

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANDROGYNY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN THE DRAMA OF MAHESH DATTANI

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how psychological androgyny has been used in the play of Mahesh Dattani as a prefiguration of identity as processual and integrative and not as something fixed and gendered. Going beyond the readings on gender discrimination, the paper probes how the characters developed by Dattani represent a merger of what is inhaled as traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics. The paper uses a theory of psychological androgyny suggested by Sandra Bem and a concept of gender performativity by Judith Butler to examine Tara, Dance Like a Man, and Seven Steps Around the Fire and show how Dattani dismantles strict gender dichotomies.

The analysis of the textual materials leads to the argument that Dattani recreates the identity on the basis of portraying the ethical selfhood as a psychologically negotiated and relationally situated identity. His main characters experience conflicts between personal will, social norms and ethical duties and attest to dharma as something dynamic and gender-biased instead of a fixed set of moral rules. In masculinizing the collision of the masculine and feminine sensibility on the individual psyche, Dattani imagines androgyny as the transforming state of existence that rebels against patriarchal conditioning. Finally, his theatre also suggests an inclusive image of a self-based on empathy, moral judgment, and psychological integrity.

Keywords: psychological androgyny; gender identity; Indian English drama; masculinity and femininity

INTRODUCTION

Indian English drama more frequently attempts to challenge the social constructiveness of gender and its effects on identity and moral responsibility. Mahesh Dattani is one of the most influential authors who holds a unique place in his long-term interest in gender, selfhood, and moral responsibility in the context of the urban, middle-class India. His theatre throws light on psychological, social and moral conflicts that occur between the desire of the individual and the expectation of the society, especially in the family set ups with patriarchal set ups. Instead of showing gender as an oppressive site, Dattani enacts a scenario which is a dynamic space where identity is negotiated, challenged and re-built.

This article, which is entitled Psychological Androgyny and the Reconstruction of Identity in the Drama of Mahesh Dattani, claims that Dattani in his plays transcends the binary concepts of masculinity and femininity in order to suggest an integrative approach to the notion of selfhood. His characters are frequently torn between cultural systems that they have inherited and their personal emotional and ethical urges, which show how dharma, as a concept of

moral responsibility, is constructed around gender and culture instead of being absolute. Dattani predicts, according to Sudha Mehta, the conflict between social obligation and personal desire in her theatre and states that the clash of duty and self-realization exists (Mehta 32).

The concept of psychological androgyny by Sandra Bem is used to form a theoretical basis of the study. In *The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny*, Bem argues that the more culturally coded masculine characteristics (assertiveness) are combined with feminine characteristics (sensitivity), the more psychologically flexible that person will be (Bem, "Measurement" 155-56). In *The Lenses of Gender*, she also criticizes the strict gender schemas on the basis of the constriction of human potential (Bem, *Lenses* 3-5). The utilization of the framework provided by Bem to the Dattani drama provides a clearer insight on how his characters cross the gender lines by balancing their emotions and making moral choices.

Placing the plays of Dattani in the context of the psychological androgyny, the current article proves that his theatre recreates identity in the form of fluidity, relationality, and integrativeness. The concept of ethical selfhood in his dramatic world arises not due to adherence to the patriarchal standards but to the establishment of the balance between the masculine and the female sensibilities in the personal psyche. By making this integrative vision, Dattani is able to redefine identity as an ongoing process of negotiation, based on empathy, moral consciousness and psychological completeness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of gender and identity, ethical responsibility in literature and theatre can happen as a consequence of the fusion of feminist theory, psychology, cultural studies, and Indian philosophical thought. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* gives a contribution to the feminist discourse. Beauvoir claims that it is not biology that makes woman to be a construction in which she is considered the Other in patriarchal society, but rather, through her socialization and cultural discourse (Beauvoir 267). Her analysis of the essentialist categories of genders preconditions an interpretation of gender as an object of production which is historically and socially constructed instead of being innate.

It is on this basis that Judith Butler renegotiates the concept of gender in *Gender Trouble* as performative; defined by repetitive acts, gestures, and discourses as opposed to being defined by biological nature (Butler 34-36). By disrupting the binary system of masculinity and femininity, the theory by Butler allows critics to see literary characters not as fixed representations of their gender roles, but as participants who construct, oppose, and create (again) identity via performance.

Psychologically, the theory of psychological androgyny by Sandra Bem can be a very important framework in the analysis of integrative identity. Bem develops Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) in *The Measurement of Psychological Androgyny* and insists that gender individuals who have merged masculine and feminine traits according to the cultural frameworks are more emotionally intelligent and behaviourally adaptive (Bem 156-57). *The Lenses of Gender* extends on her part by stating that it is the presence of strict gender schemas, which are supported by social institutions and ideology that limit human development and moral growth (Bem, *Lenses* 94). In the case of Bem, the notion of psychological integration is a manifestation of personal, as well as structural gender polarization resistance.

In their article, *Masculinity and Femininity: Their Psychological Dimensions, Correlates, and Antecedents*, Janet T. Spence and Robert L. Helmreich analyze the impact of gendered traits on the behavior, social interaction, and moral judgement (Spence and Helmreich 653). Their study confirms the position to the fact that masculinity and femininity are not oppositional categories, but they are independent dimensions, which confirms the possibility of a psychological and ethical integration.

In Indian English plays, Mahesh Dattani has long been known as a challenger of patriarchal values and identities created by the society. Some critics like Sudha Mehta argue that the Indian middle-class has hidden conscience, which is revealed in the plays by Dattani (Mehta 43), and some critics like Ranjan Gupta argue that gender and identity can stay fluid and open to negotiation in Dattani dramatic space (Gupta 47). *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* are just but a few plays that have been explored in respect to patriarchy, marginality and social injustice. Nevertheless, very little criticism clearly places them in the framework of psychological androgyny.

In combination, feminist philosophy and psychological theory are regulated address binary gender thinking and accentuate integration, adaptability, and ethical responsiveness. It is on the basis of these theoretical approaches that this paper argues that Dattani characters represent a reconstructive form of identity, which is based on psychological androgyny--a mode that goes beyond patriarchal conditioning and views ethical selfhood as fluid, balanced, and relational.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do the protagonists in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* reflect psychological androgyny by blending masculine and feminine traits?
2. How do patriarchal norms influence or restrict the development of androgynous identities in the characters?
3. How does the combination of masculine and feminine traits foster resilience, self-assertion, and identity reconstruction in the narratives?
4. How can Sandra Bem's Psychological Androgyny Theory explain character development and gender dynamics in these plays?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the expression of psychological androgyny in *Tara*, *Chandan*, and *Jairaj* through the integration of masculine (instrumental) and feminine (expressive) traits.
2. To analyze the impact of patriarchal pressures and gender expectations on the formation of androgynous identity.
3. To explore how psychological androgyny aids characters in achieving resilience, asserting identity, and experiencing personal growth.
4. To apply Bem's Psychological Androgyny Theory as a framework for interpreting gender, identity, and character development in Dattani's plays.

Psychological Androgyny Theory of Sandra Bem

The psychological androgyny theory by Sandra Bem questions the old-fashioned understanding of a gender by the fact that a person can be both possessing psychologically masculine and feminine features. Male traits are instrumental which means that they are assertive, independent and goal oriented and female traits are expressive i.e. they are

empathetic, nurturing as well as emotionally responsive (Bem, Measurement 156). She claims that gender roles are inflexible with the society and it impairs the development of the psyche and personal adaptability.

Bem states that psychologically androgynous persons could unite these opposing features and provide more behavioral flexibility, resilience and self-expression (Bem, Lenses 3). Through this integration, people are able to provide answers to more problems of social and personal problems because they are not restricted by cultural codes of behavior that are coded to be typical of their assigned sex. Conversely, when people follow the conventional gender roles quite rigorously, they might be prone to emotional dissonance and lack of adaptability, as one group of characteristics is suppressed in favor of another.

The relevance of Bem framework is especially in the analysis of literature and theatrical production because it would allow one to look at both instrumental and expressive characters. Lead characters in films like *Tara and Dance Like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani show androgynous qualities that enable them to break traditional expectations of patriarchy and overcome societal restrictions, as well as dominate the agency in a gendered space (Bem, Measurement 157). Applying the theory created by Bem, researchers will be able to see a psychological integration of these characters as a response to binary gender subjugation and a mechanism to become whole and strong.

ANALYSIS

Tara by Mahesh Dattani: Androgynous Resilience

Mahesh Dattani emphasizes androgynous resilience in *Tara* as a psychological defense against patriarchal identity fragmentation. Based on Sandra Bem's psychological androgyny theory, the play shows how characters combine "feminine" empathy with traditionally "masculine" assertiveness to build resilience and adaptability in the face of systemic gender bias (Bem 156).

Core Conflict: Gender, Surgery, and Societal Devaluation

The surgical separation of conjoined twins Tara and Chandan is the main source of conflict in the play. The fact that Chandan is given Tara's leg despite its biological viability reflects Bharati's father's patriarchal authority and Dr. Patel's obedience (Dattani 332–33). Tara is physically and psychologically crippled by this act of gendered injustice, and Chandan is deeply guilty. Dattani dramatizes the imposition of strict gender hierarchies and the devaluation of femininity in society through this incident.

Tara refuses to be a helpless victim. She combines what Bem calls "masculine" agency with emotional depth through her intellectual ambition, competitive spirit, and defiance of maternal authority (Bem 156). She is able to confront patriarchal injustice, assert her value, and withstand humiliation because of these qualities.

Tara's Resilient Androgyny

Tara is an example of psychological androgyny, exhibiting resilience by combining empathy and assertiveness. "I have the right to be selfish like everyone else!" she exclaims. (Dattani 335), combining Bem's expressive and instrumental qualities, which show both relational concern and autonomy (Bem 156). Her moral bravery challenges oppressive social norms, establishing her as a psychologically complex heroine who can overcome gender hierarchies and adapt to hardship.

Chandan's Fractured Integration

On the other hand, Chandan shows signs of incomplete androgyny. He redefines himself as Dan, a writer, after moving to London, but his repression of emotions shows an uneven development that favors stoic masculinity (Dattani 345). Isolation highlights the consequences of denying feminine sensitivity, while his reflective soliloquies hint at possible integration. Dattani criticizes the social and psychological costs of strictly following gendered roles by drawing a comparison between Chandan's partial integration and Tara's resilient wholeness.

Escape, Renaming, and Writing as Catharsis

Dan's renaming in London and self-imposed exile represent his disconnection from cultural and familial patriarchy (Dattani 348). However, the unresolved moral and psychological burden is reflected in the lingering guilt over receiving the viable leg. Dan confronts patriarchal complicity in the twins' suffering and externalizes repressed trauma through his meta-play, *Twinkle Tara*. He is able to honor Tara's memory while resolving the conflict between privilege and responsibility by using writing as a tool for catharsis and reconstruction (Dattani 350–52).

Limits of Reconstruction

Despite this process, identity reconstruction remains incomplete. Dan's isolation and stalled writing career reflect lingering trauma and self-loathing (Dattani 354). Dattani suggests that partial integration—empathy and introspection without societal transformation—cannot fully resolve the consequences of patriarchal bias. Tara's death and Chandan's exile underscore societal constraints on psychological androgyny and the ongoing struggle for authentic selfhood.

Artistic Integration and Androgyny in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

In *Dance Like a Man*, Mahesh Dattani examines the negotiation of identity and gender through artistic pursuit. Jairaj's dedication to Bharatanatyam confronts entrenched patriarchal norms, as his father Amritlal emphatically declares, "Dancing is not for men" (Dattani, *Dance* 12). Amritlal's statement reflects more than generational disapproval; it embodies a deep-seated resentment toward what he perceives as a feminized art form. His contempt for dance manifests in controlling behavior, verbal reprimands, and social intimidation, all aimed at curbing Jairaj's artistic expression. Dattani portrays Amritlal as a symbol of rigid gender binaries, where masculine identity is equated with dominance, stoicism, and public conformity, and deviation is met with hostility. This mirrors Sandra Bem's concept of culturally enforced gender limitations, which suppress the integration of instrumental and expressive traits (*Lenses* 3).

Jairaj's Embodied Androgyny

Jairaj exemplifies psychological androgyny in spite of Amritlal's animosity by fusing stereotypically "feminine" characteristics like grace, emotional expressiveness, and sensitivity with traditionally "masculine" virtues like ambition, tenacity, and perseverance. Through dancing, he creates a platform for self-expression that goes beyond the strict boundaries his father imposed. Bem contends that this kind of integration improves authenticity, flexibility, and resilience, allowing people to deal with social demands without compromising their individuality ("Measurement" 157).

Amritlal as Patriarchal Antagonist

Amritlal's resistance to dance is a reflection of society's demand for gender conformity. His mockery of Bharatanatyam and his demand that Jairaj give up the art form reflect a larger societal fear of men exhibiting qualities like elegance, sensitivity, and emotional expression that are typically associated with women. The psychological cost of strict gender conformance is highlighted by this suppression of integrated traits: Amritlal's repression encourages rigidity, intolerance, and emotional conflict, whereas Jairaj's androgynous integration supports resilience and authenticity (Dattani, *Dance* 14–15). The portrayal by Dattani highlights the social opposition that people encounter when they try to balance their masculine and feminine traits.

Implications for Androgynous Identity

Jairaj's journey demonstrates Bem's assertion that psychological androgyny facilitates multidimensional self-expression and functional flexibility (*Measurement* 157). By negotiating ambition and emotional depth, he achieves an integrated identity capable of resisting patriarchal constraints. Dattani positions artistic practice as a metaphor and medium for identity formation, suggesting that creative engagement enables psychological androgyny and authentic selfhood despite societal opposition.

CONCLUSION

The plays *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani demonstrate the transformational power of psychological androgyny by presenting identity as relational, integrative, and flexible rather than based on biology or social conventions. The protagonist of *Tara* cultivates resilience, self-assertion, and ethical discernment by fusing conventionally masculine attributes like ambition and assertiveness with feminine features like empathy and emotional sensitivity (Dattani, *Tara* 332–354; Bem, *The Lenses of Gender* 3–5). Characters demonstrate the psychological and ethical benefits of androgynous identity by navigating patriarchal restraints while remaining authentic through this integration (Bem, *Measurement* 156–157).

By utilizing Bem's paradigm, Dattani's theater questions inflexible gender dichotomies and demonstrates how social expectations, individual desires, and moral obligations interact to enact, negotiate, and reconstruct identity (Butler 34–36). Jairaj's quest for Bharatanatyam in *Dance Like a Man* serves as an example of how creative expression permits the integration of expressive and instrumental qualities, enabling him to develop selfhood while fending against patriarchal pressure (Dattani, *Dance Like a Man* 12–15).

Dattani emphasizes psychological wholeness as a personal and moral ideal by staging the meeting of masculine and feminine sensibility. By providing a model of identity based on balance, empathy, and adaptability, his works affirm that authentic selfhood arises from integration rather than conformity. They also position psychological androgyny as a paradigm shift for understanding gender, identity, and moral agency in modern Indian society.

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