CHAPTER THREE

CONFRONTING THE BINARY: THE REPOSITIONING OF MALE-FEMALE STEREOTYPES WITHIN PATRIARCHY IN "DANCE LIKE A MAN" (1989) AND "TARA" (1990)
The third chapter highlights Mahesh Dattani’s attempt to question the stronghold of gender defined roles which are engrained in Indian mindset as reflected in Dance Like a Man (1989) and Tara (1990). The following lines from Alfred Tennyson’s 1971 poem “The Princess” show how the gender binary dynamics reduce woman’s status to a subservient position:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth
Man for the sword and for the needle she;
Man with the head and women with the heart. Man to command and woman to obey:
All else confusion. (188)

In both the plays under analysis in this chapter, Dattani as a champion of feministic cause has shaken the gender binary dynamics reflected in the above quoted lines of Tennyson. Both Dance Like a Man (1989) and Tara (1990) are the great dramatist’s mission to break the citadel of patriarchy which has created indelible impression on Indian mindset where one gender dominates the other rather suffocates the other. Both the plays resonate what Judith Butler writes in Gender Trouble:

Gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is instituted in time, instituted through a stylized repetition of [habitual] acts. (179)

Both Dance Like a Man (1989) and Tara (1990) convey the playwright’s vision as has been advocated by Butler in the above quoted lines that gender is not something one is, it is something one does; it’s a sequence of acts, a doing rather than a being. Hence, repeated “feminizing” and “masculinising” acts congeal gender, thereby, making people falsely think of gender as something they naturally are. Ironically, the roles set by patriarchy have been so lop-sided that they have contributed to the development of the antithetical difference between men and women in private and public spheres of life, thereby, nullifying the identity and individualistic self of women by pushing them to the margins.
Dattani’s concern to confront the gender which is a creation of social behavior and practices is forceful and vehement. Gayle Rubin’s popular phrase “sex/gender system” which describes “a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention” (The Traffic in Women 165) highlights how society plays a pivotal role in shaping gender dynamics. More so, Indian society has always been phallo-centric since ages, equipped with stereotypes, where any deviations on the part of gender or sexuality are seen as contempt or sacrilege. As a result, men have enjoyed power and supremacy while women have remained at the backdrop either as an ethical support to their men or as an inexperienced confidante. A wedding hymn from the Rig Veda translated by a German scholar, Hermann Oldenberg throws light upon the role of religion in marginalizing women in Hinduism, where her worth and her happiness is calculated by the number of sons she gives birth to. The Rig Veda says:

In this hymn, Agni is called upon to protect the bride so that she will be of blessed womb, a mother of many children who live to old age, and who will experience happiness from her sons! Punctuating the expectation that the bride will be fertile, and have many sons to make her happy. (The Religion of the Veda 72)

Mahesh Dattani in both the plays Dance Like a Man and Tara deals with the issue of gender divide which has been an ethos of Indian society since centuries. Commenting on the diversity of the socio-cultural matrix of Indian society, Erin Mee highlights in a prefatory “A Note on the Play”:

Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that’s a great advantage and a great disadvantage as well, because…we’re living in the present and there are so many challenges facing us — you just have to cross the road and you have an issue, … I think it is very important for our country to spawn new playwrights…who reflect honestly and purely our lives, because…that is our contribution to the world. (CP 319)
The two plays provide harsh annotations upon gender prejudice and social indifference done to a child under the veil of gender dichotomy that is an age-old Indian tradition. Both these plays are a persistent attack on society where a woman has been forcefully destined to struggle, to assert her identity and individuality. Mahesh Dattani concern about the gender stereotyping is reflected in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramanyam when he says:

I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant act. (qtd. in Multani 134)

Dattani’s portrayal of the protagonist Tara as one of the Siamese twins, deformed and re-created a “freak” when her family decides to provide one of her legs to her twin brother, Chandan further establishes the fact that male child is seen as a harbinger of prosperity and pride. As a result, Tara grows up physically flimsy with the corresponding cultural creation of her gender enforced on her defiantly. Beauvoir has given a suitable analysis of this crisis when she says:

Accepting a female child is an act of generosity on the father’s part; the women enters such societies only through a kind of grace bestowed on her and not legitimately like males. (*The Second Sex* 94)

The play highlights a grim reality of Indian mind set where a female child is never preferred over a male child because female child is always considered a burden where as a male child is seen as a reservoir of wealth and happiness who is welcomed with a pride and happiness in the family. As a result, the dramatist shows how the protagonist rapidly comes to her steady recognition of the societal norms around her that are devalued and destitute of sense. Erin Mee in “A Note on the play” comments:

*Tara* centers on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother
and grandfather to favor the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). Tara, a fiesty girl who isn’t given the opportunities given her brother (although she may be smarter) eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name to Dan and attempts to repress the guilt he feels over his sister’s death by living without a personal history. (CP 319)

The whole play is in Dan’s nostalgic memories. Dan is the second name of Chandan. He has changed his name from Chandan to Dan to free himself from the pangs of guilt due to discrimination done to his sister. He goes to London and tries his hand at writing. He considers himself responsible for pathetic situation of Tara which haunts his inner consciousness repeatedly. He confesses:

Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. (Pause) I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move. Without meaning, I forget Tara. (CP 379)

The “unknown force” that governs the life of these Siamese twins is callous and ruthless power of patriarchal norms and beliefs that create hierarchy between the children of the same womb. Tara is another half of Chandan and this realization tears apart Chandan when he knows that she is an alienated self of him.

The play revolves around the tragic end which the girl child of the Patel family faces. Patel couple is otherwise depicted as a modern couple who is educated and are from a socially powerful section of society. Patel is the General Manager in Indo-Swede Pharmacia and is a Gujarati, whereas Bharati, his wife is a Carnatic, the daughter of a powerful MLA. Both of them disobey wishes of their parents and enter the wed-lock as theirs was an inter-caste marriage. Despite of such progressive outlook, they make the choice for the survival of the male child when Bharati gives birth to Siamese twins. The irony of the situation is that the girl child would have better chances of survival but was denied life due to a prejudiced choice of her parents.
As a thematic innovation, Dattani in this play has shown the house of Patel’s as “the lowest level”. This level is seen only in memory while the next level is the realistic one representing a bedsitter in London where Dan lives. The “highest level” is occupied by Dr. Thakkar who performed the surgical operation. The case of Chandan and Tara is shown as special among the history of Siamese children as Dr. Thakkar says:

Conjoined twins— your Siamese twins— developing from one fertilized ovum are invariably of the same sex. Well, almost invariably. But here these two were obviously from different fertilized eggs… The twins are of different sexes. Very, very rare. (CP 332)

According to Dr. Thakkar, such children do not live a long life; one surely dies by the age of four. They have to make more efforts to live an ordinary life. In an imaginary interview taken by Dan for “Marvels in the World of Medicine”, Dr. Thakkar passes on this information thus:

The parents were warned of the odds against survival. They were, understandably, totally disheartened in the beginning. But, soon, even the remotest chance for survival was received with hope once they were made aware of the facilities offered by modern technology. (CP 342)

However, the problematic and most sensitive aspect of the case was that the twins had three legs. After medical check-up, it was revealed that foremost part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Therefore, chances were that the third leg should naturally survive on the girl. This left the couple in the state of dilemma and choice. Ostensibly, governed by the patriarchal mindset, “The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have— might have— been Tara.” (CP 378) was given to Chandan. In exchange, Dr Thakkar received a reward from Bharati’s father for the unethical favour. Patel tells the children:

He had acquired three acres of prime land—
in the heart of the city— from the state.
Your grandfather’s political influence had been used. (CP 378)

This choice changed the childhood of Chandan and Tara. After the operation, Chandan and Tara have to wear an artificial Jaipuri leg each for the rest of their lives which makes their movements difficult. Tara is portrayed as the hub of appeal and the lure for the Patel family. She keeps everyone engaged with her playfulness since her childhood. She recollects and tells Roopa:

I really used to play hard to get. Sulking all the time. And when I smiled, it made everyone quite…relieved! As if… if I didn’t smile I would just curl up and die! Mummy said my eyes really twinkled when I smiled. (CP 350)

Tara knew that after tenth standard, she will have to undergo kidney transplantation. She knows about her deteriorating physical condition. She tells Roopa that “We knew it was going to happen. I was prepared” (CP 338). Tara does not get aggravated and she always tries to remain joyful. As is the practice, Indian woman, despite all prejudices and sufferings has learnt resilience and as a critic writes “adjust in the binary paradigm prescribed by the male-dominated society” (Neb 231). After her kidney operation, Tara joyfully declares:

(suddenly acting cheerful) Right! Let’s get the act going. Come on, Chandu, let’s hear some more of your gags. I promise to laugh at all of them, even if I’ve heard them before. I promise to be cheerful all the time. (CP 359)

Tara’s laugh here is a metaphorical representation of Tara’s suppression of the self when she accepts the bitter reality of societal injustice which women are destined to face. Tara stands as an embodiment of suffering which a girl child faces right from her birth. Although she is more sincere in her studies than her brother, more inclined to pursue her father’s business and more skillful, she has to face dejection at every step. Her father bluntly refuses her willingness to take over the family profession. On the
contrary, Patel has ambitious plans for Chandan which he proclaims with a sense of pride:

I have a plans for him. Your Praful uncle will help him to get into a good university in England. I know he can get a scholarship on his own if he tries. But Praful will take care of the… special requirements for him. (CP 360)

As a result, Chandan goes to England and settles there. Mr. Patel is a typical patriarch establishing his authority on the family decision. His chauvinism is clearly shown when he wants his decisions to be executed regarding the future of his children. He doesn’t care for their feelings or plans and dreams. Chandan wants to be writer while Tara prefers a profession like her father. Mr. Patel is confident that there are distinctive work spaces for a girl and for a boy. In a male-dominated society, certain activities are set apart for women like teaching, gardening, nursing, writing poetry or romantic fiction and so on. Serious writing, thinking, business are considered not only alien but also detrimental to women. As a critic writes:

When such creative energies appears in a woman, it may be Anomalous, freakish because as ‘male’ characteristic, it is Essentially ‘unfeminine’. (Gilbert and Gubar 96)

The mother — daughter relationship portrayed in the play too has been overshadowed by the power of patriarchy. The thought of son — preference is engrained in Indian women. That is why, Bharati’s decision is governed by her father and she expresses no free choice. Nevertheless, she realizes the injustice done to her daughter and tries to make all the compensation as a mother. She wants to give her own kidney to Tara to overcome her guilt. Patel does not permit her to do that and his authoritarianism is reflected when he tells Bharati, “You will have to obey me. It’s my turn now” (CP 344) and even slaps her. Bharati, therefore, represents another aspect of women suppression as given by Beauvoir:
She will free herself from her parent’s hold; she will open up her future not by active conquest but by passively and docilely delivering herself into the hands of a new master. (*The Second Sex* 353)

Bharati like any other Indian women was never permitted to make an individual decision neither as a daughter nor as a wife and now her sense of making decision has been atrophied under the patriarchal dominance.

The play is a powerful attack on patriarchal hegemony which restricts the intellectual growth of women. When Chandan helps her mother in knitting, his father disapproves of it and considers it a girl’s activity. Chandan believes in co-operation and equality but Patel does not share his enthusiasm and vision of the new generation. Through him, Dattani depicts the hard-core barefaced discrimination which women are subjected to. The plight of Bharati is aptly conveyed in the words of Greer when she says:

…the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed slavery of the wife. Within the family he is the bourgeois and his wife represents the proletariat. (Greer 247)

She undergoes mental breakdown due to her constant feeling of guilt which is hardly experienced by Patel. Her conversation with Chandan highlights the trauma:

Bharati. I wish your father would pay more attention to Tara.

Chandan. He does. He doesn’t like to show his affection.

Bharati. Don’t tell me about your father. He is more worried about your career than hers. (CP 348)

Bharati’s agony increases manifold when she realizes the fact that she couldn’t help her daughter to fight against the gender stereotypical roles. As a critic writes, “Femininity comes to signify a role, an image, a value, imposed on women by the
narcissistic and fundamentally misogynistic logic” (Jacobus 63) of a patriarchal system. Bharati shares her pain with Chandan when she says:

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! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God!.

(CP 348-349)

Bharati’s sense of guilt at having unjustly given third leg to Chandan makes her abnormally indulgent towards Tara. The reins of reason no longer work upon her uncontrollable emotions. Bharati, in course of time, becomes paranoid. Her sense of guilt eventually drives her to that state where she assumes that none can be kind to her and least of all Patel. When Roopa, a neighbouring girl, approaches their house for the first time, Bharati forcibly requests her “be my Tara’s friend” (CP 341). When Roopa is a bit hesitant, Bharati reinforces:

Bharati. First promise me that you will be her friend.
Roopa. I don’t know. Can I think about it?
Bharati. (hissing). Promise me now! (CP 341)

Roopa takes advantage of her weakness and goes to their house regularly. Her real intention in visiting Patel’s house is to spread a word “freak” about Tara and Chandan. Roopa represents the general notions, beliefs and prejudices of society which views the physically challenged as “freaks”. When Tara informs Roopa that Chandan is a creative writer and “He is going to write a story — about me…” “About me. Strong. Healthy. Beautiful.” Roopa, “That’s not you! That’s me!” (CP 329). Hence, Roopa’s comment to highlight how a physically challenged girl can never be viewed strong and beautiful, the terms which have always been required to be refined in feminist discourse. Tara, however, takes us into our personal investigation of completeness and
individuality. She says, “I am strong. My mother has made me strong” (CP 330). We recognize a sagacity of confrontation in her voice and her denial to be duped by gender socialization. Hence, Dattani’s vision for deconstructing gender stereotyping is reflected in Tara who emerges as a brave girl despite all odds. Tara emerges as a brave girl when she says, “The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave” (CP 328). There was a time when women accepted unhesitatingly the do’s and don’ts men decided for them but now they refuse to accept that somebody else should make decisions on their behalf. They want to shape their lives and priorities the way they consider proper which is also reflected in the below conversation:

Chandan: If daddy wants to stop her from saying something to us, may be it’s not good for us to hear it.

Tara: And who decides what’s good for us to hear and what isn’t? (CP 374)

Women of Bharati’s generation were eulogized by men for their beauty and they also loved to bask in the approval of their charms. But Dattani gives importance to her intelligence because this is what she thinks she requires now to live expressively. The credulity and viciousness of people perturbing Tara is exposed through the experience she shares with Chandan:

Embarrassing me, making me go slower than I would. When I reached them they grinned… One of these days I’m going to tell them exactly how frightful they look. (CP 335)

Roopa narrates about the female infanticide, how new born girls are killed, how insensitive we have become. Tara is surprised when she learns from Roopa the fate that waits for a new born girl child.

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. *(Pause).*

Tara. In milk?

Roopa. So when people asked about how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk. *(CP 349)*

Tara has a sense of struggle against the dogma-ridden society. Her words, “…we are more sensitive, more intelligent, more compassionate human beings than creeps like you…” *(CP 371)* is an awareness of the rampant disagreement in modern-day society about woman’s situation and her phony exaltation. It is a cry of one’s restrained and subjugated condition in the asymmetric society.

The playwright’s concern for the subjugation of women and their emancipation from the clutches of stereotypical roles is conveyed through transformation in Bharati who openly declares what should Tara do in her life. Bharati tries to make an escape route for Tara from the traditional and limited sphere of women in the society when she says:

> It’s time Tara decided what she wants to be.  
> Women have to do that as well these days.  
> She must have a career. *(CP 348)*

Tara’s yearning for an expression both creative and economic finds its expression when she struggles to come out of the muggy veracity. Tara is worried not only because of her awkward and manipulated birth but because of her identity which is the result of disparity and confrontations. Kate Millet takes gender difference to have “essentially cultural, rather than biological bases” that result from differential treatment *(Sexual Politics 28-29).* Tara’s aspiration to go beyond the mundane existence of women inspite of all conflicts and contradictions conveys Dattani’s unflinching faith in women. By portraying Tara as a character of profundity and receptivity, the belief of the
dramatist in the unconventional role of women is established. Tara’s intelligence is reflected in this conversation with her brother:

Tara. My, oh my! You sound just like mummy! ([Goes towards her room.] You men can imitate us so well if you want to. Pity we can’t return the compliment. (CP 357)

Although, Tara is not free from her family, society or the history of domination, she always presents a break away from patterned responses, imaging a picture of liberation. Never for once does she stop the insistent questioning of received values.

Tara: It’s all the same. You. Me. There’s no difference.

Chandan. No difference between you and me?

Tara. No! Why should there be? (CP361)

Dattani presents Tara as the manifestation of the latent possibilities in a human being which is inspiring for all. The protagonist is imaginative with a wild and fiery spirit and instilled with a creative spark. Her aspiration for creative work is her aspiration for liberation. She has been reared as someone who must depend on her parents for care and sustenance. In the portrayal of the protagonist here, Dattani’s vision resonates the assertion of radical feminist, Betty Friedan:

A girl shouldn’t expect special privilege because of her sex, but neither should she “adjust” to prejudice and discrimination. She must learn to compete then, not as a woman but as a human being. (*The Feminine Mystique* 503)

Ostensibly, Tara opens up a new vista of possibility for all women to come. Her endurance is almost exemplary to say the least. She resists her identity formation and puts into shame her family’s callous and self defeating purpose of getting a healthy male
child. And if she is a “freak,” so are we in our hypocrisy and corruption. Her emergent identity is characterized by a strong feeling of independence. Tara is defined as the feminine part of her twin brother Chandan, the two together making a complete whole. A dysfunctional individual, alienated from any normalising process struggles for identity and existence. Tara is willing to break taboos, the character of Tara is portrayed against the social and moral callousness of Dr. Thakkar (who manipulated her birth in lieu of money), what we observe, is the emergence of a ‘twinkling’ Tara, complete in spirit, inspite of her final disillusionment of her. The dichotomy between the twin-gendered selves is recognized and a physical separation is made through surgery:

...Like we have 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. (CP 325)

Both Dan and Tara are spiritually inseperable, the twins are born as “inseperably fused” - hugging each other emblematizing their emotional coherence at the very outset. Commenting on the rebellious nature of protagonist, R.K.Mishra writes:

The play Tara inspires Indian women to rebel against sex discrimination and shatter the old-age-fabric of women subordination and marginalization. The play has created sensation in the realm of Indian drama in English on account of its revolutionary tempo and objective. (The Atlantic Critical Review 111)

The second chapter under analysis in this chapter, Dance Like a Man raises the issue of vocations which has been reserved for men and women in Indian society. Oscillating between past and present, the play reveals before us a vivid portrayal of gender roles that we practice in Indian houses. Gerda Lerner calls gender a “costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance” (The Creation of Patriarchy 238). Dattani in this play condemns the hypocritical attitude of society towards dance as a vocation which is meant only for women.
The play is an eloquent comment on the stereotypes of gender roles that are set against the perception of the artist who is in exploration of creativity within the restrictive arrangement of the world. The protagonist, Jairaj with his obsession for dance is ready to dismantle these stereotypes. The play removes this notion and explores the nature of the tyranny that even men might be subjected to within patriarchal tyrannical structures. Jairaj and Ratna live within such an organization; the sphere of the patriarch Amritlal, Jairaj’s father. Commenting on the contemporary reality of the play, Gouri Nilakantan Mehta aptly writes:

*Dance Like a Man* is a powerful human drama that provides an insight into the contemporary Indian social scene, reflecting the aspiration of the middle class south Indian couple, who by their choice of profession as dancers, reflect the past and the present Indian culture, identities and gender roles. *(Contemporary Indian writers 100)*

Dattani’s attitude towards the central protagonist undergoes a transformation here. The pivotal character figuring in earlier plays is rebellious and unconventional women who question the marginalization of women at social, political, economic and cultural front. However, in *Dance Like a Man*, the pivotal characters are a man and a woman, Jairaj and Ratna. The leit motif of the play is conveyed through the idiom “like a man” but what exactly constitutes a dance “like a man” is perceived differently by various characters — Ratna, Jairaj and Amritlal.

The location of the play *Dance Like a Man* is the paternal house of the chief protagonist Jairaj. He and his wife were drawn to each other in their youth because of their love for dancing — something disliked by Jairaj’s father Amritlal Parekh. A respectable figure of the town, Amritlal had been a freedom fighter and a social activist of sorts, but he couldn’t win election, for which he blamed his son’s passion for dancing. He has a very low opinion of dance as an art form and of dancers as artists. A “man”, according to him, ought not to take up this art as a hobby or a profession. This is borne out of his remark:
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? (CP 406)

Clearly, there is a generation gap between the father and the son that also symbolizes the clash between tradition and modernity. The play Dance Like a Man begins in the traditionally arranged room of Jairaj and Ratna. Lata, their daughter enjoys her life in the company of her lover, Vishwas. Male attitude towards dance is seen at the very first comment of Vishwas, “Dancers stay at home till its showtime” (CP 387). Vishwas as soon as wears the shawl of Amritlal assumes his role and Jairaj revives his memories of his father. Dattani here depicts the hypocrisy of a social reformer like Amritlal who doesn’t allow Ratna to visit the old devdasi for learning Bharatnatyam. Despite being a social reformer, Amritlal doesn’t like his daughter-in-law Ratna’s association with a ‘devdasi’. The play is a bitter attack on the hypocrisies of social reformers like Amritlal and their doublespeak:

Amritlal. We are building ashrams for these unfortunate women! Educating them, reforming them...

Jairaj. Reform! Don’t talk about reform. If you really wanted any kind of reform in our society, you would let them practice their art. (CP 416)

Amritlal thinks that supporting and allowing them to practice their art is an indirect encouragement for open prostitution, but Jairaj holds them in high esteem and says, “Send them back to their temples! Give them awards for preserving their art” (CP 416). Amritlal, nevertheless, holds a very different view and believes that the most of them have nothing to do with their art and are engaged in trading of blood and flesh. Amritlal’s words, “I will not have our temples turned into brothels!” (CP 416) reflect the common notion associated with the dancers. For Amritlal, dance remains a craft of prostitutes and thus, for him, a man who learns dancing is not manly. Amritlal can’t stand the sounds of the dancing bells in his house and is flabbergasted at the long-haired guruji with an effeminate walk. Commenting on this situation, a critic aptly avers:
The underlying fear is surely that dance would make him womanly’ — an effeminate man — the suggestion of homosexuality hovers near, although never explicitly mentioned. (Chaudhari 68)

Amritlal thought that dance was “just a fancy” for Jairaj because society has fixed the role of procreator and protector for the man. Jairaj is discouraged by many desperate comments by Amritlal, “Where will you go being a dancer? Nowhere! What will you get being a dancer? Nothing! People will point at you on the streets and laugh and ask, ‘Who is he?’ ‘He is a dancer’. ‘What does he do?’ (CP 397). His words illustrate the gendering of a person and his confirmation to his or her traditional gender roles:

I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were 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. (CP 414-415)

Amritlal couldn’t accept his son’s obsession and he stands like an autocrat. He tries to inflict upon Ratna the feeling that her husband lacks masculinity. He says, “Help me to help him grow up” (CP 427). In Amritlal’s eyes, growing up means bidding goodbye to dancing — a profession unworthy of a man. He is horrified further when Ratna informs him that, “…Jairaj starts learning another dance form — Kuchipudi…in Kuchipudi, the men dress up as women!” (CP 422). Amritlal’s concern has always been to make his son a “man”. He asks Ratna, “Do you know where a man’s happiness lies?”(CP 425) and immediately answers back ‘In being a man’(CP 426). Commenting on the tyranny of the two-sex/two-gender system and the adherence to the system, a critic aptly remarks:

Masculinity is defined as sexual dominance, feminity as sexual submissiveness: genders are created through the eroticization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other. This
is the social meaning of sex. (Mackinnon 113)

Ratna has in her the grain of ambition, which gets a fillip as a result of her trade-off with her father-in-law. According to it, she would have all the freedom to learn dancing from whichever quarter she chooses and perform on the stage, but at the same time she would wean her husband away from dancing. Jairaj finally finds himself robbed of self-esteem and the process is revealed in his own words:

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. (CP 443)

Jairaj considers himself to be equally oppressed by his father and the social conventions where the feminine and masculine roles are already fixed. Dattani through Amritlal portrays the phallo-centric world which is understood in terms of regimes of power and power is synonymous to earning money. Hence, Amritlal is afraid that his dancing son would lose power because dancing can never be considered to be a man’s profession in the heterosexual society. He comments, “A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic (CP 427). Amritlal plays an ideal sexual politics as he robs his son Jairaj of his dreams. Commenting on the role played by gender in forming our individual identity and self-perception, a critic, John Beynon 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. (*Understanding Masculinities* 56)

Dattani through Jairaj highlights the tragedy of those people who doesn’t agree with the binaristic understanding of femininity and masculinity that shapes the way we perceive gender. Jairaj reveals a character who is forced to perform a gender to manufacture an identity. Commenting on the societal perception regarding a person’s defiance to follow traditional gender behavior and appearance, Butler writes:

> People think that there are true and real genders, and those who deemed to be doing their gender ‘wrong’ are socially sanctioned as ‘unnatural’. (*Gender Trouble* 278-79)

Dattani through Ratna has tried to shatter the stereotyped image of woman who in order to preserve and pursue further her ambition can question the patriarchal norms and beliefs. She bluntly asks Amritlal, “You can’t stop me from learning an art!” (CP 421). She calls her dancing as divine activity and she puts, “Yes. Dancing the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati” (CP 420). Simone de Beauvoir while commenting on the choice of women to question their position in society pertinentlly writes:

> Women aren’t wrong at all when they reject the rules of life that have been introduced into the world, in as much as it is the men who have made these without them. (*The Second Sex* 11)

When Jairaj returns to his father’s house after abandoning it, Ratna dislikes it and she comments, “You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house...” (CP 402) and further says, “You! You are nothing but a spineless boy who couldn’t leave his father’s house for than forty — eight hours...” (CP 402). For Ratna, maleness means one’s decision making power, doing the work that one liked, living on one’s own terms and conditions, standing on one’s own feet without any support which Jairaj lacked. Beena Aggarwal while commenting on the effort of Dattani to portray the unconventional woman writes:
Dattani in the conspiracy of Ratna, explores the invisible horrors of gender discrimination. He discovers those aspects of feminine psyche where woman is not a silent sufferer but a conscious individual endowed with a passion for self-identity. *(Mahesh Dattani’s Plays)*

Ratna’s remorse is that her choice has turned out to be a mediocre. Unable to see Jairaj “Dance Like a Man”, she pins hopes on their son, Shankar. She feel that he would one day dance the *tandava* like Shiva, “like a man”. Fate willed otherwise and Shankar passed away when Ratna was performing on the stage and this was the end of the performing career for her. Jairaj blames Ratna for the death of their son Shankar because of her carelessness or insincerity. Commenting on the expected stereotype roles from a woman, Beauvoir writes:

> Success is made more difficult for her as another kind of Accomplishment is demanded of her; she must atleast also be a woman, she mustn’t lose her femininity. *(The Second Sex)*

It is only after Lata is born that the couple once again put on their hopes on the child. By the time, Lata grows up into a young lady, it has become passion for both Ratna and Jairaj to establish her as a popular dancer. Ratna makes a lot of effort to ensure the presence of favourable press reviewers. She flatters the critics present at Lata’s debut performance:

> If people like you praise her, then she has every reason to be thrilled. And if a person no less than the President of India gave her a standing ovation....Ofcourse! A as soon as Lata finished her tillana, he stood up and applauded… *(CP)*

At this point, Jairaj tries to demoralize Ratna by saying, “He was in a hurry to go to the toilet” *(CP)*. The entry of women into male-dominated institutions logically forces men to admit that there are no innate differences in ability and the man feels insecure and jealous of the women who is in competition with him. As a critic aptly
comments, “Where women deliberately or inadvertently demonstrate their competence, they generate insecurity” (Hanmer 70). However, Ratna isn’t deterred and having won over the official with her honeyed words, she offers to assist in the organization of a cultural festival in Canada. Jairaj and Ratna managed Sheshadri as a musician at the dance party and did every possible effort for the success of their daughter. Ratna did painstaking efforts for Lata’s best performance. Lata performed as per their expectation and won acclaim from one and all. Jairaj and Ratna are very happy for having had Lata’s best performance. Ratna embeds her own dreams and desires in Lata and she identifies herself with Lata and derives satisfaction from her success. After reading rare review of Lata in a newspaper, Ratna says:

(shouting) I heard. Rave reviews! The star of the festival! My hard work has paid off, hasn’t it? Hasn’t it? (Takes the papers and makes for the bedroom). (CP 439)

The whole play is about gender construct and the tension and conflict that comes in a man’s life when one doesn’t follow the prescribed gender roles. Since Jairaj was a man, his flair for dance is suppressed, he wanted to be a dancer but his father wanted Jairaj to be the provider. At the end of the play, Dattani details the truth that divinity of human is neither man nor woman through the words of Jairaj:

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...We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God. (CP 447)

The characters like Tara and Ratna in both the plays Tara and Dance Like a Man portrays the resistance and desire for some kind of independence and happiness under the domineering credence of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire. As a critic, Judith Lorber attempts to highlight the relationship between sex and gender, between the ways in which our bodies are biologically constructed and the genders to which we are assigned:
Neither sex nor gender are pure separate, autonomous, discrete categories. Combinations of incongruous genes, genitalia and hormonal input are ignored in sex categorization [as male or female], just as combinations of incongruous physiology, identity, sexuality, appearance and behavior are ignored in the social construction of gender statuses [masculine and feminine].

(14)

What therefore starts as a portrayal of staunch patriarchy in both his plays opens up new domains of study, where Dattani subverts the norms that present the absurd picture of gender stereotype roles on the basis of sex and gender.