



# ‘Performance and Identity’: Exploring the Idea of ‘Gender Performativity’ through a Comparative Study of Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like A Man* and Rituparno Ghosh’s *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*

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**Abstract**— One of the most misunderstood ideas among the socio-literary discourses is, perhaps, Gender Performativity. It is often confused with our physical identities and the whole idea of ‘Performance’ becomes an error. Mahesh Dattani is well known for his dealing with a wide range of themes including unusual love-triangles, same-sex relationships, subversion of patriarchy and child-sex abuse, etc that includes the idea of ‘Performance’ as well. His *Dance Like a Man* (1989) is one such play where he creates the parallel binary worlds [i.e Patriarchy and Matriarchy] for us. The characters in this play fail to understand their true self and thus, get entangled in the labyrinth of the idea of ‘Performance’. Similarly, Rituparno Ghosh’s *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) explores the problems in the character in understanding their real identities and getting themselves attached into the war of sexual limitations. This paper explores a comparative study of both texts: how they try to represent the idea of performativity through their understanding of the self and creates a hypothetical gap for our research and understanding.

**Keywords**— Gender Performance, Interior colonization, Patriarchy vs. Matriarchy, Performance Error, Social Conditioning.

‘Who are we?’ and ‘What do we do?’ are, perhaps, two crucial questions to every social being. Some believe that people are born to execute certain tasks which have been assigned to us at the ‘pre-birth’ stage. But do we perform accordingly then? One of the most misunderstood concepts in society is, perhaps, ‘Feminism’. And what comes simultaneously with it is the idea of Gender Performance. In most cases, neither the society nor the individual is well aware of their ‘Performance’. This is a sort of abnormality and we find several members of the society who suffer from this abnormality. For them, the idea of ‘Gender Performativity’ is only restricted between ‘He’ and ‘She’; they are not interested, or better to say do not accept any kind of ‘Difference’ which is beyond the binary. What is

important for us to understand is that the performativity of a person is not dependent on his/her biological identity. This is an area of crucial discussion and Mahesh Dattani’s *Dance Like a Man* (1989) and Rituparno Ghosh’s *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012) are two particular texts which deal with this issue. We are about to witness a comparison between two similar thematic texts, yet slightly different in representation. Ratna Parekh, a wise woman who has overwhelming dreams in her life, fails to understand that it is not always the duty of a male person of the family to earn money and to act like a ‘Man’. The Family includes everyone, and that is why everyone must contribute to this. By earning money, Ratna Parekh proves herself to be a successful woman, but she fails to

understand the concept of 'Androgyny'. Whether she creates a sphere of 'Matriarchy' or not is a debatable issue, as the term requires explanation. But it is for sure that she creates a selfish world for herself, where she neither understands the true meaning of family, nor she understands the true meaning of Women's empowerment. Similarly, Rudra in *Chitrangada* tries to explore maternal affection within him and goes for a sex-transplantation surgery. But in the end, his loved one thinks of him to be an artificial 'body' and nothing else. Rudra fails to understand the fact that, being a mother does not necessarily require a female body: Motherhood is a 'Performance'. Both the characters [i.e. Rudra and Ratna] fail to understand the Performance as they confuse between their identities with their physicality.

Before going into any discussion, I think we should always have a clear mindset about the 'misconceptions' that we have. After Kate Millet and her *Sexual Politics* (1979), one should not confuse between these two terms – 'sex' and 'gender'. Though it was Robert J Stoller, an American professor of Psychiatry at UCLA, to whom Millet has taken refuge in this regard:

"Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female' the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex." (Stoller viii-ix).

When we talk of Gender, it is specifically the 'mindset' that comes first. And this is related to our free will and determination as Judith Butler says: "The controversy over the meaning of construction appears to founder on the conventional philosophy polarity between free will and determination." (Butler 8). Performativity is a psycho-sexual activity that is culturally defined. One may be born as male or female, but whether he or she becomes a woman or man is a matter of performance as Beauvoir remarks: "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one." (Beauvoir 301). When we start living in a society, specifically in a typical Indian society where such distinctions are very much prevalent, the question of implementation becomes a serious issue. Before writing the paper, when I was going through my literature review, I came to notice one thing that as Dattani and Ghosh (specifically Ghosh) are iconic figures in India for their exploration of 'Gender' perspective, readers have presumed that all of their characters do master the area which is related to Gender performativity. As a writer, both of them acquired the mastermind where the two conceptual binaries are very much prevalent. But the characters are not always someone who has mastered the same as their creators. Both the writers have tried their

level best to express their ideas on gender performativity through their characters; some have succeeded, some failed. And the ones who failed, they can no longer serve as the mouthpiece of the writer.

In all the studies of 'Feminism', 'Patriarchy' has always been a crucial point. We all know what the term 'Feminism' means. Of course, 'Feminism' does mean providing equality to women, but that does not include curbing the same facilities towards men. The balance is, thus, disturbed. This is a crucial point of Feminism and some scholars do get it wrong. Patriarchy has ruled over the society through its distinct vulnerable norms for a considerable period of time. But that does not mean that when women should come into power, they should also use it to build a women-centric society. That would be a sheer vengeance and nothing else. In the process of asking for the equality, they have forgotten to part it with their other halves and that is why we can see that we have a separate simultaneous 'Matriarchal' world in many of the cases. Whether this sphere has been assigned the same kind of power and facilities as in Patriarchy or not, is a debatable issue. But it is a fact that no one can deny, that these matriarchal norms are very much prevalent in our day to day life. For a considerable period, Patriarchy had control over the society as they hold the power-structure. That is why Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her *The Man Made World* (1911) voiced for a women-centered government as she believed that if a woman can run the household, then she can also run the state with care: "We prate much of the family as the unit of the state. If it is why not run the state on that basis? Government by women, so far as it is influenced by their sex, would be influenced by motherhood..." (189). But to designate this as only women-centric, should not necessarily mean the banishment of male-ness. And this has always been a very important issue in many of Dattani's plays. Mahesh Dattani is well known for his dealing with a wide range of themes including unusual love-triangles, same-sex relationship, subversion of patriarchy and child-sex abuse, etc. His play *Dance Like a Man* is one such play where he creates the parallel binary worlds [ i.e Patriarchy and Matriarchy] for us. Koustav Bakshi, an eminent scholar of English academia, remarks that it is: "an exemplary urban play devoted to deconstructing such essentialist notions of masculinity, the male body and the art of dancing..." (Bakshi 07). Dattani portrays the society of the 1970s which depicts three generations in a single family- Amritlal Parekh, his son Jairaj, daughter-in-law Ratna and granddaughter Lata. On one hand, we have Amritlal Parekh, a strong ideological man who believes in rational thinking and was an Indian National freedom fighter, as well as a member of the Patriarchal ideology. On the other,

we have Ratna, a high-spirited woman, who wants a good career and living for her; for which she challenges the norms of patriarchy. Unfortunately, without her least knowledge, Ratna creates, not an 'androgynous' world for her, rather, she a matriarchal sphere for her own where she deprives her husband and son of their basic rights.

Similarly, we have another story where a man creates a world for himself and his partner for their happy life, but his whole dream was shattered because he fails to recognize his own 'self'. Rituparno Ghosh was a prolific Indian film director, actor, and writer who became an iconoclastic figure in the world of Bengali Cinema. I would like to refer h-er not as 'He' or 'She' but 'S-he' because there is no other androgynous director we find in any film industry till now like her. S-he has held a significant impact on the lives of sexual minorities for whom s-he emerged as an icon through his films. Sangeeta Dutta, Koustav Bakshi, and Rohit K. Dasgupta are of the Opinion that:

"In *Chitrangada : The Crowning Wish* (2012), he experimented even further pushing the boundaries of form and style. While Ghosh was criticized for unabashedly conforming to bourgeois values and celebrating a 'good life', he was also widely applauded for bringing out in the open subjects barely discussed in middle class society. His narratives explored transgressive social codes, marital rape, and same-sex desires and moral hypocrisies of the new middleclass." (Dutta 02).

*Chitrangada* is a film based originally on Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitrangada*, a dance-drama, and serves wonderfully as an adaptation of both Tagore's work and *The Mahabharata*. Tagore had dealt with the concept of identity within the framework of masculine and feminine constructs. Ghosh reworked this myth to extend more fluid possibilities of gender and alternate sexual identities. Rudra, the protagonist of the film who is a director of a theatre troupe, falls in love with the drummer of the group, Partha, who was a drug addict. Partha wanted to marry him, but as he is not a female and cannot produce children, he was left alone by Partha. Rudra goes for sex-implantation surgery to become the consort of Partha, but he sees this whole process as a 'synthetic' mechanism and rejects the love of Rudra. The character Rudra becomes an incarnation of Chitrangada who, for a period of time, fails to idealize his virtues and romanticizes his performance whimsically. There is a crucial difference between Vyasa's Chitrangada and Tagore's Chitrangada which Ghosh underpins in his *First Person*:

"মহাভারতের চিত্রাঙ্গদা সুন্দরী, অর্জুন তাকে দেখে প্রণয় আসক্ত হয়ে পাণিপ্ৰার্থী হন ।

রবীন্দ্রনাথের অর্জুনের কাছে বালকবেশী চিত্রাঙ্গদা উপহাসের পাত্রী । সে না সুযোগ্য নারী, যার প্রতি প্রনয়দৃষ্টি নিষ্ফল করা যায়, না সে যথার্থ পুরুষ যার সঙ্গে যুদ্ধ করা যায় । তাই 'ক্ষমা' দিয়ে অসম্মান করাই তার প্রতি যোগ্যতম প্রত্যুত্তর ।" (Ghosh 86)

[Chitrangada in *Mahabharata* is beautiful in appearance; when Arjuna saw him, he tried his level best to woo her. Chitrangada in Tagore is an object of laughter to Arjuna. She is neither an equipped woman who can be wooed nor a man of valour who can be fought in battle. So, the only option left is to insult her with 'forgiveness' and that is the just reply to her questions.]

The King of Manipur was granted a boon by Lord Shiva that all the heirs in his lineage will become Kings. Chitrangada was born a woman, but her father brought her up like 'Man'. So to the King, the idea of 'Performativity' was clear. In Tagore's work, when Chitrangada saw Arjuna, she fell in love with him, and wanted to become a woman. The point here becomes very crucial as Rudra exclaims that he wants to know how her (Chitrangada's) father reacted when he saw Chitrangada in a woman's costume. Was he sad because of the fact that after taking so much toil in bringing her up as a 'man', she ultimately ended up performing a 'woman' by violating lord Shiva's boon? Or was he happy to know that at the end Chitrangada ended by accepting who she is?

Many of the critical issues find an expression in Millet's works which later shaped our ideologies. Two such crucial ideas are 'conditioning' and 'socialization' as Millet observes: "Conditioning to an ideology amounts to the former. Sexual politics obtains consent through the "socialization" of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status." (Millet 26). This whole concept underpins the crucial distinction among the terms 'Feminist', 'Female' and 'Feminine' [As Elaine Showalter divides them in *Towards A Feminist Poetics* (1979)]. Toril Moi explains that 'Feminist' is a political position against patriarchy; 'Female' is a biological category and 'Feminine' is a set of culturally defined characteristics. Millet was first to point out in her theory that Patriarchy operates through family and 'self' which she terms as 'Interior Colonisation':

"Through this system a most ingenious form of "interior colonization" has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring." (25)

In our society, we categorize our tasks according to our sexes, and not to our roles. And that is something which has been a crucial point in Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*. Amritlal Parekh, the patriarch of the family, firmly believes that a man becomes a man only through his manliness. He permitted his son Jairaj to let his hobby continue in dancing but he never thought of Jairaj's picking it up as a profession to be a very rational idea. He wanted to control his son from being an Indian Classical dancer as he sees dancing as suitable to women only. This is surely because of what Millet terms as 'interior colonization'. Dance for Amritlal is a profession of a prostitute and which is why he cannot accept Jairaj's choice to be a professional dancer. It is because of the same reason why he forbids his daughter-in-law Ratna to take lessons from Chennai Amma, 'the oldest living exponent of the Mysore School' (42). He cannot tolerate the sound of dancing bells in his home and his son roaming around with the tinkling of bells in his leg during the practice sessions. While asking about the lineage of Jairaj's Guru, he firmly roars that 'His mother was not a devdasi' (39). According to the temple worship rules, 'dance' and 'music' are the two major exponents of daily religious offerings to the temple deities. Though we can have some factual evidence regarding the origin of the rituals, yet we don't know exactly how the divine temples and the divine art became a lying-in room for prostitution. Amritlal thinks that the temples have slowly turned into brothels, and as they practice dance over there, the form no longer remains a sacred art. What Amritlal fails to understand is that Dancing is a performing art that is absolutely gender neutral. The primary aim of any performing arts is to regulate positivity through the mind with rhythm and to feel 'life'.

The same thing happens with Rudra as well in *Chitrangada*. His father doesn't approve of his son to be wearing bells in his legs and roaming around the stage. Though in this case, his father is not like the patriarch that we witness through Amritlal Parekh. But still, there are social prejudices within him (Rudra's father) that forbid Rudra to perform according to his will. His father repents as to why Rudra did engineering then, if he is to choose dancing and acting as his profession, and Rudra firmly replies: "তোমরা জোর করেছিলে বলে [you people insisted, that's why]. This is a very important point in the play as it indicates how parents control our performativity. Unlike Jairaj, Rudra expects that his father would turn up in any of his shows to encourage him, but it never happens and we can feel that agony in Rudra when he says: "Infact, I have stopped missing you Baba!" To perform well, what we need the most in life is the gender neutral

support of our parents who would understand our social performances.

Amritlal Parekh also thinks that Jairaj's Guru is manipulating him and that is why he does not like his Guru as well. Besides, due to social conditioning, Amritlal thinks that growing a man's hair long will again make his gender performance an error, and that is why he doesn't want his son to grow his hair long. Having long hair and walking like a woman; do not necessarily make a man woman- would, perhaps, sound abnormal to him:

"Ratna : That he is planning to grow his hair long? It would enhance his abhinaya.

Amritlal : I see. And was that his idea, or may be yours?

Ratna : Actually, it was Guruji's suggestion.

Amritlal : Tell him that if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and through him on the road." (Dattani 40)

Ratna , his daughter-in-law , in order to make her Father-in-law more tensed and make fun of his idea of 'performativity' remarks : "Tomorrow , Jairaj starts learning another dance form – Kuchipudi... in Kuchipudi, the man dress up as women!(*laughs triumphantly and exits...*)" (44)

Amritlal thought that dance is just a 'fancy' for Jairaj in childhood but it became a passion in his adulthood. Amritlal would have happily made a cricket pitch for his son to play cricket, as to him, cricket epitomizes manliness. Krishanu Chand, a research scholar, in one of his articles on patriarchy and its subversion observes that: "Amritlal is against the passion of his son only because it will ruin their social status and it will not bring any income" (166) which is, in a way, partially true. The Jairaj who did not have money to pay to the musicians and out of despair left home in Act I, comes back again at the beginning of Act II, and his father concludes: "... I have changed my mind. I will allow you to dance. And I shall be very happy if you can earn your livelihood from it." (48). Deep down Amritlal knew that Jairaj will be unable to do this because his understanding of the art is as a passion , and not as a business as Amritlal and later Lata sees it, and here the character of Ratna Parekh gains more significance.

When Amritlal failed to make his son understand the importance of livelihood, he turned up to his daughter-in-law Ratna who is portrayed as a very selfish woman by the playwright. Ratna is a character who lives in a circle of 'herself'; where she rules as the 'Matriarch' of the family and sees even his husband as an inferior parasite. When Amritlal asked her how good he is as a dancer, Ratna's

reply was evident enough to settle our mind at the conclusion that she thinks herself to be superior to her husband because she does practice harder than him. Amritlal knew that his son couldn't achieve the same fame and competency as that of Ratna and that is why he claims that 'He (Jairaj) is wasting his time.' (51). The whole act seems like a conspiracy to make Jairaj more inferior to Ratna and to destroy his self-esteem and self-respect at once. Later, when Ratna gave birth to Shankar, their elder son: due to several occasions and concerts, Ratna was deliberately neglecting her motherly duties. The major shock that Jairaj gets from Ratna is her claiming Jairaj to be someone who has done nothing for her. And Jairaj covers himself by saying that the opportunity he was looking for, was not for his own self but for both of them:

Jairaj : For one full year. For one full year I refused to dance- turning down offers because I didn't want to dance alone.

Ratna : I didn't ask for such a sacrifice. Tell me what you want in return. I'll do anything except sacrifice a year of my life in return.

Jairaj : I want you to give me back my self-esteem !" (69).

This is where Ratna's true self comes to the forefront. She doesn't love Jairaj. She just wanted someone who could let her dance without any objection. She is someone who wants fame and credit and attention and nothing else. One instance can be cited where she gives credit to herself for the performance of her daughter, Lata, who gives a performance in a concert. Continuously defending herself by saying that the credit goes both to them, Jairaj does not want Ratna to paste the newspaper reviews in their album as he thinks this will only satisfy Ratna's ego. : "They don't belong there. (Silence) Those critics gave her good reviews because she [Lata] deserved them. They weren't doing you any favours. Face it, woman."

One of the very facts which cannot be ignored is that, Dattani truly understands the idea of performativity. And that is why, perhaps, he deliberately gives instruction to the characters about changing their roles: "Jairaj wears the shawl... The characters have all changed. Jairaj becomes the father, Amritlal Parekh. Viswas becomes Jairaj . Lata is now Ratna..." (34). Of course, this is true that it gives freedom to the team to perform the play with less number of players and they can change their characters. But changing characters does underpin the fact of understanding the idea of 'Performativity' as well because the actors have to play both the roles; as well as have to portray their own thinking and ideology. Another very important question can be raised here, and that is, perhaps, one of the major issues that people deal with

nowadays. When Jairaj accuses Ratna by saying "No matter how clever an actress you are, you can't convince me that you are playing the part of devoted mother very well. You wouldn't even know where to start." (72), he also takes the sexual identity of Ratna to be a gender performance. He fails to understand that being a mother doesn't mean breastfeeding only- it demands more care, responsibility and attention. If Jairaj were so responsible as he sounds, couldn't it be possible that for just one time that he put aside his male-'I' and embraced his son in the absence of his mother? Though the title of the play refers to as '*Dance Like a Man*', it is basically a threat to both Ratna and Jairaj, as it may mean – 'Earn like a Man'-signifying and cautioning Jairaj to act in a more manly way; to take the profession seriously and make a good livelihood out of it. It could have been 'Perform like a man' – signifying the same thing with an addition that Ratna could have also earned for family and Jairaj could have become a house-husband.

The same thing was also a concern in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada*. Though Ghosh is regarded as one of the most subtle directors who can understand the performativity of any gender better than others, still h-er character Rudra fails to recognise this. When Mala, one of the dancers of the troupe came to Rudra, and for the first time Rudra realises that Partha loves children, Rudra instantly make a decision to have one. Rudra was a very lonely person and h-er loneliness drove him to be with Partha. Though Rudra was serious about the decision he took that he will go through the sex-changing and implantation surgeries, Partha was not at all serious about it. Although, later, he was convinced, yet he didn't take the decision to be a wise one. That is the reason we see him referring to Rudra as 'Synthetic' because he wanted someone who could give birth to his child naturally. What Rudra and Partha both failed to understand that being a male member of the society, they could still have a baby [adopted] and make him/her/h-er eligible to live in a society and perform accordingly. Gender is a performance, so is motherhood. Lots of examples are there in the society now where after the death of the father, the mother never gets married and rears up the child on his own as a single mother or vice versa. In fact, there are cases where women are now living their status as 'single mothers' without any patriarchal tag. When Kasturi, the fiancé of Partha, was carrying a child and wanted to abort it because she was not ready to perform her motherly duties yet, Partha realizes the sacrifice that Rudra made for him and that is why he wanted to come back, but there was no way return. In the whole situation of this chaos, what happens is that Rudra also forgets to perform simultaneously. Performing of a lover and performing of a mother occupied her so

immensely that she forgot to perform the duties of an only child. Later, Rudra realises her responsibilities and tries to cope up with whatever is left behind by not going for any implantation surgery and he ends up ultimately uprooting them.

Ghosh, sometimes, was at her best and one such instance was the inclusion of Shubho, Rudra's counselor. Though his real name was not known, it was Rudra who used to call him by that name. From the very beginning till the end, it was he who helped Rudra recover from the illness of her performance. At the end of the film, when Rudra was getting ready for the de-rooting surgery, she came to know from the sister at the hospital that she never had any counsellor her doctor never approved any. In reality, Shubho became an alter-ego of Rudra who helped her to understand the true meaning of 'Performance' and how she can begin her life again. It is very subtle and expected from Ghosh who wants us to believe in our self-esteem and in our own self. The best of the inspiration in our life comes not from others but from within, which helps us to realise the problems and help us to win over our mental aboulie. In fact, this is the point where Ghosh becomes successful as a director as s-he carefully brings forth the concept of Woolf's 'Androgyny' that: "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly." (Woolf 168). If Rudra is the 'Woman'-self, Shubho becomes the 'Man'-self, and together they try to discover a real meaning of 'Performance'.

Jairaj, Ratna, Rudra, and Partha, all of them forget one very important thing- 'Feminism' and 'Gender Performativity' are two absolutely different things. While Dattani's play vehemently focuses on 'Feminism', the characters do not share the concept of 'equality'. Rather, they are obsessed with two individual problematic selfish spheres- Matriarchy and Patriarchy. We live in a society for a very short time and what we must do to survive is to continuously 'perform'. Jairaj could have practised more and more and could have become a well-trained Bharatnatyam dancer, or he could have also become a 'house-husband'. Ratna could have thrown away her 'I' and could have seen poor Jairaj and his struggle. Similarly, Partha and Rudra could have lived with adopted children and become their parents, but all of them struck at one point - 'And why should I do that? No one can claim whether he is purely man or a woman or any other being because we are always in this intermediate phase of performativity. We are still in the process of making our performance - our Gender, as Ghosh concluded:

"- Why a building is called a building even if it is complete?"

- Why?
- Because, no transition is ever complete. It is an ongoing process."

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