

Short Communication

Social and Psychological Consequences of Performative Masculinity in *Dance Like a Man*

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Abstract

Bharatnatyam, in its traditional sense, is considered as a women art form. *Dance Like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani is a complex interplay of the psychological and social impacts of performative masculinity on Jairaj, a male protagonist whose passion for Bharatanatyam, a classical Dance in India, clashes with societal expectations of masculinity. This study incorporates a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis that the intergenerational consequences of these pressures of masculinity is not only performed but also policed within familial and cultural frameworks.

Keywords: Masculinity, Feminine Art, gender, Social and Psychological effects

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Background Information

In India masculinity is frequently connected to social standing, power, and control. One of India's most well-known modern dramas, *Dance Like a Man*, reconnoiters the challenges faced by Jairaj, an artist who wants to pursue a career in Bharatanatyam dancing⁽¹⁾. His father, Amritlal, blocks his path of making career in Bharatnatyam by forcing patriarchal ideas of masculinity, which causes him to become socially isolated and suffer from psychological anguish.

According to Butler (1990)⁽²⁾ and Connell (2005)⁽³⁾, masculinity is a social performance shaped by institutional power structures and cultural norms rather than an innate quality. This performativity is demonstrated in *Dance Like a Man* by Jairaj's attempt to balance his love of dance with his father's strict ideas of what it is to be a man. Amritlal, a patriarch and former freedom fighter, tries to make Jairaj into a "respectable" man who represents traditional masculinity through economic stability, power, and control over women⁽⁴⁾. Jairaj suffers from extreme psychological anguish due to his father's imposed expectations which leads to broken relationships, a deep sense of inadequacy, self-doubt, and emotional suppression.

Aim and Scope

This article aims to examine the construction of masculinity through the lens of performative gender theory by integrating textual analysis with empirical data from a small-scale survey. The study explores how societal perceptions and cultural narratives shape and reinforce internalized notions of masculinity⁽⁶⁾. The scope of the research encompasses both literary and sociological dimensions, focusing on how traditional gender roles are perpetuated and challenged within specific cultural contexts⁽⁷⁾. By combining theoretical insights with field data, the article seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of masculinity as a dynamic and socially constructed identity.

Result and Discussion:

The qualitative analysis determines that Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like A Man* is a compelling exploration of performative masculinity. It functions as both a personal burden and a socio-psychological construct that commands the course of individual lives. The article highlights that masculinity is not an inherent or stable identity, but a performance—enforced by societal expectations, cultural norms, and patriarchal ideologies⁽⁵⁾. Jairaj's desire to pursue Bharatanatyam, a classical dance form often gendered as feminine, positions him in direct conflict with the rigid masculine ideals upheld by his father,

Amritlal⁽⁸⁾. This conflict builds a larger narrative of emotional repression, failed communication, and intergenerational trauma.

The small scale survey deals with the data analysis of 19 respondents out of 20, both male and female, who were between the ages of 20 and 22. A structured questionnaire comprising eight questions (seven close ended and one open ended) about performative masculinity and its psychological and social ramifications was utilized to collect the data. One of the key questions asked in the survey was: "What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase 'Be a man' or 'Act like a man'?" This question aimed to explore common societal perceptions and internalized meanings attached to masculinity.

The survey findings reveal that a significant majority (80%) of respondents recognize the societal pressure imposed on men to adhere to conventional masculine norms. Despite growing awareness, male participation in artistic fields—particularly in classical dance—continues to be shadowed by persistent stereotypes. These ingrained perceptions not only discourage men from pursuing careers in the performing arts but also reinforce restrictive gender roles that negatively impact their psychological well-being. Respondents widely acknowledged that such rigidity contributes to emotional suppression and mental distress among men. Notably, 80% of participants rated the freedom to choose a career free from gender-based expectations as "very important," underscoring a strong desire for more inclusive and equitable opportunities. However, only 20% believed that men are able to express emotions openly in

Furthermore, an overwhelming 80% contemporary society, highlighting the enduring long-play a vital role in dismantling stigma surrounding held biases and challenging traditional stereotypes agreed that

fostering gender equality in the arts can male vulnerability

The **bar chart** represents the thematic analysis of responses to the phrase "Be a man" based on survey. It visually highlights the frequency (in percentage) with which each theme appeared among the 19 respondents.

The analysis of participant responses revealed that the most commonly identified theme was **emotional suppression** (63.2%), with a majority linking masculinity to the expectation of hiding emotions, remaining stoic, and avoiding vulnerability. **Traditional masculine traits** such as strength, courage, independence, and responsibility were noted by 47.4% of participants, indicating that these ideals continue to dominate perceptions of manhood. Approximately 42.1% of respondents reflected an awareness of **social conditioning and stereotyping**, emphasizing how rigid gender norms shape male behavior from an early age

A critical stance was taken by 31.6% of participants, who argued that phrases enforcing traditional masculinity are outdated and may contribute to mental strain and aggression among young men. On a more progressive note, 26.3% of respondents expressed support for a positive reinterpretation of masculinity, advocating for emotional openness, empathy, and ethical strength. Lastly, a small minority (10.5%) expressed **confusion or indifference**, suggesting limited engagement with or awareness of contemporary gender discourses.

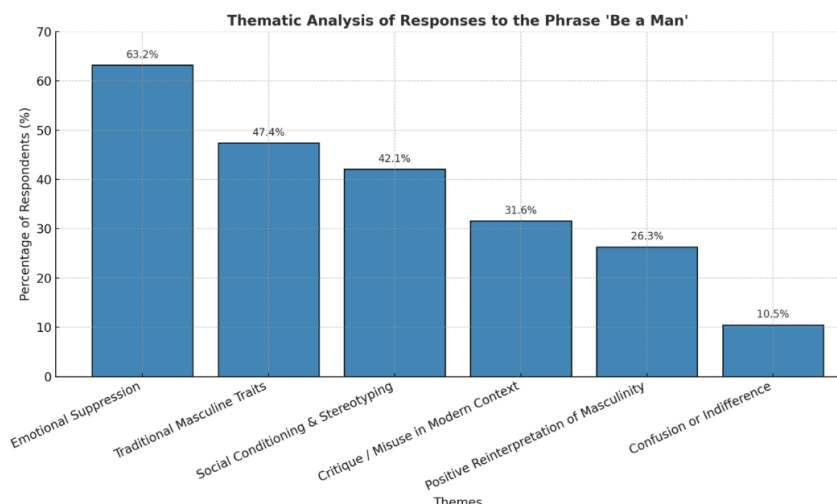


Figure 1: Thematic Frequency of Respondent Views on Performative Masculinity



Figure 2: Visual Representation of responses through Pie Charts.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* poignantly reveals that masculinity is not merely a social expectation imposed from the outside but a deeply internalized performance—one that governs behaviour, suppresses emotional expression, and often leads to psychological conflict. Through Jairaj's struggle against the rigid masculine ideals embodied by his father, Dattani critiques the emotional toll of traditional gender norms and invites readers to reflect on the hidden costs of conforming to these expectations. The play becomes a compelling cultural and literary interrogation of masculinity, advocating for more inclusive, empathetic, and fluid understandings of gender identity.

The survey results strongly echo the concerns raised in the play. A significant majority of respondents associated masculinity with emotional suppression, rigid stereotypes, and mental health challenges. Many acknowledged the societal pressure on men to conform to predefined roles and highlighted the importance of freedom in career and emotional expression. The findings also revealed growing support for a reimagining of masculinity—one that embraces vulnerability, empathy, and individuality.

The literary analysis and empirical data underscore the need to dismantle performative gender roles and promote healthier, more authentic expressions of masculinity. This study calls for continued critical engagement with cultural narratives and social structures that reinforce limiting gender norms and urges a shift toward more open, compassionate, and psychologically sustainable models of manhood.

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