which Jairaj and Lata are passionate about, is a fusion of traditional and modern forms of dance, showing how the two can coexist in harmony. Through dance, Jairaj and Lata are able to express their emotions and beliefs, breaking free from the constraints of traditional society. The play suggests that the acceptance and the embracing of modernity is essential for individuals to be able to express themselves freely, without the fear of constraints placed due to societal expectations. The play presents a nuanced approach to the issue, highlighting the struggles faced by characters such as Jairaj, Lata, and Ratna in their pursuit of cultural expression, through dance. The play suggests that embracing modernity is important to stay relevant and feel liberated from the constraints of tradition. The play urges for Indian society to evolve progressively and embrace new ideas without leaving behind the essence of tradition.

#### **8. THEME OF FAMILY :**

In *Dance Like a Man*, the theme of family is paramount. The play revolves around two generations of a family, their relationships, and individual struggles. The family's perspectives and dynamics reflect the changing landscape of Indian society. The central theme of family is explored in a nuanced, complex manner in the play, delving into the personal, familial, and social aspects of the characters' lives. The play portrays a dysfunctional family marked by a tense and troubled relationship between the father and mother, Mohan and Ratna, and their children, Lata and Jairaj. The friction between the parents is evident in their clashing values and beliefs, and their different attitudes and opinions towards dance. The father is a traditionalist who believes in preserving the art form's purity and heritage. He demands perfection from his children, making Jairaj's life a complex one as he tries to navigate his father's demands and expectations. Ratna, Jairaj's mother, supports her son's interest in dance and encourages his desire to express himself. The play reflects the cultural tensions in Indian society between traditional values and modernity. Jairaj represents the new generation who wants to break away from the traditional ideas and beliefs held by his father, while his father Mohan represents the older, orthodox generation. The differences between the two generations reflect the generational conflict taking place in Indian society at the time of the play's release. The family dynamic in the play is examined through the lens of art, with dance being a central theme of the play. The dance form of kathak symbolizes the family's heritage, but also serves as a reflection of their aspirations and desire for artistic expression. The play represents how the dance form unites and divides the family simultaneously. Furthermore, the play's portrayal of family relationships is notable because it examines the personal and social aspects of family dynamics. The central theme of family is used to explore the character's individual struggles and desires, their relationships with each other, and the complex way in which these dynamics shape their lives. For instance, Ratna is shown struggling with her marriage to Mohan and her desire to support her son's interest in dance. Lata is depicted as a troubled individual struggling with her own identity and searching for a sense of belonging. Through these characters' struggles, the play underscores the complexity and intricacy of the family bond. The play portrays a family struggling to reconcile their personal aspirations with their family's traditions, reflecting the broader social tensions and changes taking place in Indian society. The play's nuanced and complex portrayal of family dynamics highlights how family relationships shape character identity, aspirations, and desires. Overall, *Dance Like a Man* is a reflection of how family dynamics shape individuals and how they navigate these complex relationships in a rapidly changing world.

#### **9. CONCLUSION :**

Mahesh Dattani explores the complex theme of family, gender, and tradition. The play tells the story of an Indian family grappling with societal expectations, personal ambition, and family dynamics. One of the key themes of



the play is the clash between traditional and modern values. Jairaj and Ratna, the two protagonists of the play, represent this conflict through their different approaches to life. Jairaj is the son of an accomplished dancer who sticks to the old ways of artistic expression while Ratna, his wife, is a modern woman who believes in freedom and individuality. The two characters' viewpoints are in contrast to their upbringing, with Ratna raised in a freer environment, while Jairaj is under the strict supervision of his father. The notion of tradition is threaded throughout the narrative, with dance as a recurring symbol. The play highlights the importance of dance in India, as it is considered an art that holds cultural value. However, dance is also shown as a form of personal expression, a means of self-discovery, and a way of breaking free from societal norms. The play portrays how Jairaj's passion for kathak dance has been motivated by his father, who teaches him the traditional way of dance. Meanwhile, Ratna's approach to dance is more personal and less traditional. Furthermore, gender roles and societal expectations are another significant theme in the play. Jairaj's father is a traditionalist who believes that dance is the domain of men and is disapproving of his daughter's aspirational interests in the art form. Similarly, Ratna's father, who supports her aspirations, has the opposite viewpoint, believing that dance is strictly for women. The play, therefore, raises the question of gender roles and their societal impact, as well as exploring the interplay between tradition and modernity. The theme of familial relationships and dynamics is also central to the play. Jairaj's mother and father have a tumultuous relationship that casts a long shadow over their family. The strained relationship shapes Jairaj's perspective of his father and the family's attitude towards the art form. The play portrays how family histories and parents' values can impact the children's aspirations and desires. In conclusion, *Dance Like a Man* is a play that explores the cultural, social, and identity conflicts that arise when tradition and modernity collide. Through dance, the characters' conflicting beliefs, and their family interactions, the play explores what it means to hold on to tradition, what it means to move away from it, and what it means to exist somewhere in between. Ultimately, the play challenges the audience to reflect on their own attitudes towards tradition and change and asks them to contemplate the importance of artistic expression and family relationships in nurturing a person's identity.

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