Deviants of Power Narratives: Defying Hereditarian Stigma in Dance Like a Man

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Abstract:

Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani (1958) has reached a universal appeal with his plays focusing on discriminated minorities. In *Dance Like a Man* (1989), Dattani presents the story of a father ashamed of his son's passion for the stigmatized Bharatanatyam dance form. Dattani himself was a Bharatanatyam dancer, he voiced the male dancers' hardships through the character of Jairaj. A resilient rebel, Jairaj has led a life of unhappiness and pain. His father rejects him and succeeds in ending Jairaj's career with the help of Ratna, Jairaj's wife who is also a dancer. The study uncovers underlying power narratives by tracing the lasting impacts of Western and colonial thought brought by colonialism over the traditional Indian narratives. Following the theoretical framework of French philosopher Michel Foucault, the study takes a sociopolitical approach to detect the reasons behind the rejection faced by socially rejected deviants; revealing the origins of inherited truths and the defects behind normalizing culture.

Keywords: (Bharatnatyam, British Colonialism, Deviation, Power/ Knowledge, Power narratives)

المنشقون عن سرديات الاستبداد: تحدي وصمة العار الموروثة في مسرحية ارقص كرجل لماهيش داتاني

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الملخص:

حقق الكاتب المسرحي الهندي ماهيش داتاني (١٩٥٨) اقبالا عالميا من خلال مسرحياته التي ركزت على الأقليات ومعاناتهم من التمييز. قدم الكاتب قصة أب يخجل من شغف ابنه برقص الباراتاناتيام الموصوم بالعار من خلال مسرحية ارقص كرجل (١٩٨٩). كان داتاني نفسه راقص باراتاناتيام، وعبر عن مشاق الراقصين الذكور من خلال شخصية جيراج. عاش جيراج المتمرد حياة مفعمة بالتعاسة والألم. يتعرض جيراج للرفض من والده الذي ينجح في إنهاء مسيرة جيراج بمساعدة راتنا، زوجة جيراج وهي أيضًا راقصة. تكشف الدراسة عن سرديات الاستبداد من خلال تتبع الآثار الدائمة للفكر الغربي والاستعماري الذي جلبه الاستعمار على السرديات الهندية التقليدية. من خلال التباع الإطار النظري للفيلسوف الفرنسي ميشيل فوكو، تتخذ الدراسة نهجًا اجتماعيًا وسياسيًا للكشف عن الأسباب الكامنة وراء الرفض الذي يواجهه المنشقون والمرفوضون اجتماعيًا؛ كاشفة عن أصول الحقائق الموروث والعيوب الكامنة وراء الرفض الذي يواجهه المنشقون والمرفوضون اجتماعيًا؛ كاشفة عن أصول الحقائق الموروث والعيوب الكامنة وراء الثقافة التطبيع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (باراتاناتيام، الاستعمار البريطاني، الانحراف، القوة/المعرفة، سرديات الاستبداد).

Introduction:

The social system has proven itself nonexclusive by favoring certain individuals over others. The favoring depends on who is more beneficial, and the best candidates are those who fulfill the criteria of being "normal". In his 1975's Discipline and Punish, aside from tracking the history of the Western penal systems, French philosopher Michel Foucault presents how disciplinary mechanisms have found their way into our everyday lives. Discipline for Foucault is power. Disciplinary mechanisms achieve control

by playing on the ideology of a particular group of people. This relation is what Foucault terms the power/knowledge relation. Knowledge serves power and power constructs knowledge to its service. Knowledge is introduced according to the time's discourse. Foucault's concept of discourse is very difficult to define, but in simple terms, it can be thought of as a huge underlying system that defines, limits, and allows what is acceptable and what is not. Each specific period of time has its own discourse, as it is changeable according to whom it serves. Discourse and discursive practices deprive people of their agency without their awareness.

The social system achieves control and order without much supervision, it lets people handle each other. It does so, through the power/ knowledge relation, by controlling core values and beliefs. Like recruiting an army, it recruits its people to accept what it wants and reject what it doesn't allow. This drew the line between us and them, the "others", and produced a normalization culture. The "normal" individual is the best candidate for the continuity of production to support existing power structures. The norms are docile bodies that are easily manipulated. On the other hand, the "abnormal" is cast off and punished by rejection. This sort of wide–scale "manufactured knowledge" ensures order and productivity. It is important to remember that the so–called "normal" is a manufactured way of living, almost like a written script or a narrative. The victims of normalization are

subjected to racial and sexual discrimination. Power narrative is a narrative of normalization.

A large portion of people are left on the margins of the power narrative. They are abandoned with no roles or chances to participate in the script, there are no roles written for them. This left those people with an identity crisis feeling unseen and ashamed. The identity issue comes from them being deprived of a chance to function in society.

Dance Like a Man takes place in post-colonial India. The play reflects the changing mentalities and attitudes after the colonizers' departure. It is revealed that the main character's father was a revolutionary leader. Post-colonial India was torn between modernity and tradition. As the play progresses, the father's mentality seems to be affected by Western ideology and beliefs. While his son leans towards tradition and culture, despite newfound ideology. This reflects the state of modern India and the country's splitting attitudes. From Dance Like a Man's title alone, one can get an idea about what to expect in this play. The deviant in this play is in the form of a male Bharatnatyam dancer. Bharatnatyam is a classical Indian dance form. The play follows Jairaj's memories of his father's disdain for his passion and identity as a male Bharatnatyam dancer. Jairaj fails to fit into the stereotypical image as well as his father's perception of masculinity.

The play focuses on the lives of Jairaj, his wife Ratna, and their daughter Lata. The couple are trained dancers in Bharatanatyam, a stigmatized

dance form that used to be a sacred practice to be performed for the gods in the temples. The couple live with Jairaj's father Amritlal who was a social reformer as we learn from Jairaj's daughter, "He was a social reformer. Used to hold secret meetings in this very room during the British Raj." (CP 389). Lata is a skilled dancer and her mother seems to live her unfulfilled dreams through her. Ratna works so hard to get her daughter to win the dance competition. Lata brings her partner Viswas home, so he can meet her parents and propose to her. As the couple returns home, the plot unfolds in the form of flashbacks that tell the hardships of Jairaj and Ratna's lives. They lived under Amritlal's roof due to their poor financial state and were dominated by his rules. He rejected his son's passion and dreamt of putting an end to it. When Jairaj's father persuades his wife to ruin Jairaj's dancing career, Jairaj suffers the consequences. This can be seen as his punishment for his deviation from the social norms and his rebelliousness against the rules of the social system. However, the punishment seems to touch upon the entire family After the deteriorating state of Jairaj and Ratna's busy and successful life, it is revealed that their young son has died due to neglect. Despite the play's catastrophic nature, it ends peacefully with Lata and Vishwas married, on the condition that he doesn't stop her from dancing. Jairaj and Ratna forgive each other for their faults. The play ends with them dancing in heaven together.

Many social issues are in question during the course of the play, Issues as Indian classism; stigma; as well as gender roles. Nonetheless, it is the perception of masculinity remains the main interest of the study. As it fits under the hereditary pre-established social roles, and those who fail to fit in are considered deviants. The play starts in the future with Lata, Jairaj's and Ratna's daughter, and her fiancé to be Viswas. Throughout the play, the same characters change to fit each time period. After introducing her grandfather's history, Lata and Viswas detect the following:

LATA. He must have had his hands full handling daddy, what with him wanting to be a dancer!

VISWAS. They must have had some terrific fights. (CP 393)

A man choosing to be a dancer as a profession is frowned upon socially, not only in India. The reason here is not an issue of masculinity per se. It is an issue of money as the man is the provider of the family. This can also be a gender rule issue. Viswas mocks the profession in another scene where he says:

VISWAS. What a granddaddy she had! He must have been a terror. No wonder her father is a weirdo. (*Clears his throat and puts on a mock-father voice*.) So, you want to be a dancer. Hah! Hah! Hah! Son, you will never amount to anything in life. Look at me. Look at what I have achieved. Yes. Look. Look. Look. (*Points to the furniture*.) What's that you say? There's more to life than money? You ungrateful wretch!

Unnoticed by him, Jairaj Parekh and Ratna Parekh enter. They stop and stare at his antics. They are both in their sixties, but very erect and energetic from years of rigorous training.

VISWAS (continues dramatically). 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?' 'He is a dancer.' 'Yes, but what does he do?' 'He is a dan . . .' (Notices them.) Sir! (Grins stupidly and shrugs embarrassedly.) I got bored waiting . . . (Jairaj and Ratna don't respond.) I love dancing. Not disco or anything like that. You know, our dances. There's so much more in them. You know what I mean? (Shouts.) Lata! After the awkward encounter, Viswas and Jairaj share a drink. While asking Viswas about his family's income, Jairaj remembers how his father had treated him. He tells Viswas how his "gullible" father would "give out a lot of personal loans to friends and relatives" (CP 406). He precedes to say how he would not give any to him because:

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? (CP 406)

Besides toxic masculinity, there is a sense of classism and stigma in his father's words. Bharatanatyam dancers were stigmatized and seen as

prostitutes. The line between prostitution and Bharatanatyam dance is vague. This is due to the dance's relation with India's ancient Devadasi tradition. The earliest record for Devadasi was found dating back to 6^{th} century A.D. during the Keshari Dynasty. In her pursuit to honor the gods, the Queen ordered to select wives for the temple's deities. The wives must be trained in classical dancing, especially Bharatanatyam, as they would dance to the gods in rituals and serve the temple. Choosing to become Devadasi brought women honor and respect in the community. Devadasis lived in the temple all their lives and were supported by wealthy patrons. They were not to be married for they were married to a god. It was under Islamic and British rule that this tradition took darker turns. After Islam's destruction of Hindu temples, and the British cutting off patrons, Devadasi found their way into prostitution to support themselves (Shingal 109-111). Jairaj's father, Amritlal, struggles with the stigma associated with Bharatanatyam. The dance is also thought of as a feminine dance, with its use of heavy makeup and bridal jewelry, which further stimulates Amritlal's rage. Viswas sees Jairaj as a brave man for staying true to himself and following his dream despite his father's rejection. Jairaj disagrees:

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 a

man. Just a spineless boy. And you know what I think? I think she is right! (CP 407)

Jairaj is a deviant failing to fit into the power narrative role of a masculine family man. Jairaj's statement has an overpowering sense of identity crisis as well. Early in the play, the parents showcase an immense level of stress over their daughter's dance competition. Perhaps they have a need to prove something and are living through her. Their relationship has been affected, not only by Jairaj's nature but also by his wife's past betrayal. Having a dancing couple, shed light on the different social view regarding dancing and gender relations. Thanks to the tradition of the Devadasi, the dance was associated with females. Since the girls were considered the wives of the gods, a girl who achieved this position brought great honor to her family. This made dancing take an important role in a girl's life from a very young age. In modern times, it appears to be an interest in Bharatanatyam by male dancers. Mahesh Dattani himself is a trained Bharatanatyam dancer as mentioned earlier.

Jairaj and Ratna are conversing when Jairaj decides to talk out Ratna's earlier offense: "JAIRAJ. You brought it up. What did you say? I stopped being a man for you because we couldn't survive on our own." (CP 410) The couple lived in Jairaj's father's house, Jairaj's inability to provide for his wife is a threat to his already shattered masculinity. It is also revealed that Ratna only married him because he would not let her give up dancing. For that reason, Ratna was forced to endure suffering with her

husband. Yet, resentment built up between the two. The "truth" about masculinity is also a manufactured truth. A set of inherited beliefs decides what is masculine and what is not. It is after all a term made up by power/knowledge relations. As Foucault demonstrates:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors', it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 194)

A simple example of this would be the concept of femineity and masculinity in relation to Bharatanatyam. Masculinity and femininity were produced by Power relations in order to regulate individuals. Away from society and within the world of nature, male birds dance in order to appeal to female birds during mating.

The play changes time, now it is the past, and the audience is invited into Jairaj's memory. Jairaj and Ratna are having a rehearsal at his father's house. His father, Amritlal, is annoyed by the musicians. He demands his son to let them leave. While arguing with Jairaj, it is indicated that he has always been supportive of his son's interests. Amritlal expresses his feeling by saying, "It's bad enough having had to convert the library into a practice hall for you." (CP 415). When confronted by Jairaj about the reason he did it, Amritlal responds with:

AMRITLAL. 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 416)

This showcases Amritlal complex character. The statement shows a caring father at heart, as he first supported, what he thought was a hobby. He also expresses a longing for a normal boy interested in cricket and sports. His disdain for dancing only began when it became an identity for his son. He views dancing as a threat to Jairaj's masculinity. Amritlal voices the social body and its ideology, specifically the pre–established social roles and the discourse of genders. This inherited ideology is followed blindly all over the world. And for India, in particular, to fall into this Westernized truth would be a shame indeed; since dancing is so engraved into their culture and religion. If this proves anything, it would be the massive powers of Power narrative ideology. Amritlal is removed from his own culture. This is aided by Jairaj in the following lines:

JAIRAJ. Where is the spirit of revolution? You didn't fight to gain independence, You fought for power in your hands. Why, you are just as conservative and prudish as the people who were ruling over us!

To which Amritlal further cements this by saying:

AMRITLAL. You are mistaken. Gaining independence was part of our goal. And someone has to be in charge. It's what we do now that counts.

As you know, our priority is to eradicate certain unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to our society. (CP 417)

Amritlal's ideology is affected by classism brought by colonialism, forcing his son to call him "ignorant". They dive into an argument concerning temple dancers. Jairaj sees those women as artists, while Amritlal sees them as no more than "prostitutes" who should be reformed. Amritlal represents the self-surveillance individual, as he does the social system's job in disciplining and punishing those who deviate and rebel against the rules of discourse. Jairaj, a deviant rebel not concerned with the social system, looks away from the fact that the temple dancers had to sell away their bodies to survive and focuses on preserving Indian heritage. Amritlal is a self-surveillance individual, he sees it as his responsibility to regulate and discipline the crooked behaviors of others; be it his son or the temple dancers. There is a continuous touch of Irony since Amritlal considers himself patriotic but fails to care about the country's vanishing traditional arts.

He then tells his son the following:

AMRITLAL. I have no objection to your efforts in reviving the art, but I definitely do object to the people you are associating with. (CP 418)

Social stigma and classism are present here. Since Amritlal is so appalled by the social stigma associated with the Bharatanatyam and the temple dancers. He refuses to let his family be smudged with the bad reputation associated with the dance. He understands and abides by the social

rules of his age. Unlike Jairaj and Ratna who possess a more artistic eye that respects dancing as heritage. Amritlal refuses his son's identity as a dancer until he finally intervenes to change it with Ratna. Talking about his dance guru's hair, Amritlal is concerned with his long hair. He even implies that his dance guru is not "a man" saying "I've also noticed the way he walks." (CP 421)

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

JAIRAJ. All sadhus have long hair.

AMRITLAL. I don't mean them. I meant normal men.

JAIRAJ. What are you trying to say?

AMRITLAL. All I'm saying is that normal men don't keep their hair so long.

. . .

AMRITLAL. I've also noticed the way he walks. (CP 418)

Jairaj walks away upset with his father. When Ratna learns about the long hair conversation she laughs, she proceeds by telling Amritlal about Jairaj desire to grow his hair; as "It would enhance his abhinaya." (CP 419). Amritlal is so displeased telling Ratna, "Tell him that if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and throw him on the roads." (CP 419).

Ironically, despite fighting in the revolution against the British invasion, Amritlal views on long hair reflect colonial ideology. Influenced by Westernized ideology, he views long hair as a feminine trait. Looking

back at Indian history, one finds many examples of long hair that are not feminine in any way. For example, the Sikhism religion, which was founded by Guru Nanak (1469–1539) in the late fifteenth-century Punjab, celebrates good deeds and a god so divine that it is impossible to find concrete representation to represent him. Bearing many similarities with Islam, the religion was exposed to Islam during Turko-Afghan rule in the sixteenth century. Some Sikhs identify themselves as Keshdharis who follow the religious act of Kesh, Kesh is the act of choosing not to trim one's hair as an act of respect for God's creation (Grewal 5, 19, 54). Jairaj also describes his Guru as a "sadhu". A sadhu is an ascetic person who leaves behind all the pleasures of the world, asking for penance for all the bad deeds made in the lives of others and themselves (Comer 34-35). They are seen as holy with their long hair and humble clothing like those of the poor since they have chosen a life of poverty and asceticism. These two examples illustrate colonial power remaining even after the colonials were gone; their powers remained as ideology within the minds of the colonized. As for Jairaj his choice to grow his hair was not influenced by religion or spirituality, it was simply for practical reasons; that is to articulate a certain dance move.

Amritlal questions Ratna about her whereabouts.

AMRITLAL. You know very well where, because that's where you go every Monday! (Ratna does not respond.) It was fortunate for me that it

was Patel who saw you going there. I can trust him to keep his mouth shut. He called me, out of concern for our family name. (CP 420)

Ratna explains herself telling Amritlal how ". Chenni amma is the oldest living exponent of the Mysore school and is the only link we have with the old school" (CP 421). To which Amritlal furiously replies:

AMRITLAL. And practise in her courtyard for all passers-by to see.

RATNA. Only those who are curious enough to peep over her wall to see where the sound of dancing bells are coming from.

AMRITLAL. Your bells. The sound of your bells.

RATNA. Yes.

AMRITLAL. The sound of your bells coming from the courtyard of a prostitute.

RATNA. She is seventy-five years old.

tries to make a deal with Ratna.

AMRITLAL. And people peer over her walls to see my daughter-in-law dancing in her courtyard.

RATNA. Yes. Dancing the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati. (CP 421) Amritlal threatens her with stopping her movement. He feels ashamed that his daughter-in-law is associated with "a prostitute" as he views her, despite her old age. Amritlal is affected by the stigma associated with the temple dancers; a hereditary shame influenced by colonial powers. He

AMRITLAL. Good. And if you promise me not to visit that woman again, I won't feel it necessary to restrict your movements. (*Ratna looks at him and laughs suddenly.*) What's so funny?

RATNA. I really feel sorry for you!

AMRITLAL. That's a strange way of showing that you feel sorry for me.

RATNA. I really do feel sorry.

AMRITLAL. Why?

RATNA. Tomorrow, Jairaj starts learning another dance form—Kuchipudi.

AMRITLAL. So?

RATNA (*triumphantly*). In Kuchipudi, the men dress up as women! (*Laughs*). (CP 423)

Ratna triggers her father-in-law's gender-influenced fears with that last line. Amritlal possesses the colonial-influenced eye, he ties performance, makeup, and dancing with masculinity. Despite India's rich classical heritage where dancing was seen as a sacred act to worship and honor the gods.

AMRITLAL. It is hard for me to explain. I leave it to you. Help me and I'll never prevent you from dancing. I know it will take time but it must be done.

RATNA. I will try.

AMRITLAL. You'll have to do better than that. (CP 428-429).

Amritlal makes a deal with Ratna, he uses his most powerful weapon which is his authoritative powers. Ratna can be thought of as a minor

Power narrative deviant. She also goes against social rules with her rebellious secret dance lessons at the stigmatized temple. She looks beyond the colonial eye; she has a traditional Indian eye like her husband. Still, her alliance with Amritlal against Jairaj makes her an ally to the Power narrative. This proves the power of Power narratives in weaponizing people against one another; Foucault terms this as self–surveillance, as individuals preserve the order of the system.

In a scene from the past, It is implied that Jairaj is no longer dancing. He is full of contempt as he says:

JAIRAJ. The seth of the house is not in! He's away receiving awards for serving the nation—while his Lakshmi-of-the-house has been away receiving (*claps*) acclaim for her . . . talents. (CP 442)

Jairaj's attempt in becoming a dancer and defying stereotypical notions, regarding masculinity and stigmatized dance form, is but an attempt against what Foucault terms "subjectivation". Subjectification is the subject's attempt at constituting themselves under the influence of historical and cultural inherited truths. (Foucault *Archaeology of Knowledge* 472). This rather complex term is the offspring of knowledge formation. Individuals are taught to be a certain way via institutions like schools for example. They are shaped by inherited and manufactured truths. Ancient beliefs considered Bharatanatyam dancers to be deities. The stigma towards Bharatanatyam, specifically male Bharatanatyam dancers, is a newfound cultural truth. Adhering to this truth would be to

surrender oneself to the process of subjectification and obey the unwritten social rules. Resisting it would be to explicitly join the power narrative's social outcasts. Jairaj violates the system by ignoring the cultural truths and following his passion. He rebels against a system that tries to reshape him according to its desired model. Not being able to fulfill his quest, he is filled with rage and resentment towards his wife, his father's accomplice.

An argument arises and the scene ends with a tragedy. It is revealed that the couple had a son, before Lata, who died due to his nanny's neglect while the couple were away. At the end of the play, Jairaj narrates the ending of their story. After Ratna's death and his own, the play ends with Jairaj's compassion towards himself and Ratna. The partners are seen dancing in heaven.

JAIRAJ. We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God. (CP 449).

As mentioned earlier, Jairaj's father reflects the social body with his ideology. He operates as a personification of the power narrative in his relationship with his son and his daughter-in-law. Jairaj's last days are seen to have a sense of peace. He is freed from his past with his father and Ratna. He is no longer in shackles; he also seems to forgive his wife as he was also at fault for the death of his eldest-born child. His identity as a dancer follows him to heaven where he dances with Ratna.

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