

**UNVEILING GENDER DYNAMICS: EXPLORING  
DISCRIMINATION, PATRIARCHY, AND INDIVIDUAL  
RESILIENCE IN 'NAGAMANDALA' AND 'DANCE LIKE A MAN'**

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**Abstract:**

This paper offers a compelling analysis of gender dynamics in Girish Karnad's "Nagamandala" and Mahesh Dattani's "Dance Like a Man." By delving into the themes of gender discrimination, patriarchy, and individual resilience, it sheds light on the enduring struggles faced by individuals, particularly women, in the face of rigid gender biases. Through a critical examination of societal norms and expectations, this analysis explores how these plays challenge traditional beliefs and expose the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures on women's lives. It emphasizes the universal nature of gender struggles and the resilience displayed by characters when confronting gender discrimination, urging readers to reevaluate ingrained biases and envision a future marked by gender equity and individual empowerment.

**Keywords:** gender roles, gender discrimination, patriarchy, societal expectations, traditional norms

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender discrimination arises from unequal treatment, prejudice, or discriminatory attitudes based on gender or sex. It is rooted in societal norms that dictate gender roles. Deviation from these norms creates tension within the patriarchal structure, where one gender is often considered superior. Although women are commonly seen as the primary victims, both men and women face discrimination shaped by societal

expectations and biased judgments about masculinity. Patriarchy, as a dominant social system, perpetuates gender inequality, violence against women, and disparities in opportunities. It establishes a power structure that reinforces male dominance through customs, laws, and traditions, affecting various aspects of society. This biased framework limits women's (and sometimes men's) agency, reinforcing traditional roles and hindering progress in education, employment,

and leadership. Additionally, patriarchy contributes to gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting women.

Indian literature, including Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*, criticizes gender discrimination and patriarchy. This comparative analysis explores the struggles depicted in these works, shedding light on prevailing social issues in Indian societies. The paper aims to emphasize gender struggles by examining these plays in different socio-cultural contexts in India, contributing to a deeper understanding of patriarchy, discrimination, and individual resilience.

## **NAGAMANDALA**

*Nagamandala*, written by the renowned Indian playwright, actor, and film director Girish Karnad, was published in 1989. The play draws inspiration from two sources: a Kannada folk tale that Karnad heard in his childhood from the poet and academician A.K. Ramanujan, and the play *The Washerwoman* by the notable Kannada playwright A.N. Krishna Rao. The term *Nagamandala* itself refers to a traditional South Indian ritual, which involves creating a mandala or a circular design on the ground with colors, representing the serpent god, or Naga. The ritual is meant to appease the serpent god and is often performed to protect against curses or to ensure fertility and prosperity. This concept is intricately woven into the themes of Karnad's play, which explores

the intersections of folklore, tradition, and gender roles in Indian society.

The central character of *Nagamandala*—Rani, represents all women and plays a universal role, as evident from the opening line, "A young girl, her name...it doesn't matter." Ironically, Rani, whose name means "Queen" in English, is reduced to the status of a maidservant and captive by her husband Appanna, whose name means "any man." He ignores Rani's desires and feelings, keeping her hidden from the outer world while spending his nights with a concubine.

Rani, on the other hand, yearns for Appanna's love and attention and receives a love potion from a blind woman named Kurudavva who sympathizes with her. Rani plans to mix it into Appanna's food, but fearing its red color, she throws it onto an anthill instead. Unexpectedly, a Cobra (Naga) drinks the potion, falls in love with Rani, and disguises itself as Appanna to sleep with her at night while Appanna visits his mistresses. Rani is unable to distinguish between Appanna's rude behavior during the day and the Cobra's affections at night:

NAGA: What beautiful long hair...

RANI: I must have been dreaming again. (Karnad 22)

Eventually, Rani becomes pregnant but does not understand why it infuriates Appanna. Rani had not consciously committed any sin. She remains unaware of the real identity of Appanna and yet has to face terrible public humiliation:

APPANNA: Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off? (Karnad 35)

APPANNA: I swear to you I am not my father's son, if I don't abort that bastard! Smash it into dust! Right now-- (Karnad 36)

Rani is taken to the village elders, who remain silent on Appanna's extramarital affair but force Rani to prove her innocence by either holding a hot red iron bar or picking up a cobra from the anthill. Rani listens to the advice of the cobra and decides to choose the latter option. Their conversation highlights the internal struggle Rani is facing:

RANI: What truth?

NAGA: The truth. Tell the truth while you are holding the cobra.

RANI: What truth? Shall I say my husband forgets his nights by next morning? Shall I

say my husband brought a dog and a mongoose to kill this cobra, and yet suddenly he

seems to know all about what the cobra will do or not do?

NAGA: Say anything. But you must speak the truth.

RANI: And if I lie?

NAGA: It will bite you. (Karnad 37)

When Rani refuses, Naga gets angry and

says, "I can't help it, Rani. That's how it has always been. That's how it will always be." (Karnad 38). These lines reflect the practice of male dominance on a universal level. However, to everyone's surprise, the cobra slides over Rani's shoulders and spreads its hood like an umbrella over her head when she says, "Yes, my husband and this King Cobra. Except for these two, I have not touched any one in the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the Cobra bite me." (Karnad 43). The village elders declare Rani a goddess, and Appanna is left frustrated because he knows that he has never slept with Rani. He begins to doubt his sanity, feeling as though the whole world is conspiring against him.

Karnad subtly mocks conventional society and social laws, which demand fidelity and devotion from a wife even if the husband is adulterous and unfaithful. The play depicts how women are often confined to kitchens and houses, oppressed by traditional expectations and limitations imposed by societal norms. It highlights the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society where their desires and ambitions are stifled, and they are forced to conform to societal norms. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft insisted in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that women were not less than men in intellect, and therefore, their suppression was unfair and unjust. Rani ponders upon her oppression under male domination:

RANI: (Blankly) Yes, I shall. Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. Don't

ask questions.

Do as I tell you. No. I won't ask questions. I shall do what you tell me. Scowls in the day.

Embraces at night. The face in the morning unrelated to the touch at night. But day or

night, one motto does not change: Don't ask questions. Do as I tell you. (Karnad 34)

As a young woman married to an older man, Rani is limited to household duties and lacks personal freedom or agency. On top of that, Appanna constantly silences her. In the male-dominated society, women's silence is considered a virtue, while their speech is deemed insignificant:

RANI: Listen--(Fumbling for words) Listen--I feel-- frightened--alone at night--

APPANNA: What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you.

Rice!

(Pause)

RANI: Please, you could--

APPANNA: Look, I don't like idle chatter. Do as you are told, you understand? I'll be back tomorrow, for lunch. (Karnad 7)

Patriarchal norms have conditioned women to fear expressing their sexuality, often leading to those who do, being labeled as outcasts. In society, a woman

is either dragged to the level of a 'Devil' or idealized as a 'Devi'. The concept of chastity and virginity is a brainchild of a male chauvinistic society where patriarchy rules. Men and women are treated differently, and a woman is said to be virtuous only if she is chaste and pure.

The play also illustrates other versions of patriarchal influences through Rani's mother-in-law, Gowri, who upholds patriarchal norms and perpetuates the male-dominated system. Gowri, being an older woman, has accepted and internalized patriarchal values and enforces them upon Rani, maintaining the cycle of oppression. Moreover, the play shows how patriarchal beliefs influence Appanna, who values social norms over basic human rights for women. His actions and decisions are dictated by societal expectations of masculinity, and he exercises full control over Rani under those patriarchal norms. Rani suffers due to her husband and society. The village elders decide to subject her to a fire trial or a Cobra trial. Ironically, she finds relief, love, and passion from a reptile-turned-human Naga, who helps her achieve the status of a goddess.

Nagamandala introduces a critique by attributing human and humane qualities to a cold-blooded snake. This mythical creature sympathizes with Rani's plight, eventually falling in love with her and fulfilling all her needs, symbolically ushering her from girlhood to maturity. In this reversal of male privilege, Karnad mocks human beings who are incapable of helping their own kind, as a crawling

reptile provides more happiness to Rani than her fellow humans. This inspires Rani, portraying her not just as a victim of societal norms, but as a vocal individual with needs and desires.

In Nagamandala, both Rani and Appanna struggle with their sexuality while being ensnared in the web of social hypocrisy. They are physically and psychologically mismatched, exemplifying the impact of gender roles and norms that dictate their actions and behaviors. Rani, a sexually naive and inexperienced wife, is assigned the role of a mere cook and housemaid, largely ignored by her sexually experienced husband, Appanna. Appanna makes no effort to initiate his inexperienced wife into the realm of sexual awareness, instead visiting a mistress to satisfy his physical needs while leaving Rani's needs unmet. The dangerous chastity tests forced upon Rani resonate with ancient Hindu social norms, as seen in the Ramayana, where Sita underwent trials to validate her chastity. Similarly, Rani, under suspicion of infidelity, is compelled to undergo tough tests to prove her innocence and maintain societal notions of purity.

The play highlights the hypocrisy of the Indian marriage system, where the emotional and sexual needs of the wife are considered unimportant. Instead, everything revolves around satisfying male desires, with sex seen as a duty that the wife must fulfill. Rani's apparent unawareness of her two different husbands visiting her during the day and night subtly illustrates female submissiveness and the

willingness to obey without questioning. Rani dares to request sexual pleasure, challenging the expectation for wives to only satisfy their husband's sexual needs. Victimized by an unfair social order due to early marriage, Rani remains trapped in a patriarchal society where she has no control over her life. The institution of marriage in India becomes a tool for the exploitation and oppression of women, conditioning newlywed girls to prioritize their husbands' needs and be submissive, while their husbands may engage in infidelity without consequences. The women in Nagamandala are depicted as lacking independence, self-worth, and self-reliance. Rani initially hopes for a happy domestic life with a man her father regards as perfect, but the reality is that she becomes confined within her husband's home with no companionship. Rani, once dependent on her parents, transfers that dependency to her husband, trapping her in a cycle of reliance. The climax occurs when Rani becomes pregnant, leading to the imposition of a chastity test by the patriarchal society. While her husband engages in sexual promiscuity without facing judgment, Rani is subjected to intense societal scrutiny. This play exposes the societal taboo linking chastity with virtue and treating sex as sinful, which imposes unbearable social stigma on women.

## **DANCE LIKE A MAN**

Dance Like a Man is a play written by Mahesh Dattani that delves into the



impact of patriarchy, societal norms, and individual differences. The story is set in a joint family in contemporary Chennai and spans three generations. The play revolves around the role of dance, particularly Bharatnatyam, in the family. It examines the societal expectations placed on men in the 1940s and explores gender discrimination against men. Amritlal Parekh, the head of the family, holds unquestionable power over his son, Jairaj, and daughter-in-law, Ratna. He makes all the important decisions for the family and maintains traditional gender roles where men are expected to dominate women and women are considered inferior. Amritlal forbids Jairaj from pursuing a career in Bharatnatyam, equating it with prostitution and femininity:

JAIRAJ. You promised you would allow me to continue with my hobbies.

AMRITLAL. That was when you were a boy and dance was just a hobby. Grow up, Jairaj.

JAIRAJ. I don't want to grow up! You can't stop me from doing what I want.

AMRITLAL. As long as you are under my care . . . (Dattani 45)

Meanwhile, Amritlal allows Ratna to dance as he believes that women are only suited for certain roles. He expresses his view by saying, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic." (Dattani 50). This shows the designated status and unequal power distribution between men and

women. Despite being a freedom fighter against British rule, his mindset remains pseudo-liberal and restrictive. He not only restricts his son's freedom but also tries to impose his ideologies on Jairaj, wanting him to conform to the stereotypical male role of being the breadwinner. Amritlal considers Jairaj not masculine enough and fears societal shame and embarrassment. Consequently, Jairaj faces judgment for not adhering to traditional masculinity and experiences the pressure of strict heterosexuality. Amritlal embodies societal opinions, reflecting the narrow-minded mindset prevailing in mainstream Indian society— "Do you know where a man's happiness lies?...In being a Man..." (Dattani 49). His aversion to feminine traits extends to Guru Ji, displaying disdain for his apparent effeminate qualities: "The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares— what business did a man have learning such a craft?" (Dattani 25). Jairaj's desire to grow out his hair on Guru Ji's advice was snuffed out by Amritlal because he associated long hair with feminine beauty: "Tell him that if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and throw him on the roads." (40).

Dattani, through Jairaj, critiques societal stereotypes where men are expected to work, and women manage the household. Patriarchy dictates that men should not assume women's roles and maintain their masculinity. Women are similarly restricted from engaging in traditionally masculine domains such as business and finances.

Dance Like a Man underscores a historical pattern where men not only dominate and control women's actions but also affect other men. It also sheds light on how men are conditioned to not express vulnerability, grief, or fear, rather, fostering a rigid identity centered on courage and strength is encouraged. Amritlal exemplifies this discrimination by allowing Ratna to dance in exchange for sacrificing Jairaj's passion. He manipulates Ratna into believing that Jairaj is inferior to her in dancing, reinforcing the association of femininity with grace and beauty, contrasting with masculinity linked to strength and dominance.

Ratna, despite being a victim of patriarchy, agrees to conspire with Amritlal's unwitting assistance, to undermine Jairaj's dancing career so that she can continue dancing. In an unconventional twist, here, a man becomes the victim of gender restriction, losing his identity when challenging the longstanding conventional roles. Jairaj is left feeling empty, spineless, and worthless for which he blames Ratna:

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

RATNA. When did I ever take it?

JAIRAJ. Bit by bit. You took it when you insisted on top billing in all our programmes. You took it when you made me dance my weakest items. You took it when you arranged the lighting so that I was literally dancing in your shadow. And when you called me names in front of other people.

Names I feel ashamed to repeat even in private. And you call me disgusting. (Dattani 70)

At one point, Amritlal discovers that Ratna is visiting a Devdasi, Chennai Amma, and demands that she stop immediately. Concerned for his status and position in society, he fears that the passersby would see his daughter-in-law dancing in the courtyard of a former prostitute. In response, Ratna tries to convince him about the divine status of dancing: "Yes. My husband knows where I go and I have his permission." (Dattani 53). But Amritlal asserts his dominance: "Your husband happens to be my son, And you are both under my care. It is my permission that you should ask for." (Dattani 53). Dattani also addresses the stereotype of men being responsible for financially supporting their families. Ratna expected Jairaj to earn enough for a separate house, tying financial success to his manliness: "You stopped being a man for me the day you came back to this house . . ." (Dattani 21). Society's expectation that a man is a 'perfect man' if he provides financial support is challenged by Jairaj, who strives to assert that gender roles don't define his societal standing and that his passion for dance doesn't diminish his masculinity. The strict suppression of desires and passion due to gender norms negatively affects individuals, as seen in Jairaj, who turns to alcohol, leading to the ruin of his dance career. Patriarchal stereotypes again resurface when their son, Shankar, dies resulting in Jairaj blaming Ratna for

neglecting their child. This was a clever attempt at subtly reinforcing the notion that childcare is a woman's responsibility.

Patriarchy remains a prominent theme throughout the play, with Amritlal exerting control as the eldest male. His authority influences Jairaj, who, in turn, dictates his children's choices. The couple, Jairaj and Ratna, project their dreams onto their daughter Lata, unintentionally restricting her freedom and choice. Jairaj expresses great joy when Lata Parekh is acknowledged as the "star of the festival" by the Herald and the Times, and their pride is evident when the review comments on her:

VISWAS (reading). Her nritya and abhitiaya were unparalleled and truly remarkable in a dancer so young in years. Under the expert guidance of her parents Smt. Ratna and Sri Jairaj Parekh, she has blossomed into a superlative dancer. This is one star which will shine bright in the sky of Bharatanatyam. (Dattani 56)

Unlike Lata's parents, who demanded nothing less than perfection from her, she accepted her flaws and mistakes and maintained a good balance in her dancing. The clash between conservative values and the younger generation's desire for autonomy perpetuates patriarchal structures, evident in the power imbalance. Jairaj, like Amritlal, attempts to impose his beliefs on his children, highlighting the generational continuation of patriarchy. The conflict between society and tradition is evident in the evolving relationship

between Lata and Viswas. Lata seeks Viswas's approval regarding her post-marriage dancing practice, asking, "Viswas, when we are married—you will let me come here to practise, won't you?" (Dattani 6). Mahesh Dattani addresses this societal expectation that women should embody household chores in Indian culture. Despite working outside the home, women are often considered true women only if they work in the kitchen. Viswas expresses this sentiment to Lata, stating that accepting a daughter-in-law who doesn't make tea is too much to ask (Dattani 8). This suggests that men and women do not have equal power and status in Indian society.

Dance Like a Man questions norms dictating acceptable roles for men and women. Jairaj's inability to conform to them leads to his marginalization and tragedy, critiquing gender discrimination. His quest becomes a metaphor for challenging gender biases and patriarchal limitations. Overall, the play sheds light on the harsh reality of gender conflict and how societal expectations, cultural norms, and familial pressures prevent individuals from pursuing their passions and achieving success. It also challenges the notion that men passionate about dance are considered inferior and emphasizes the importance of changing societal support for gender inequality. Through its portrayal of the struggles of the family members, the play highlights the importance of individuality and self-expression and encourages audiences to challenge patriarchal norms



and support gender equality.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In both *Nagamandala* and *Dance Like a Man*, Rani and Jairaj stand as powerful symbols of the pervasive issues regarding gender roles, discrimination, and patriarchy in Indian society. Despite their differing narratives, these plays resonate with common themes, shedding light on the enduring struggles faced by individuals across time and societal settings. They emphasize the deep-rooted historical nature of gender discrimination and societal norms. Rani, despite her regal name, represents the countless women subjugated by societal expectations and patriarchal control.

Similarly, Jairaj's passion for Bharatanatyam symbolizes the suppression of individuality under the weight of gender norms. These characters become archetypes in the broader fight against oppressive gender roles. Patriarchal figures like Appanna and Amritlal Parekh personify the oppressive nature of patriarchal authority, illustrating how male dominance contributes to the marginalization of women and stifling of men's individuality.

The plays challenge the notion that only women suffer under patriarchal norms. Jairaj's struggle to pursue Bharatanatyam and the subsequent undermining of his self-esteem illustrates how men can also become victims of societal expectations. Rani's transformative resilience as she

finds strength through her connection with the Naga challenges the victim narrative imposed by society. In *Dance Like a Man*, the characters' struggles serve as a platform for challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, encouraging individuals to pursue their passions irrespective of gender expectations.

Both plays offer a nuanced critique of societal norms, highlighting how gender discrimination intersects with other societal issues. *Nagamandala* delves into the intersectionality of caste and gender, showcasing how Rani faces discrimination not only as a woman but also due to her caste. *Dance Like a Man* explores the intersection of gender and artistic expression, revealing how societal biases permeate various aspects of life. The plays collectively serve as a mirror to society, urging reflection on deeply ingrained prejudices.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of gender dynamics in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* provides profound insight into pervasive issues of discrimination, patriarchy, and the resilient spirit of individuals facing societal constraints. Both plays delve into the complexities of gender roles, revealing the enduring impact of patriarchal norms on the lives of women and men alike. *Nagamandala* masterfully scrutinizes the stifling gender norms in rural Indian society, challenging conventional beliefs

surrounding chastity and exposing the hypocrisy embedded in age-old traditions. Meanwhile, *Dance Like a Man* offers a contemporary exploration of gender discrimination within a family dynamic and unearths the clash between individual desires and societal expectations. Both plays shed light on the dual victimhood experienced by men and women, emphasizing the need for a universal reevaluation of gender-based expectations. Collectively, these plays underscore the universality of gender struggles, transcending geographical and temporal

boundaries. They exemplify the resilience of individuals who challenge the status quo, striving to break free from the constraints of a deeply ingrained patriarchal structure. Rani and Jairaj become symbolic figures representing the countless individuals facing discrimination, seeking autonomy, and grappling with societal expectations. The narratives not only critique existing societal structures but also advocate for a collective reevaluation and transformation toward a more equitable and liberated society.

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