
GENDER, GUILT AND THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS: A COMPARATIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF TARA AND DANCE LIKE A MAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into gender identity, psychological guilt, and the quest for wholeness in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*, foregrounding Sandra Bem's psychological androgyny as its central framework alongside Judith Butler's gender performativity (Bem 162; Butler 25). Bem's model posits androgyny as the integration of masculine and feminine traits, enabling psychological wholeness; the study applies this to reveal how patriarchal norms enforce binary roles, fragmenting identities and breeding internalized guilt. In *Tara*, the conjoined twins' separation exemplifies gendered discrimination, dooming the female twin and disrupting androgynous potential (Dattani, *Tara*). *Dance Like a Man* critiques masculinity's crisis through a male Bharatanatyam dancer's rebellion against emasculation, advocating androgynous fluidity (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man*). Both plays depict denial of gender fluidity as causing fragmentation, with wholeness emerging as an emotional, existential integration of dual traits. Dattani thus critiques patriarchy while envisioning androgynous liberation.

Keywords: psychological androgyny, gender performativity, identity fragmentation, patriarchal norms, internalized guilt.

INTRODUCTION

As mentioned earlier, the Mahesh Dattani works are dramatic, which interrogates the rigid gender binaries within the Indian middle-class social and cultural structure. Through his plays, one can find how the norms of masculinity and femininity, both socially constructed, do not only imprint individual consciousness but also suppress individual desires, which, in most cases, lead to destructive psychological effects (Dattani, *Collected Plays* xi). In *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani foreshadows characters who are disintegrating due to gender bias, emotional defiance and unremitting psychological struggle to reveal the oppressions of patriarchal traditions in a postcolonial Indian society (Dattani, *Tara*; Dattani, *Dance Like a Man*).

The play is discussed in this paper to highlight the common theme of psychological guilt and the struggles to find wholeness in the face of deep gender fragmentation. It has a combined theoretical framework of psychological androgyny theory by Sandra L. Bem and gender performativity theory by Judith Butler, and the third one is the existential feminism theory by Simone de Beauvoir. The conceptual theory of Bem is that psychological well-being thrives when people combine instrumental (masculine) and expressive (feminine) characteristics,

which creates an adaptable and emotionally stable state; in contrast, extreme sex-typing, which is perpetuated by the societal dichotomies, kills growth and welcomes fragmentation (Bem 155, 162-65). Butler goes further to theorize the gender as performative, a stylized repetition of practices that are socially produced and not inherent to individuals, and that affirm the norms of oppression by practicing on a daily basis (Butler 24-25, 33). In addition to these, when de Beauvoir states that a woman is not born but made, the construction of gender by the author supports the idea of its being an imposition of otherness, a project (de Beauvoir 267). Together, these lenses help to reveal how the characters in Dattani survive with existential pain when society rejects them fluid androgynous identities.

Dattani (1990) creates a tragic tale of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan (then Patel), who in turn were separated as newborns due to racial and medical prejudice towards the male child. This gendered violence seals Tara with bodily impairment and mental torture, and Chandan with survivor guilt, the family secrets are unveiled in a non-linear storyline, and hypocrisy of the middle-class is exonerated (Dattani, Tara 45-47, 72). Similarly, *Dance Like a Man* (1989) follows the Parekh family through the generations as the core character is Amritlal, a devoted male Bharatanatyam dancer who went through a guru and whose passion oppressed the inner colonial manhood of his son Jairaj. The emotional repression of resentment is experienced when Jairaj feels the Aesthetic of femininity of Bharatanatyam threatening his heterosexual self, which indicates the generational trauma (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 32-35, 68).

The rejection of gender fluidity is psychologically disastrous, both in the plays, and generates guilt, alienation, and existential emptiness. Dattani capitalizes on the Indian struggle between cultures, the feminized past of Bharatanatyam caught in colonial contempt at the effeminate arts, and he generalizes the androgynous struggle (Dattani, *Collected Plays* 12). And lastly, Tara and *Dance Like a Man* confirm that psychological androgyny can mend the wounds of patriarchy, and offer the way to becoming integrated and liberated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The plays of Mahesh Dattani have been greatly analyzed in as much as they question gender roles and psychological implications among the middle-class people in India. Researchers have never ceased pointing out that his works question strict dichotomies and address the effects of the patriarchal standards on identity. Jain notes that the characters of Dattani are negotiating gender policing in society, which makes them feel deeply guilty and alienated when they are defying the expected roles (Jain 78). Likewise, Mehta puts the plays of Dattani in the postcolonial Indian context, stating that they expose the conflicts between the received cultural codes and personal wants, or the tensions between the gendered expectations and personal ones (Mehta 112). All these works help to emphasize the prominence of the theme of gender and identity conflict in the theatre of Dattani.

Sandra Bem theorizes the psychological androgyny as an important tool to analyze the characters of Dattani. According to Bem, emotional stimulation and flexibility arise with the combination of masculine (instrumental) and feminine (expressive) characteristics, whereas extreme sex-typing leads to psychological fragmentation and guilt (Bem 155-162). Using this framework, Rao illustrates that in Tara, the medical division of conjoined twins reinforces male privilege, victimizing Tara and limiting her chances to achieve psychological integrity. *Dance Like a Man*, Rao notes the ways in which the generational trauma and internalized ideas of masculinity by colonialists cannot allow Jairaj to enjoy the expressive nature, which leads to his repressions and conflict with his family (Rao 68). Such treatments indicate the

tremendous psychological impacts of one being denied androgynous identity in the works of Dattani.

The gender performativity theory by Judith Butler also sheds more light on the nature of identity in these plays. Butler views gender as a stylized repetition of acts which is not inherently natural but socially constructed, and therefore preservation of cultural norms (Butler 25, 33). Scholars such as Kapoor use this view of Dattani, revealing how the repression of bharatanatyam, the dance form that by its cultural coding of femininity, expresses that Jairaj is bound to performative masculinity, exemplifies the mental stress of following performative masculinity (Kapoor 41-42). Likewise, the marginalization of Tara shows how the society acts out the male privilege and how gender is performed and enforced through sex and portrays the point made by Butler that an act repeated becomes oppressive (Kapoor 54).

Dattani criticizes patriarchy further in the context of existential feminist views especially those of Simone de Beauvoir. The importance of gender as a social construction that is imposed on anyone is highlighted by de Beauvoir when she says a woman was not born; one is made (de Beauvoir 267). According to Sharma, this is the way in which Tara is marginalized and Jairaj experiences such internal conflict because their psychological sufferings are caused by the external alienation of gender roles expectations and the refusal to determine identities independently (Sharma 33-40). The insights provided by De Beauvoir would be a complement to Bem and Butler because it throws light on the existential implications of rejecting androgynous and fluid identities.

Lastly, even the very analyses of the texts of Dattani support these theoretical interpretations. The separation of the twins and the subsequent trauma in Tara exemplifies discrimination and feeling of guilt in terms of gender attitudes (Dattani, Tara 45-47, 72). Dance Like a Man presents the conflict between individual desire and social norms, the suppressive nature of colonial and patriarchal modes of masculinity (Dattani, Dance Like a Man 32-35, 68). The Collected Plays presents a more inclusive approach by presenting common motifs of repression, alienation and the pursuit of psychological wellbeing (Dattani, Collected Plays xi-xii). These readings prove the fact that the study of androgyny and gender fluidity that Dattani conducts is both local and global.

Overall, it is seen that, in the literature, Dattani shows the psychological price of the latter imposition of binary gender standards. By incorporating the theory of androgyny by Bem and the theory of performativity by Butler and the theory of existential feminism by de Beauvoir, one gets a complex approach to the problem of examining the idea of guilt, the sense of identity disruption and the existential tension that forms as a result of patriarchal oppression. Taken together, these works indicate that psychological androgyny can enable characters to become emotionally whole, which is not only a criticism of the patriarchal culture but also a prospect of individual freedom.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does Mahesh Dattani depict gender-based discrimination and its psychological consequences in *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*?
2. In what ways do guilt and internalized societal norms influence the fragmentation of identity in the protagonists of these plays?

3. How can Sandra Bem's theory of psychological androgyny and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity explain the characters' struggles and the pursuit of wholeness?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine how Mahesh Dattani portrays gender-based discrimination and its psychological impact on the characters in *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*.
2. To analyze the role of guilt and internalized societal norms in causing identity fragmentation among the protagonists of the plays.
3. To apply Sandra Bem's theory of psychological androgyny and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to interpret the characters' struggles and their pursuit of psychological wholeness.

ANALYSIS

Gender Discrimination and Fragmented Identity in *Tara*

The story of *Tara* (Mahesh Dattani) is an outright warning against the influence of patriarchy by the author using the characters of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, whose surgical separation is skewed against the male child (Dattani, Tara). This choice leads to the death of Tara and Chandan is left with a lifelong guilt, a point that shows how masculinity is preferred in society and is a root cause of physical and psychological violence. The twins at the very beginning possess a combined androgynous identity, a synthesis of masculine and feminine aspects; this balance is ruthlessly broken by gendered discrimination. The play shows that the strict patriarchal rules divide identity, resulting in severe psychological trauma by prioritizing the male survival above all.

The subsequent transformation of Chandan to Dan can serve as a good example of the consequences of such gendered bias in the long term. The fact that he tries to rebuild his life and his identity as well is a demonstration of his inability to avoid internalized guilt and at the same time hang on the loss of his sister and the totality that she represented (Dattani, Tara). In the perspective of the psychological androgyny theory created by Sandra Bem, the tragedy of Tara is that of the eradication of an integrated identity: the forced separation of the twins favors one sex, denying the other, and refutes the potential of psychological completeness (Bem 170). The story thus also depicts the ways in which patriarchal institutions not only impose gender inequality but also create existential and emotional discontinuity in the victims.

Moreover, the body and symbolical exclusion of Tara highlights how gender is made/constructed as an indicator of worth and survival in society. Her death is the material end result of gender bias whereas the guilt of Chandan is its long-term psychological price. The play thus challenges the cultural violence of prioritizing masculinity or the need to have both masculine and feminine qualities to be integrated in their totality and thus be emotionally and existentially balanced through the story of Dattani. It is in this sense that *Tara* is research on gendered injustice and its long-term effects on identity as it shows that the refusal of androgynous possibilities results in the loss of personal, as well as family, equilibrium.

Masculinity and Suppressed Androgyny in *Dance Like a Man*

Mahesh Dattani in *Dance Like a Man* shows the conflict between the individual desire and the strictness of Patriarchal norms in his character Jairaj, who wants to become a

Bharatanatyam dancer but has to fight with the fixation of his father on the idea of masculinity: Dance is no work of a man... it makes you soft, weak (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 33). As a femininely-coded dance tradition, Bharatanatyam is a location of gender anxiety, a site of expression trait suppression in the male body. The struggle of Jairaj proves that conflict between true and social self-expression and the norms imposed by society can lead to the loss of emotional and professional growth and thus to a kind of downgrade of people in a patriarchal society. Jairaj thinks retrospectively on his compromises at one point: "I had to conceal what I loved... what I was" (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 68), showing how bitterly the internalized guilt of his denial of his artistic and expressive tendencies was.

The father of Jairaj is Amritlal Parekh, a strong supporter of gender roles, who considers artistic expression to be weakness, and policing of masculinity in society. This strict upholding of patriarchal values makes Jairaj frustrated and emotionally repressed. Ratna on the contrary questions traditional femininity through its ambition and aggressiveness when she says, "Unless I push myself, nobody will push me" (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 52). Her appearance supports the idea that gender restrictions are confining both men and women to express their true selves instead of men. The play thus reveals the psychological and interpersonal effects of the duality gender expectations, showing how the society perceptions of masculinity and femininity restrict identity and choice.

Through the psychological androgyny of Sandra Bem, the frustrations experienced by Jairaj occur because of the repression of both gender characteristics; emotional development and self-actualization are inhibited in the event of the rejection of androgynous integration (Bem 159). Also, the gender performativity formulated by Judith Butler explains how the reiteration of gender roles through the repetition of practices results in conformity, which creates a cycle of psychological repression and the internalization of guilt (Butler 43). Through the application of these theoretical prisms, Dattani criticizes the strict application of gender roles and the need to have an androgynous identity, one that is a combination of both male and female, in order to be psychologically complete and authentic in expressing oneself to both men and women.

Guilt and the Quest for Wholeness

In the Mahesh Dattani in the *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* the guilt serves as a overall psychological theme, which is the result of the injustice of the gender and the oppression of the true identity. The guilt in the case of *Tara* is collective and generational, as it is based on the choice taken by the parents to give the advantage of the male twin in the procedure of separation. The traumatic experience on *Tara*, who eventually dies has long-term effects on *Chandan* who survives but with the survivor guilt. *Chandan* carries the moral and emotional burden of a decision determined by patriarchal codes when he looks back and says *Tara* was always within me (Dattani, *Tara* 72). Guilt in the play is not portrayed as a personal sensation but rather it is a result of social organization that favours men over women. The initially integrated androgynous state of the siblings, the embodiment of the masculine and feminine qualities, is brutally destroyed, bringing about a certain feeling of disintegration. The transformation to *Dan* that *Chandan* later experiences and his attempts to re-create the story of *Tara* can be seen as a way to recover the lost wholeness, and it is implied that the process of reconciliation and emotional inclusion has to start inwardly and not in society.

In *Dance Like a Man*, the guilt is more personal but no more limiting, as it comes due to the inability to conform to the ideals of patriarchy. The fact that *Jairaj* wants to become an artist in a culturally coded feminine art of Bharatanatyam is frowned upon and mocked by his

father, Amritlal Parekh: "Dance is no man's business... it makes a softie out of you, a weakling, a woman" (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 33). The experience of Jairaj is an example of a psychological price of repressing femininity-related qualities in the male identity, which led to the internalization of guilt and frustration: I had to repress what I loved... what I was (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 68). This emotional and artistic repression resembles the emotional trauma Chandan experiences in *Tara* because both of his characters are forced to deal with the tension between the self-expression and the society. The behavior of Ratna, who is so aggressive and ambitious makes the story even more complicated as it turns out that the rejection of androgynous potential concerns not only female but also male as well and limits the process of growth and self-realization.

The quest to be complete in both plays relates closely with the recognition and absorption of the repressed characters. This process, according to Sandra Bem theorizing psychological androgyny, can be viewed through this prism, and it implies that a combination of masculine and feminine traits leads to emotional stability, flexibility, and identity consistency (Bem 174). The characters portrayed by Dattani also demonstrate that it is impossible to be a whole by means of external approval or conformity; on the contrary, it is the result of internal reconciliation with the denied sides of oneself. By portraying guilt as an outcome of patriarchal oppression and showing how the emotional space may be incorporated through androgynous harmony, Dattani not only portrays the destructive aspects of gendered oppression but also shows the chances of self-actualization. Finally, *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* claim that psychological androgyny is the key to having a whole, balanced, and natural identity.

CONCLUSION

The book by Mahesh Dattani *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* is an in-depth exploration of gender identity and psychological guilt, and a quest to find wholeness in the context of a patriarchal society and within the confines of a particular culture. The two plays present the effects of strict gender regimes and the rejection of androgynous possibilities in the future, since heterosexuality has devastating physical and emotional effects, but also causes deep identity instability. The literal and symbolic enforcement of gender hierarchy in *Tara*, as the surgical separation of conjoined twins in support of the male child, is an example of the intergenerational and society-wide burden of patriarchal prejudice (Dattani, *Tara* 46, 72). The original androgynous unity of the twins, a unity between male and female features, is unleashingly broken, which proves that the denial of feminine features leads to psychological trauma and split identity. The efforts made by Chandan to rewrite the story of *Tara* and his metamorphosis to become Dan point to the internal conflict of reconciliation, meaning that a psychological wholeness is reached through internalization of the self as opposed to social acceptance.

Equally, *Dance Like a Man* challenges gendered repressions by using Jairaj, a male Bharatanatyam dancer whose passion goes against the extreme fatherly ideals of masculinity. Bharatanatyam as a feminine coded dance form is the subject of tension as Jairaj must repress and internalize expression, a process that causes him to deny what he loves and who he is (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 68). The strict policing of the gender roles by his father is an illustration of the imposition of masculinity by the society and Ratna is an illustration of how the gender limitations limits both men and women through her aggressive challenge of the femininity (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 52). In psychological androgyny of Sandra Bem, Jairaj is unable to develop emotionally and self-actualize, as both femininity and masculinity are repressed (Bem 159, 174). The idea of gender performativity by Judith Butler also adds

more light into the idea of how the continuous repetition of social acts of masculinity and femininity leads to internalized guilt and supports conformity (Butler 43).

In both plays, guilt is a psychological reaction to the rejection of the genuine self-expression and imposition of the patriarchal standards. In *Tara*, it is intergenerational, collective whereas in *Dance Like a Man* it is individualized but restrictive as well. Dattani shows us that the processing of wholeness cannot be done without the recognition and assimilation of repressed characteristics. Dattani anticipates the disruptive possibilities of psychological androgyny by introducing characters that face and mediate the conflict between individuality and social demands. The mix of masculine and feminine aspects not just leads to emotional stability but also makes existential fulfilment possible, which lets characters obtain more sensible, balanced, and real self.

To sum up, collective statements of *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* are that the only way to free ourselves of the oppression of patriarchy is to involve the elasticity of gender and the androgyny fusion of characteristics. Dattani uses his works to criticize the social systems that create strict binaries exposing the emotional and existential price of such suppression and at the same time, offers a way out to personal completeness. This paper shows that, through a combination of a theoretical framework of Bem, Butler, and de Beauvoir, and textual analysis, Dattani plays propose an identity that goes beyond the imposed gender constraints and that can not only criticize the cultural patriarchy but also offer a vision of psychological and existential freedom.

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