Chapter IV

Breaking Gender Stereotypes

Gender perception is significantly influenced by social forces. Similarly gender roles depend on society, culture, geographic location, and politics; and gender behaviour is more significantly influenced by the processes of socialization and social forces than by natural or innate differences. For many people it is hard to believe that most of their understanding of gender is a result of outside influence.

Interpretations of sexual differences are complex. Almost all observations declare women bodies to be inherently inferior. In almost all the prominent religions of the world certain texts claim these differences; for example, in Hinduism; Manu's Dharmasharta argues that at the moment of creation women were given the habits of lying, sitting around, anger, meanness, treachery and indiscriminating love for ornaments. He writes that knowing their disposition, which the creators laid on them (i.e., their reproductive power, their sexuality, their essential nature), every man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them.

Aristotle holds the view that women naturally lack intelligence and rationality as their bodies lack the necessary warmth that creates intellect. Buddhist texts argue that woman's innate nature is corrupted. Jataka texts hold that women are wrathful, slanderous ingrates, sowers of strife. Thus their nature demands control and discipline by men. In Christianity it is believed that God created man first and woman next from the man's rib and therefore man is the exemplary human whereas woman is a secondary and dependent being. In Islam too it is believed that men were created to rule and manage the lives and affairs of women. (Geetha 12-13)
So while women are expected to be pleasing in their demeanour; men’s are expected to be expressive innate vigour, physical prowess and authority. If a man does not conform to these “heteronormative” expectations of society, he gets is devalued by his family and society alike.

This chapter deals with two plays Dance Like a Man and Tara of Mahesh Dattani. The first play Dance Like a Man breaks the stereotypical image of gender constructed roles in our society and focuses on a man who chooses dance as a profession, in opposition to the socially constructed behaviour of masculinity. By popular understanding, “Masculinity reflects social and cultural expectations of male behaviour rather than biology” (Whitehead and Barrett 16). Moreover dance is associated with grace, beauty and womanliness, so a man in the world of dance seems to be an anomaly, and if involved in this performing art, is often suspected of being a homosexual. The play deconstructs many notions created by society, such as a man ought not to choose dance as a profession, that a “Devdasi” is a female artist and that a male dancer/guru is a “long haired” man with an effeminate gait. Through this play Mahesh Dattani introduces the debates within the discourse of masculinity and examines what the meaning of the term is and what traits are incorporated in being “masculine.”

In Tara Dattani deftly incorporates the issue of disability to make the theme of gender discrimination more complicated and worth interrogating. The play talks about patriarchy by portraying the lives of Siamese twins Tara and Chandan, who were later separated by a surgery. The partiality and the injustice started in the life of Tara with a surgery when the common leg was given to Chandan even after the medical knowledge that the survival capability was higher in Tara’s body.
Oppressed Oppressor: Gendered Dilemma

*Dance Like a Man* highlights that it’s not only always a woman who suffers in society but even men are rendered helpless as a consequence of cultural conditioning. Men’s voices sometimes remain unheard because primarily they are considered as oppressors and nobody notices their oppression by society. A patriarchal society suppresses a woman by associating only the “feminine” qualities with her, as her counterpart, a man is expected to conform to standardized “masculine” qualities. The notion of “being a man” in Indian society denotes being strong, authoritative, less emotional, practical and opposite to all that is considered feminine. Anyone who does not fit the label becomes the laughing stock of society.

This notion of gender is similar even in the cities space. The space that we built as an urban space is always constructed with the symbolic and the material environment which always influences many things like our home, profession, food habits, technology, law, landscape, experience of time etc. but above all our mindscape. Daniel Miller in his book *The Comfort of Things*, offers a very traces the relationship between urban materiality and individuals:

[T]he historical processes and material order which create those characteristic individuals and their expectations. In short, material culture matters because objects create subjects more than the other way round. It is the order of relationship to objects and between objects that creates people through socialisation whom we then take to exemplify social categories, such as Catalan or Bengali, but also working class, male or young. (287)
He says that it is materiality through which we define ourselves. It means city conditions not only our mind but identity and getting rid of this spatial identity which is conditioned by the urban materiality is unavoidable. Dattani as a playwright is socially conscious about the impact of space specially urban space and that is why in the beginning of *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani describes that the play is city centric as the house is positioned “in the heart of the city” Dattani divides the stage in three parts. In the centre of upper stage, there is the entrance of room with a huge arched doorway which is embellished with a modern-looking rear panel in which there is a telephone and a modern painting. On the upstage left there is a dance practical hall and on the upstage right there is a staircase going to the bedrooms. This division is parallel to the Lefebvre theoretical concept of a spatial triad. In which a space is divided as physical, mental and social. While centre is the social space of Lefebvre’s triad which is also developed further by Edward Soja as third space where we find most of the action took place and had both the imprints of present and past. The upstage left space which is a Dance hall is a physical space which refers to spatial practice, while the upstage right staircase going to bedroom is the metal space as whatever happens in this play has a close relation to this hidden mental space.

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri writes, “*Dance Like a Man* is a play that deals with one of Dattani’s pet concerns—gender—through one his principal passions, dance” (67). Dattani makes Amritlal Parikh, father of Jairaj, the mouthpiece of society. Through him the playwright presents the generally accepted notion that if a man does not behave in a manner that is expected, he is considered a social misfit and not “man” enough:
AMRITLAL. A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic... sick

(Collected Plays 427)

The implication of the word “sick" is a clear indication of the sexist fear of homoeroticism. In some institutions where extreme sexual segregation is practiced such incidents are tolerated without much fuss:

JAIK. …they only wanted a woman… they loved it even more when they found out I was a man. Of course, knowing the army, that may not be very surprising. (Collected Plays 435)

Dancing is considered to be something meant only for women and according to Amritlal these men who want to dance are not men enough. John Beynon in “Understanding Masculinities” observes:

The [still] widely accepted view among the general public is that men and women fundamentally differ and that a distinct set of fixed traits characterize archetypal masculinity and femininity. This is reflected in popular sayings such as ‘Just like a man!’ or ‘Just like a woman!’….Masculinity and femininity are often treated in the media as polar opposites, with men typically assumed to be rational, practical and naturally aggressive and women, in contrast are held to be expressive, nurturing and emotional. (56)

According to Whitehead and Barrett masculinity in society is viewed as:

...masculinities are those behaviours, language and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations which are commonly
associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine. So masculinities exist as both a positive, inasmuch as they are not the ‘Other’ (feminine). Masculinities and male behaviours are not the simple product of genetic coding or biological predispositions (15).

It is erroneously thought that anything that is feminine cannot be masculine. This notion is rejected by Dattani in this play by presenting a man who chooses to be a professional dancer. There is an autobiographical element in Dance Like a Man, as Mahesh Dattani himself learned classical dance in his twenties. Dattani shares this in an interview with Utpal K. Banerjee:

I had been learning the classical dance of Bharatnatyam for six years, when I was in my twenties, from gurus US Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhaga Devi. They were already in their seventies and frequently talked about the dance-scene half-a century earlier. It appeared that Chandrabhaga had secretly learnt Bharatanatyam from the Devdasi, Mylapore Gauri Amma (also the guru of Rukmini Devi Arundale) and guru Kittappa Pillai. They taught me to have a passion for dance; which coloured my theatre as well! The idea came from there. (Indian Literature 162)

_Dance Like a Man_ was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 22 September 1989, as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. After that it has been successfully performed over a hundred times. The relevance of the play remains immense because it interrogates the idea of gender defined roles in society. The play is in two acts and revolves around an aging couple, Ratna and Jairaj, both Bharatnatayam dancers in their sixties. The play unfolds the painful past of
struggle, mis-happening and the future aspirations of the couple that they hope to fulfill through their daughter Lata. Their hopes are pinned on Lata whom they want to see becoming a world-renowned dancer. As the scene begins, Lata is preparing for an ‘arangetram’ (public and formal initiation into dance). Lata is an accomplished dancer, who wants to manage things on her own terms. The play begins with Lata bringing Viswas, her boyfriend, home, to meet her parents.

The stage has multilevel sets. The place is a dimly-lit room in an old fashioned house in the heart of the city. Behind the entrance of this room, there is a modern looking rear panel which helps in revealing a garden and a dance practice hall at upstage left. The furniture arranged in the room is at least forty years old. The garden and the living room symbolize the past and the present with the help of flashback device and split-scene devices. The play presents the flux of conscience dealing with past and present scenarios. The changes are dramatically depicted through the characters who interchange their roles such as Amritlal Parekh and old Jairaj, Lata and young Ratna and Viswas and Young Jairaj. This doubling of characters by the same actors gives an all together new meaning and understanding to the issues that are raised by Mahesh Dattani:

Amritlal, the frustrated patriarch changes into equally frustrated and alcoholic Jairaj who interviews Vishwas, the prospective groom for his daughter. Meanwhile, Vishwas, the son of a rich ‘mithai-wala’, an alien to the world of dance, transforms into young Jairaj who is consumed by his love for the art form. Lata, the most pragmatic and level-headed of the characters also plays the insecure, calculating and scheming young Ratna.... (Chaudhuri 68)
Jairaj and Ratna are portrayed as an unhappy couple. The arrival of Jairaj and Ratna transforms the relaxed atmosphere of the play into a tense one. They are highly perturbed about Lata’s performance as the ‘mridangist’ is unfit to accompany her to the performance. Their worries set aside the matrimonial conversation for which they have gathered. Rather than marriage, they talk about the performance. Jairaj and Ratna pick up quarrels time and again and blame each other revealing their past struggle as dancers. Viswas advises them not to throw mud at each other. Ratna develops a headache. She is frustrated and recalls her father-in-law, Amritlal Parekh, who didn’t want his son to take up the career as a dancer. Viswas tries to leave the house because of the ugly quarrel between Jairaj and Ratna, only to be persuaded to stay and discuss the proposal of his marriage with Lata. After learning about Viswa’s background and especially his willingness to allow Lata to dance after marriage, Ratna and Jairaj agree upon the marriage between Lata and Viswas.

The play looks much like “us-and-them” game which ecologically and sociologically, is being played out every day (Roy web). To achieve their goals both Amritlal Parekh and Ratna use Jairaj as a tool. Amritlal wants to make a “man” out of his son while Ratna wants to continue to dance so both had a pact that if Ratna would help him pull Jairaj out of his obsession and make him a “manly” person, he would allow Ratna to keep up with her dancing. Amritlal and Ratna gathered their profit out of this situation without thinking about Jairaj who is a mere ploy in their game of self fulfillment.

The pain of the artist is well portrayed by Jairaj who in the scheming hands of his father and wife wastes away and takes to drinking to escape from the stress. This suggests that a man who does not conform is also a sufferer. This theme also brings out a gender based critique of patriarchy, and shows man as the victim. In this form,
the critique extends beyond feminism as such. However, the upturning of the conventional structure of gender politics makes it more important to discuss this invisible layer of social discrimination against the male something that has remained largely unseen and unheard. Ratna accused Jairaj for not being brave enough to confront his father and also for not being able to earn enough for Ratna and himself to live separately. The dancer wife of the dancer husband finds herself caught in the urge to find a real man in her husband. She cannot escape the ideological trapping of conceiving the role of a man as money earner:

RATNA. You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house for more than forty-eight hours.

JAIRAJ. Ratna! Don’t…

RATNA. You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house…

JAIRAJ. For forty years you’ve been holding that against…

RATNA. You are right, I’m worrying about nothing, because nothing is what we are! (*Collected Plays 402*)

As dancers, they have no steady income to support the independent household that the young couple had hoped to set up. Even after they leave Jairaj’s paternal home to be with Ratna’s uncle, the situation kept on getting worse. The internal conflict of the discourse of (man)hood is exposed to the hidden alternative given to financially weak dancer couple. Ratna’s accusation of Jairaj for lacking in foundational (man)ly virtues like financial freedom and toughness meets a challenge in his bitterly sarcastic interrogation:
JAIRAJ. While your uncle asked you to go to bed with him? Would I have been a man then? Giving my wife to her own uncle because he was offering us food and shelter? Would you have preferred that? Do you think your uncle made such interesting proposals to all his nieces? No! That would be great sin. But you were different. You were meant for entertainment. Of what kind was a minor detail? So what was wrong with going back to my father? At least my father didn’t make...

(Collected Plays 410)

The gendered cultural constructs affiliate the masculinity of Ratna’s uncle by emphasizing his financial independence and obscuring his predatory design while the same constructs disaffiliate Jairaj by emphasizing his inability to support his family financially and by obscuring his comparative independence from oppressive ideology of patriarchy, as he refuses to dance alone when Ratna was in the family way.

The play highlights the way Ratna’s constant nagging and complaints add to the bitterness of their troubled married life. Frustrated, they continue to blame each other for not being able to achieve what each wanted.

JAIRAJ. What happened? Nothing. (laughs.) That was the trouble.
Nothing happened. (laughs again.) Didn’t you hear my wife? Nothing is what we are! After forty years, she tells me she doesn’t think of me as man. Just a spineless boy. And you know what I think? I think she is right! (Collected Plays 406)

Jairaj’s father Amritlal Parikh fails to understand his son’s inclinations towards dance, as for him dance is a degraded kind of art performed by devadasis and
desperately comments, “As far as you can see! You can’t see far, that is your trouble. Where is your dance going to lead you?” (Collected Plays 415).

When Jairaj questions him, Amritlal replies, “I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on own lawn if you are interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn’t realize this interest of yours would turn into an… obsession” (Collected Plays 415). These comments of Amritlal are suggestive of the stereotyped role of a man—playing cricket instead of dancing.

Amritlal accepted a daughter-in-law from the other community, but could not allow her to dance the divine dance of Shiv and Parvati in the courtyard of a seventy-five years old divine prostitute. His discomfort with Ratna’s pursuit of the art form is only the family version of the state programme of rehabilitating the devdasis and to pursue them to conform the idea of sanctity even at the cost of damaging their art. After this Amritlal tries to control Ratna, as he is aware that instead of going to the temple every Monday, as she has said she does, she goes to the house of the aged devdasi. Amritlal stops Ratna from visiting devdasi as that would bring ill repute to his family. In retaliation, Ratna tells him that she feels sorry for him, as “tomorrow, Jairaj starts learning another dance form—Kuchipudi!” Ratna’s punch line comes with the fact that in Kuchipudi the men dress up as women. Ratna’s freedom is only at the cost of making Jairaj a man. “Help me and I’ll never prevent you from dancing” (Collected Plays 427). Ratna is faced with the alternatives of sacrificing her career on one hand and sacrificing Jairaj’s career and thus ensuring financial security on the other. Ratna as an artist committed to her art chooses the obvious.
RATNA. He realized he couldn’t stop me, but he could you—through
men. (444)

Amritlal Parikh trapped in his own prejudices believes that Bharatnatyam is
the craft of prostitutes. He thus feels that no self-respecting person should choose it as
a profession, particularly a man. That is why he does not understand his son’s
dedication towards the art and instead of appreciating his efforts, he watches out for
the latent homosexuality. Since a man choosing the profession of a dancer is always
looked down upon by society, so Amritlal views Jairaj’s Guru ji with abhorrence,
suspecting him to be queer.

AMRITLAL. Your guru. What kind of a family is he from?

JAIRO. His mother was not a devadasi, if that’s what you wanted to
know.

AMRITLAL. Why does he wear his hair so long?

JAIRO. Why do you ask?

AMRITLAL. I have never seen a man with long hair.

JAIRO. All sadhus have long hair.

AMRITLAL. I don’t mean them. I mean normal men.

...JAIRO. Are you saying that he is not... (Realizes the implication.)
Are you saying...?

AMRITLAL. I’ve also noticed the way he walks.

JAIRO (angrily). This is disgusting! You are insane! (Collected Plays
417)
Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* says, "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way...Assuming for the moment that stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies" (Butler 6). As pointed out by Butler, assuming gender attributes and assigning them a pre-determined bodies can be wrongful task.

Michelle Barrett in her book *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* points out, "...the imagery of gender affects both men and women profoundly, if differently." She also points out that "...it is not possible to take literary texts or any other cultural products, as necessary reflections of the social reality of any particular period. They cannot even provide us with a reliable knowledge of directly inferable ideology. What they can offer...is an indication of the bounds within which particular meanings are constructed and negotiated in a given social formation" (106-107).

It is notable that Dattani is not of being a propagandist. He writes artistically and for the purpose of raising awareness. He never shows conflicts in stark contrasts of black and white. That is why instead of showing Jairaj as a victim of society or Ratna as a clever scheming woman; he presents them in shades showing both the good and bad aspects of their personalities. Apart from presenting Jairaj as a victim of cultural construction, Dattani also portrays the other side of his personality as a person who cannot tolerate his wife being professionally more successful than him. This is the reason why Jairaj comments to Ratna that she struck fame not because she is a good dancer but because of her seductive female body. This is the usual assumption
of people that dance is actually a display of the body and if it is an alluring female body subjected to the male gaze, it results in a successful performance.

JAIKAJ (admiring Ratna’s costume). What a beauty you are! Is that why you like to dance? To have men admire your assets? (Collected Plays 442)

Similarly, though Ratna is presented as a scheming and clever woman she is also shown to be a better dancer than Jairaj. She is also a more dedicated artist who takes pain to revive a lost tradition of temple dance. For this she even goes to an old devdasi’s house to learn the forgotten steps and moves. Ratna not only manipulates her husband and her father-in-law but she uses her inventive mind to advance her daughter’s career being well, aware of media politics and knowing fully well how to extract its maximum benefits. She was so determined to advance her daughter’s career that this goal becomes her “obsession”. This can be understood better through the Freudian phenomenon of “transference,” that is, when one redirects unfulfilled feelings and desires, and specially those unconsciously retained over time, towards a new object. (Morgan, King & Weirz 684-685) Here Ratna’s fixation on Lata’s career can be seen as a case of such transference.

Dance is a mode of aesthetic expression among the people residing in Chennai. The setting of the play is Chennai, the abode of dancers. Mithran Devanesen in a note on the play writes, “In a city like Chennai, where everyone knows a dancer or has a dancer in the family, Dance Like a Man was bound to strike a familiar chord. The challenge to both the actors and myself as director was not just to bring the issues the play raises to the fore but also to bridge Dattani’s verbal ingenuity with a strong visual element” (Collected Plays 383).
The play provokes us to think about the decline in the tradition of classical dance even in such cities where it has been patronized for ages as it lacks social favour and state patronage. The urbanized population has begun to look down upon dance as a profession and because of this prejudice; classical dance can be seen as a dying art form. If a man chooses dance as a profession, he has to bear the wrath and mockery of society. Even Vishwas, Lata’s fiancé does not like her to dance as he finds it “too erotic.” The following words of Jairaj bear out the prejudices of society towards dance as a form of art in general and in respect of male dancers in particular:

JAIraj (drinks). The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares—what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic? (Collected Plays 406)

Urban Materiality and Space of Exclusion

The urban materiality is one of the biggest reasons behind the urban decay. This decay is not just the material one but it also influences the deteriorating relationships in the city space. Ratna and Jairaj are both the victim as well as practitioner of this urban decay. As pointed out earlier, the play presents the professional jealousy between the couple, that is, between Ratna and Jairaj. Ratna was always better than Jairaj and was praised by the media. The public reception of Ratna and the neglect of Jairaj caused a widening gap in their relationship. Later Ratna not only starts promoting her daughter but also starts comparing her accomplishments with her own. Ratna believes that all the success and fame of Lata is because of her hard work in manipulating the press and sweet talking the politicians. To gather the
fruits of Lata’s success, she even wants to paste all the rave reviews and photographs in her own album. This again shows the parents’ inability to let go the child, and like Amritlal of the older generation, Ratna clings to her progeny.

RATNA (shouting). I heard. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! The dancer of the decade! And why shouldn’t she get reviews like these? I deserved it. Spending sleepless nights arranging things. Sweet-talking the critics. My hard work has paid off, hasn’t it? Hasn’t it?

(Takes the papers and makes for the bedroom.)

JAIRAJ. Where are you going?

RATNA. I have to paste these reviews in our album?

...JAIRAJ. They don’t belong there. (Silence.) Those critics gave her good reviews because she deserved them. They weren’t doing you any favours. Face it, woman. (Collected Plays 439-440)

Behind all this is the dance itself. Dance, the acme of which is achieved by lord Shiv in “Tandava Nritya”. The dance of a man, the cosmic dance that resulted in the origin and the end of the world; the rhythm of which results in continuations of life. Jairaj named his first child, Shankar. But the couple lost Shankar because of this dance. Ratna had a show that night so she gave the boy some amount of opium. Later the maid also gave some amount of opium to Shankar so as to get restful sleep but because of this overdose the child died. This bitter incident in the past brought disastrous distortions in Ratna and Jairaj’s marriage.

The play comes to an end after the cathartic revelation of the deeply rooted truth of loosing Shankar by an error of parenting. It was blamed upon Ratna’s
ambition to dance and her lack of supervision as a mother. Subsequently the scene changes to the present times and there is a complete change in the situation as the couple shift into a new flat after selling their old mansion. The symbols of past glory and its associative principle of authority are finally discarded. But the same act also leaves Jairaj with neither a past nor a future. Having lost all that he held dear till now, Jairaj is ready to welcome the god of death. His liver ceases to function, possibly destroyed by his heavy drinking habits. On his deathbed he imagines dancing like God Shiva:

JAI
d.

JAIRAJ. ...I see you coming to what seems to be heaven, riding with Death on a buffalo...And we embrace. We smile. And we dance.

We dance perfectly. In unison. Not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes we made in our previous dances.

(Collected Plays 447)

This dancing in unison signifies a harmony that brings perfection to death as well as life. It is the exquisite harmony that was achieved by matching the separate bodies of Shiv and Parvati in the divine form of “Ardhanarishwara”. Each part is recognized as male and female, yet in the grace of the total being. The gender divide creates beauty as well as rhythm. The balance of stillness and movement, male and female, grace and power is celebrated in the “Ardhanarishwara” image immortalized in Hindu mythology and sculpture. The iconic representation of equality in power, status and gender, manifesting in Lord Shiva and Shakti, is the ideal, and it is said to impel the creation of the entire universe (Mandir 2008).

[The younger Ratna strikes a pose which the younger Jairaj seems to disagree with.]
We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance we lacked the magic to dance like God. (*Collected Plays 447*)

The city space, however, denies the grace associated with exquisite harmony of the form of “Ardhanarishwara” to the dancers who are urban dwellers. Jairaj and Ratna in the play are also complicit with many forms of patriarchy. And since Dattani engages the audience in the dilemmas that he portrays, he expects each person to see, in the truths of the Indian city and, indeed, the nation, by a partial returning to their individual and collective past.

Dattani depicts all this philosophical aspect with his multi level set and background music that help him in emphasizing the theme, while the mrindangam builds up the tension in the atmosphere. The transitional roles of the characters give it a complexity which matches with the theme. One may be reminded of August Strindberg’s experiment with characters in his *A Dream Play*. “The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble,” Strindberg writes,” …there are no secrets, no illogicalities, no scruples, no laws…an undertone of melancholy and of pity for all mortal being accompanies this flickering tale” (Strindberg 175).

It is startling for readers that Ratna herself discards Jairaj’s maleness openly and he accepts it without any offence. In the play maleness of Jairaj was not that much a question of body than that of mentality. Similarly the maleness of Ratna might have meant her independent decision making power, earning livelihood, doing the work that she liked, living on one’s own conditions.

Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri says, “The underlying fear is obviously that dance would make him ‘womanly’- an effeminate man- the suggestion of homosexuality
hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned” (68). While for Ratna dance serves as an undying passion that moulds her character in various shades. Ratna also comes across as a city-bred materialistic character as she only lives for herself and uses others only as a tool to go ahead in life. Her decision of marrying Jairaj also clears her way to get freedom to dance even after marriage. The twentieth century sociologist Robert E. Park have highlighted the study of behavior and interaction in relation to urban materiality which includes both social conveniences and administrative devices:

The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature and particularly of human nature (1)

Dattani’s characters struggle for the freedom of choice and happiness under the burden of authoritative traditions and society’s cultural constructions of gender. Dattani also uses symbols in the play in the form of the old mansion and the yellow shawl standing for the inherited beliefs of Amritlal Parikh. Even Davis Cohen in his book *Being a Man* explains that “In theory, boys are supposed to take their fathers and grandfathers as role models. Father teaches son how to be a man” (Cohen1). That Jairaj stays at home and wears the shawl shows his dependence on these traditions even as he fights them in the choice of a career in dancing.

Other than noticing the psychological angle of exploring gender issues and role divisions in *Dance Like a Man*, critics such as G. N. Mehta see the play as representing a hybridized colonial condition that questions the identity through
‘colonial depolarization’. These are “ambivalent to cultural moods, forms, transitions and translations in Indian society” (Mehta 105). Such an approach would take a reading of the postcolonial aspects when the Father and the son bring a contrasted era in view. The Indian cultural traditions of dance are not well regarded whereas the carry-overs from colonial practices, such as in education and English language, mingle with local traditions. In either case, the construction of masculinity remains the important agenda in Dattani’s play. Written in English, and ending with a reference to Shiva and Parvati’s indivisible form, the play appears to project a new harmony that an independent India of postcolonial times must strive for.

The title of the play Dance Like a Man is suggestive of the construction of male stereotypes and the questioning of an essential identity or quality of maleness/masculinity. As the simile in the title suggests, the central question for one of the main protagonist is if he can dance like a man as the very notion of the dancer contradicts the notion of maleness. Nilanjana Sen, while discussing the title of the play points out that the dance with the adverbial adjective like a man carries almost the sense of super imposition—an unnatural/abnormal (304). This edginess comes from the culture’s anxiety to ostracize the genre of dance performance from the matrix of normalcy and to negate the possibility of a manly dance. The character of Jairaj becomes the site to situate, de-situate and re-situate the contesting discourse of gender. Amritlal approved Jairaj’s pursuit of dance only as a boyhood hobby, and now when he is grown up, the former tries every measure to make him a man. The failure as a dancer is accepted but the failure as a man goes on haunting his existential status throughout the play. Jairaj challenges the methodology of the man-making process by over-simplifying the definition: “Will finding a musician make a man?” (Collected Plays 402).
Jairaj’s falls prey to the dichotomy between his own chosen identity as a dancer and this identity as a man imposed by society. Throughout the play he undergoes the painful identity crisis.

JAIRAJ. For one full year. For one full year I refused to dance—turning down offers because I didn’t want to dance alone.

RATNA. I didn’t ask for such a sacrifice. Tell me what you want in return. I’ll do anything except sacrifice a year of my life in return.

JAIRAJ. I want you to give me back my self esteem!

RATNA. When did I ever take it?

JAIRAJ. Bit by bit. You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names in front of other people. Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting. (*Collected Plays 443*)

Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* argues that social power lies in hands of the patriarchy. Ratna echoes the same stereotypical ideas of gender as Amritlal and plays sexual politics to get what she wants.

RATNA. You just don’t want to face it. It is me they want to see dancing.

JAIRAJ. A young beautiful woman, yes.
RATNA. A young beautiful woman! And you are jealous of me for that? What kind of man are you?

JAIRAJ. Oh, you are so clever. No wonder you get along well with him.

RATNA. Get along well with whom?

JAIRAJ. My father. It was him, wasn’t it? (*Collected Plays 443*)

Thus Jairaj becomes a symbol of gender trouble. The do’s and don’ts of gender became the nemesis for Jairaj. The problem with Jairaj is that he does not opt to “perform” gender hence Amritlal is afraid that his dancing son would lose power in the heterosexual society that he lives in. In a bourgeois society power is synonymous to earning money and Amritlal knew that dance cannot be a source of earning for Jairaj because in a highly gendered society dancing can never be considered to be a man’s profession. Only Lata valorizes the status of Jairaj as “man” by accepting Viswas, “Daddy is a bit more...pliable than usual. Like you” (*Collected Plays 392*). This impression was further strengthened by her commendation of her father’s courage to choreograph the ‘Asthapadi’ for her mother thirty years ago.

The play is also about the life of an artist. It discusses about how space is important for an artist. It brings about the issues of survival and also witnesses the contestation between tradition and modernity in the life of an artist. Dattani in an interview to Rana Uniyal replies;

I could talk about *Dance Like a Man* which is because we talked about my Bharatnatyam background. It is about Bharatnatyam dancers.

Again in their old age when they are in their 60s and they are looking back on to their struggling days, when they has their ideals and in the
50s where there was a stigma attached to the dance forms; that it is a dance form of the devdasis. It’s a prostitute’s dance and people from respectable families didn’t perform or practice that dance form. It is doubly difficult for the man. You know, what business a man has learning a prostitute’s dance. So it brings about gender roles, what is expected of gender as well. And also the tensions between the couple and how, they solve, how they felt that they used their relationship to develop their careers dances and how they reconciled to the fact that the time wasn’t right for them. (182-183)

The play clearly depicts how an artist is influenced by his family or society. Dattani has very skilfully portrayed three generations in the play to highlight the fact even in the city space irrespective of timescape the idea of gender influences our identity. Mahesh Dattani’s Tara also strengthens the fact of inevitable influence of gender on cityscape.

**Tara: Disability & Gender**

*Tara* captures the voice of the new woman and interrogates the patriarchal assumptions that have held sway on our society. Dattani has set this play in the urban milieu of Bangalore. The play is about the twins who are born with three legs and blood supply to the third leg is from the baby girl’s body. Only one of the twins could have two legs, and the other had to survive with only one leg. It is decided to fix the third leg on the male’s body so as to make male baby complete. This decision was not on the basis of medical ground but due to gender discrimination. Dattani’s play illuminates many a depth related to gender issues in our society. As he says that he wanted to take a gender head on having written *Dance Like a Man*. The Siamese
twins provided him with the powerful metaphor to bring to the fore many ideas related to gender specific identities in our society. Talking about these issues in an interview Dattani says:

Well basically it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated and of course they were invariably of the same sex and there was this thing about a fused leg and which had the qualities of both left and right so there had to be some careful consideration as to which twin was supplying the blood to the leg and the journal went into the detail because obviously it was a very unique operation and separation. Although that was the inspiration but I think by then having written Dance Like a Man, I was prepared to take on the gender issue head on, and I think that was a powerful metaphor. Again, you know, the play is misread and you know, people tend to focus on the medical details but that’s really not what the play is about. It’s a metaphor either for being born equal as male and female and sharing so much more and with the surgical separation comes a cultural distinction and prejudice as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and female self... (Multani JSL 130)

Like Thirty Days in September where Mahesh Dattani has shown a serious concern towards the issue of child sexual abuse, in this play also Mahesh Dattani takes up a severe case of the issue of disadvantage suffered by a child because of being a girl which further leads to her disability. Her yearning for normality and struggle to carve out her own niche and find acceptance in society clearly demonstrate the adverse conditions vis-avis gender stereotypes. The attitude of society towards the
disabled and especially towards the disabled female is vividly illustrated in the play. The discrimination and injustice done in the name of cultural construction of gender, harms both the male and the female children. In a country such as India, where the first preference is always a boy child, the injustice towards the girl child can be, often, excessive. Anita Ghai in (Dis) Embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women says:

Very few people accept the fact that disability is as much a social construct as other categories such as gender.... Society thus exhibits a structural amnesia about a particular category of people, who, because they do not fit into the hegemonic discourse of ‘normality’, are excluded, separated and socially dis-empowered. (16)

A disabled female always faces this “double disadvantage” of both being a woman in a patriarchal society and being disabled in an “able normative society,” Somewhere both the identities are similar as neither impairment (to some extent) nor gender, in themselves, is problematic unless they are placed in a social context, as Ghai explains.

Tara was first performed as Twinkle Tara at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 23 October 1990 by Playpen Performing Arts Group. As already noted, Tara is about the tragic physical separation that occurs between a pair of Siamese twins. Even after their unjustified and manipulated division which is done against the law of nature, they are emotionally united; both of them share the same mental agony of this separation. The play focuses on Chandan’s attempts to fathom Tara’s agony as well as his own predicament and dilemma. Tara dies because of the shock of disclosure that her disability is not natural but was thrust on her by the manipulation of her mother and grandfather just to favour Chandan, the boy, over Tara, the girl. Chandan survives this trauma but he migrates to a suburb of London, as he could
never lead a peaceful life after this revelation. He changes his name to Dan and attempts to create a new persona for himself and tries to write an autobiographical play.

This play too, like other plays of Dattani has the city-space at the centre. The urban ethos seems to control the action in subtle manner. Mahesh Dattani weaves the play around the family of Patel who is the father and Bharati the mother of the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan. The play opens with Chandan, now known as Dan, in a nostalgic mood wanting to write a drama but frustrated by his present circumstances in London.

DAN. In poetry, even the most turbulent emotions can be recollected when one is half asleep. But in drama! Ah! Even tranquility has to be recalled with emotion. Like touching a bare live wire. (Collected Plays 323)

In this play, memory constitutes an important resource. Dan plans to write the play about his twin sister Tara, “who never got a fair deal” in her life, not even from her mother and father. The pain of separation is as strong for him as for Tara. Dan blames God for being unjust to both of them. Mahesh Dattani, through Dan, philosophizes on some aspects of modern life: “Conflict is the crux of life” (Collected Plays 330). Dan reflects on the superiority of science over God because in the modern era science can accommodate things that even the traditional idea of God may not have accepted.

DAN. ....But even god does not always get what he wants....A duel to the death between God and nature on one side and on the other—the amazing Dr. Thakkar. (Collected Plays 330)
The stage setting and lights make the shifts in Dan’s memories crystal clear for the audience. “A multi-level set,” apart from highlighting separate spheres for Chandan and Tara, represents multiple meanings of the past as it is recalled. The set at the lowest level shows the house of the Patels illustrating the basis of Tara’s and Chandan’s life. The second level set shows the suburb of London where Chandan lives now under the pseudonym of Dan showing the distance he has now achieved from his family. Dattani points out in the stage directions that “This is the only realistic level”, (Collected Plays 323) making it quite clear that everything else on the stage is actually imaged from of Dan’s memories. The third level, the highest one, is the place where Dr Thakkar remains seated with “his God-like presence” that signifies his value in the contemporary world and in the life of the Patel family. “Also, like God, Dr. Thakkar is an interested audience who is implicated in the action that he watches unfold; he is both the moving force and objective witness” (Prasad 135).

The play begins with the spot light on Dan (older Chandan) at his writing table. He is shown typing furiously. He stops and looks up and speaks directly to the audience.

DAN. ...Seedy suburb of London, thousands of miles from home hasn’t put enough distance between us. (Holds up his glass.) My battery charger helps on some occasions. But now I want them to comeback. To masticate my memories in my mind and spit out the result to the world in anger. (Collected Plays 323-24)

Dattani through Dan, brings to the fore many existential issues. Touching upon the problems faced by immigrants, the place of Indian English literature in the English canon, publishers’ interest in the “oriental” India among other things, he
contextualizes the debate within which the agony of the “disabled” person is placed. Being incomplete or disabled in world of “normal” people is excruciating extremely difficult. Dattani uses expressionistic techniques, making Chandan his mouthpiece, to illustrate the continuous struggle of contemporary urban India in familial, social and cultural spheres.

But that’s all done with. Tonight I drop everything I’ve desperately wanted to be in my years in England. (Mimes removing a mask and throwing it away.) The handicapped intellectual’s mask. (Mimes removing another mask.) The desperate immigrant. (Mimes removing yet another.) The mysterious brown with a phony accent. The last being the hardest to drop having spent two whole years in acquiring it.

(Collected Plays 324)

Raymond Williams observes that expressionism as a technique presents, “What life is like when the external pretences are dropped” (qtd in D Rani web). In an attempt to unveil his identity, Chandan enacts the removal of the imaginary masks which he has used to cover his trauma. He speaks while he removes the “handicapped intellectual mask”, “desperate immigrant mask” and the “mask of a freak.” Thus, masks in this play perform a key role in deciphering the underlying reality. Through the multi-level sets, symbolic devices and lights, Dattani adroitly depicts the shifting layers of memory.

For Dattani the play is about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself. The very first speech of Tara expresses the pain of separation between herself and Chandan.
TARA. And me. Maybe we still are. Like we’ve always been.

Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out...

And separated. (*Collected Plays* 325)

Mahesh Dattani presents the helplessness of the girl child in the city space of India, dismantling the myth that modern Indian society is liberal and advanced in its thoughts and actions. The play underscores the fact that when the choice is to be made between a male and a female child, it is the male child that is always preferred. This clearly belies all the propaganda of equality between male and female in modern society. The mother daughter relationship is also directed by the strict norms of patriarchy. When Patel finds Chandan helping his mother in knitting he can’t digest it.

PATEL. Let Tara do it.

CHANDAN. It’s okay

PATEL. Give it to her

CHANDAN. Why?

PATEL. Chandan, leave that damn thing alone

PATEL (to Bharati) How dare you do this to him?... you can think of turning him into a sissy teaching him to hit! (*Collected Plays* 351)

There are many instances in the play where a true picture of patriarchal society in the city space is portrayed. In one such instance Tara explains Roopa, Tara’s neighbour in Bombay, about the conversation between the father and the son as “The man in the house were deciding on whether they are going to hunt while the women looked after
the caves" (Collected Plays 328). These words clearly present the male-female boundaries that society strictly imposed upon them. In another instance Roopa explains to Tara how the Patels would drown their new born girl child in milk.

ROOPA. Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies—you know dowry and things like that—so they used to drown them in milk. So when people asked them how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk. (Collected Plays 349)

Similarly in one of the conversations between Tara’s father Patel and her brother Chandan, Dattani highlights the patriarchal mindset of Tara’s father:

PATEL. He (grandfather) left you a lot of money.

CHANDAN. And Tara?

PATEL. Nothing

CHANDAN Why?

PATEL It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it.

(Collected Plays 360)

The life of self-condemnation that Chandan adopts after the death of Tara is laden with the guilt that he feels about “killing” his sister. Though he had nothing to do with Tara’s death, yet he realizes that the manipulation by his mother and grandfather was for his well being and not his sister’s. This makes him feel in some way responsible for her tragic end.
DAN: ...An object like other objects in a cosmos, whose orbits are determined by those around. Moving in a forced harmony...I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move. Without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget that I had a sister with whom I had shared a body. In one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out...and separated....

Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy. (Collected Plays 379-380)

What had Tara been deprived of? Tara always craved for completeness. The fateful leg would have given Tara’s body wholeness but the preference for benefiting Chandan undid Tara’s life. Not only the mother and grandfather but somewhere the father too was responsible for her disability as he accepted this decision silently at that time. This play, like others by Dattani, offers a microcosm of Indian society where every person tries to favour the male child. Not only the three main characters but somewhere, even the “demi-god” Dr. Thakkar subscribes to this attitude. Dattani poses a serious question in the play about the ethics of one’s profession especially of the doctor who is always placed next to God under such serious circumstances. By becoming an accomplice in that sinful decision of Tara’s grandfather just for the sake of some personal gains he actually gave Tara a miserable life. To get a “strong and healthy” boy they all turned against the idea of giving the common limb to Tara, whose body was in every way accepting it more naturally than that of Chandan as the blood supply to the common limb came more directly from Tara’s body. Chandan’s body naturally rejected that limb and consequently, the leg was amputated, leaving both brother and sister with one leg each. This incompleteness always made Tara inferior and throughout her life she abhorred her disability.
CHANDAN. They are not the ugly ones. We are. Horrible one legged creatures

TARA. (angrily). Yes, but you don’t have to say it!

CHANDAN (moves to her). I’m sorry. You mustn’t mind very much.

TARA. What?

CHANDAN. Being one-legged.

TARA. What makes you think I mind?

CHANDAN (softly). I feel your pain.

TARA. Yes, I do mind. I mind very much. (Collected Plays 369-370)

Yet another important issue that is dealt with by Dattani is about the education of a disabled girl child and also the cultural constructs for the choice of profession according to the gender. Tara is aware of the societal assumptions about female occupations.

TARA. …The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave.

CHANDAN. I haven’t decided yet. (Looks at Patel.) I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle.

TARA. Or carve another story on the walls. (Collected Plays 328)

While Tara wanted to choose a career like her father’s, Chandan wanted to be a writer. But their father wants to plan the careers of his children according to the typical stereotypical gender roles.
PATEL. What are you two doing?

CHANDAN. Mummy’s knitting and I’m helping her sort out her mistake.

PATEL. Let Tara do it. ...

PATEL...turning him into sissy—teaching him to knit! (Collected Plays 351)

Bharti represents the empowered woman in the play. Bharti insists that Tara must decide what she wants for herself. She tells Chandan what she expects to do these days:

BHARTI. It is time Tara decided what she wants to be. Women have to do that as well these days. She must have career.

CHANDAN. She can do whatever she wants. Grandfather’s trust will leave us both with money, isn’t it?

BHARTI. Yes, But she must have something to do! She can’t be aimless all her life. (Collected Plays 348)

Bharati also knows that her daughter is highly intelligent and she knows that in a patriarchal society intelligence and smartness in women are not assets as she tells Chandan: It’s all right while she is young. It’s all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you—but not her!” (Collected Plays 348-349). Dattani also refers to the mother’s experience when she finds that her husband is neglecting and ignoring his daughter. Bharti does the same when she tells her son that his father does not pay attention to his sister. Bharti discloses this fact to Chandan.
BHARTI. I wish your father would pay more attention to Tara.

CHANDAN. He does. He does not like to show his affection.

BHARATI. Do not tell me about your father. He is more worried about your career than hers. *(Collected Plays 348)*

To make amends, Bharati wants to donate her kidney to Tara, but Patel does not want her to do so as he is aware of the fact that now she is just trying to compensate for the wrong decision that changed the fate of Tara. The madness of Bharti was the consequence of that guilt. The suppressed emotion of guilt about the past, and fear of the future of Tara make her oversensitive to everything. Because of this she ends up in the asylum after a nervous breakdown. Dattani establishes the fact that the mother and daughter relationship is ultimately subordinated to the directives of the patriarchal directives.

While Patel wants to send Chandan abroad for further studies, he has made no comparable plans for Tara. Patel’s attitude towards Tara typifies society’s attitude towards a disabled woman.

*Women with disabilities in India and elsewhere encounter discrimination on several levels, each of which restricts their options and opportunities for equal participation in the economic, social and political life of society. (Ghai 400)*

Though from the beginning we see the extreme love and compassion of Bharati towards her daughter, Tara, the gradual disclosure of the truth about the past generates a death like response from Tara. The love that Tara’s mother used to give was compensatory due to the guilt that she had of depriving her daughter of the thing...
that she most yearned for—the second leg. Mother called her “a star” recalls Tara. These words interrogate the whole upbringing of Tara by Bharati, blurring the boundary of the mother’s pretence and the reality. This is the crucial moment in the play that kills the female and tears her apart from the male. With the burden of Tara’s death Chandan moves far away, never to come back. This feeling of loss and incompleteness always lingers with him like the haunted ghost of the past.

To make amends for all her past deeds, Bharati takes care of even the minutest things in Tara’s life. She even tries to buy her a friend, Roopa, by promising her unlimited access to her VCR to watch movies. Roopa, a snoopy neighbourhood girl, works as a foil to Tara, highlighting every aspect of a girls’ life, be it a need for good friends, personal aesthetics or the fulfilment of teenage desires. Fed up with society’s comments on her physical deformity she looks at the weaker points of other people so as to embarrass them. Tara narrates the story of Deepa to Roopa just to make her uncomfortable and later when she comments on Roopa’s breasts being of unequal size, she leaves her stunned with the knowledge of this secret. This comment makes Roopa quite furious but Tara retaliates with equal anger.

ROOPA. How dare you! You one-legged thing!

TARA. I’d sooner be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than be an imbecile like you. An imbecile with uneven tits. (Collected Plays 369)

People pity disabled persons but they never care for their emotions or their needs. For instance, nobody talks about their physical desires as if they don’t feel any or as if they are not normal human beings. Roopa liked the company of Chandan. She even tries to be come close to him but when he approaches her, she just reacts as if he
is going to rape her. Roopa even comments that some mentally retarded girl would be more compatible for Chandan as he himself is disabled.

It is not only Tara who suffers because of being a girl child but even Chandan suffers because all the pain that is inflicted on Tara is just because he was given preference. Somewhere these thoughts affect him deep inside resulting in their final, imagined “union” at the end of the play.

[Tara walks into the spot without limping. Dan also appears without the limp.]

And will hug me. Once again.

[They kneel, face to face.]

Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy.

[Tara embraces Dan as the music starts. The explosive opening of Brahms’ First Concerto. They hug each other tightly.] (Collected Plays 380)

Here Tara and Chandan are presented as the two sides of the same self. (Mee 320)

Their union brings out the cleansing of the pain within Chandan and Tara. Dan writes Tara’s story to rediscover the neglected half of him that is the “feminine self” of one’s personality, which is always ignored by society. The play presents the poignant image of a child who suffers all through her life just because she is born a girl in the patriarchal set up, where she was and is always unwelcome. Mahesh Dattani makes us venture in a territory which is not touched by writes very often. The play, therefore, is an attempt to shock the audiences into an awareness of the morbidity of society they live in.
Both the plays discussed in this chapter voice one major issue that no matter how advanced the city space is, be it in the ideology as portrayed in the progressive thoughts of Amritlal Parikh and Viswas in *Dance Like a Man* or in technology depicted in the successful operation of the Siamese twins in *Tara*, the fact remains that patriarchal assumptions are too deep seated to be done away with. Even in city space where people have come up with their own choices of profession or medical facilities, the irony is that the power lies in the hands of ‘man’.