

Looking Back, Looking Forward: Examining Pre-Colonial Identities in Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

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Since the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980, more and more postcolonial novels from India have been receiving acclaim at home and abroad. Perhaps the fact that the postcolonial novel is itself derived from its European predecessor helps explain its popularity among Western and middle-class Indian audiences who would have been familiar with the genre prior to encountering it in its post-colonial form.¹ Indian publishing houses like Penguin India, which was established in the mid-eighties and is today the largest English-language trade publisher in the subcontinent and the first to publish Anglophone novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair, also help promote the Anglophone Indian novel within the country. However, while the growing popularity of the postcolonial Indian novel is to be applauded, I believe that it is also important to pay close critical attention to more performance-based Anglophone cultural productions, like theater, for instance, that are only just beginning to receive attention in India and overseas.

With this in mind, this article examines the recent popularity of playwright Mahesh Dattani (1958–), who became the first English-language dramatist to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award by the Indian government in 1998 for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays* (1989). Getting this award is no mean achievement for an Anglophone writer in India, where authors who write in English are still considered “inauthentic” by many.² In this article I explore some of the reasons that may have motivated the official Indian acknowledgement of an Anglophone author as “one of our own.” By focusing on Dattani's work, and in particular on his play *Dance Like a Man* (1989), my article directs its readers towards a different set of postcolonial aesthetics than those

established by the postcolonial novel. If the latter genre often draws its inspiration from colonial aesthetics—Indians were first introduced to this form by the English—Dattani’s work draws heavily on pre-colonial art forms and their relevance to postcolonial India. Consequently, his work might be said to offer a more nuanced look at many facets of contemporary India rather than the single and perhaps dated preoccupation with the British Raj and the partition of India that has come to define so many of the popular postcolonial novels of the time.³

Dattani’s work has also revitalized the Anglophone theater scene in India. Despite the presence of playwrights like Partap Sharma, Gurcharan Das, and Asif Currimbhoy in the sixties and seventies, Indian drama in English was most often associated with light amusement for the urban elite. Shankar Mokashi-Punekar writes, “The absence in the 1980s of new major Indian dramatists writing in English is indicative of the fact that while there is a vibrant theatre in the indigenous languages of India, there is little professional activity in English-language theatre” (386). Dattani’s work, which began to be published in the late 1980s, does much to challenge this stereotype. Dattani himself says, “A lot of the damage colonization has done is reflected in the theatre, in the English language. The way most people speak the English language, most of it is imitative, there is an embarrassment about speaking it with your own background, there is a need to sound different, to sound British” (Mee 25). Dattani’s plays do much to dispel this barrier by promoting an Indian English familiar to the urban middle-class audiences he writes for. However, like other Anglophone writers, he also receives a fair share of criticism for his choice of language. In his introduction to *Final Solutions and Other Plays* (1994) John McRae writes, “When challenged [for writing in English] at a recent seminar at the University of Bangalore [with the question], ‘why don’t you write in your own language?’ [Dattani’s] reply, with a gentle disarming smile, was ‘I do’” (9). As he explained in a later interview, “It’s not that I have a political motive to promote Indian English, but it is a part of Indian culture, so it has to be given its respect in India and in the world” (Mee 26).

Over the last two decades, Dattani’s language usage and his range of subjects have been resonating more and more strongly with urban

Indians at home and abroad, who can identify with his plays on many different levels. Dattani's work covers a wide array of subjects from issues pertaining to sexual identity to religious intolerance, from marital abuse to political corruption. Moreover, although Dattani began his career as a dramatist, he has also written for the radio and for film.⁴ The performative nature of each of these genres, in turn, enables the incorporation of song and dance in a way that a novel like Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), which presents a detailed description of courtesan life in post-colonial India, cannot. To that end, much of Dattani's work involves the use of multiple genres; his play *Dance Like a Man*—which was made into a film by Pamela Rooks in 2003—for instance, incorporates dance and music as integral to the conventional story line. Dattani's own training as a Bharatanatyam dancer is a vital influence on the play. In his playwright's note to *Dance Like a Man* he describes the dance form's "fascinating history of oppression and renaissance" (107) as well as the way in which it has come to be commodified in contemporary India. He writes:

While *arrangetrams* are staged for young girls from affluent families to enhance their marriage prospects, the serious professional Indian classical male dancer still faces upper class apathy or Anglo-mania and middle class prudery or hypocrisy. ("Playwright's Note" to *Dance Like a Man* 108)

Both in the play and in his playwright's note, Dattani is critical of the efforts of elite Indians who sanitized the dance form, cleansing it of its erotic elements, divorcing it from its history, persecuting the devadasis or temple dancers who traditionally performed it, and essentially transforming it into a commodity or artifact for export.

The devadasi or temple dancer traditionally worships Shiva in his role of Nataraja, the lord of dance. Shiva's dance "symbolizes an ecstasy of motion which with its vital rhythm holds the universe together while perpetuating the cosmic activities of Creation, Preservation and Destruction" (Nevile 13). It is believed that the celestial nymph Urvashi came to earth as a devadasi to train the temple dancers in their dance. These dancers were seen as servants of the gods and were symbolically

married to the deity of the shrine. Their first dance generally took place in the temple in front of a king who rewarded them for their performance. Initially at least, devadasis were taught to read and write, participated in temple activities and were well respected in their community (Nevile 21).

However, despite the enormous variety in the life experiences of devadasis, some of whom went into politics, some of whom married, and some of whom single-mindedly pursued their art (Lakshmi xxi), it is important to not see them “as representative of some pre-capitalist utopic space” but to realize that “the *devadasi*’s exceptional sexual status was tightly and gender-divisively controlled in the interests of economic production” (Spivak 139). For instance, “the political economy of the system was such that unless one girl in a family was dedicated (at times a devadasi even adopted a girl for this purpose), economic benefits from the temple could not be realized” (Lakshmi xxi). As C.S. Lakshmi points out, “Any system that is dependent on patronage for survival [whether the patron be a temple priest, feudal lord, aristocrat, or art lover] will assume some form of manipulation, coercion, force or exploitation” (xxi).

Various historical reasons account for the transition of the devadasi (temple dancer/wife of god) to prostitute. These include the decay of Hindu culture because of Muslim rule, the role of British administrators who described devadasis as prostitutes, and the fact that most devadasis come from poor, low-caste families, and are exploited by upper-caste men. Claire Chambers writes:

in 1892 a Madras reform group started the Anti-Nautch campaign against Bharata Natyam, portraying it as indecent and exploitative to women. In doing so, the group drew on other currents within middle-class Indian society that sought to suppress lower-class women’s traditional art forms or refine their “meretricious” practices. The Anti-Nautch Movement culminated in legislation which, passed in 1947 in Madras, outlawed the devadasis’ temple dance, expropriated land owned by devadasis, and effectively destroyed their matrilineal culture

and dance traditions. Paradoxically from the 1930's onwards, a growing number of middle-class women began to learn the dance, and it moved in due course from the temple to the stage. (74)

Dance Like a Man describes the colonial and nationalist biases against traditional dance forms that make the postcolonial patriarch Amritlal insist that his daughter-in-law Ratna stop taking dance lessons from a seventy-five-year-old dying devadasi who is the only living exponent of the Mysore school of dance. Consequently, Amritlal becomes responsible for the death of this tradition and for Ratna's mediocrity as a dancer. Deprived of the best tutor she could have had, Ratna is never able to achieve the aesthetic blending of spirituality and eroticism characteristic of the tradition and becomes little more than an audience pleaser. Amritlal also rejects the Indian tradition of male dancers that Jairaj seeks to learn from. As Chambers points out:

Certain regions, such as Tanjore, now in Tamil Nadu, and parts of Andhra Pradesh, have their own dance dramas, Bhagawat Mela Natak and Kutchipudi respectively, in which until recently all parts, including female ones were played by men. Yet cross-gender roles were also imposed by necessity, because the stigma against devadasis in the early twentieth century meant that few respectable women could be found to perform the dance. The early pioneer of the Bharata Natayam revival, E. Krishna Iyer, dressed as a woman to promote the dance form and encourage women to perform the dance on stage. (76)

However Amritlal completely ignores this part of Indian history and bribes Ratna into helping destroy her husband's dance career by promising her that she can perform certain censored dance productions for "respectable" middle-class audiences. Their pact results in tragic consequences for all, and years later, when Jairaj and Ratna's daughter Lata becomes a dancer, her parents relive their lives through her. It is particularly significant that the characters double up in the play, with old Jairaj playing his father, Amritlal; young Jairaj also playing Vishwas, his

daughter Lata's fiancé; and young Ratna (Jairaj's wife) playing Lata (her daughter). This doubling up suggests that although one half of the play takes place in Bangalore in the forties and the other half in Bangalore in the eighties, there are continuing obstacles that face those who would embrace the alternative world of dance. However, it also suggests that everyone, including a Gujrati businessman, has the potential to achieve the alternative vision embedded in the dance form.

Dance Like a Man's focus on Indian classical dance embodies the significance given to other classical art forms found in much of Dattani's work. In his play *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), for instance, Dolly, the long suffering wife of an abusive Indian businessman turns to the love songs of a thumri singer, the late Naina Devi, for solace.⁵ Thumri, like Bharatanatyam, suffered from colonial prejudice and postcolonial Indian prudery. Naina Devi, the granddaughter of well known social reformer, Keshab Chandra Sen, and a daughter-in-law of the royal family of Kapurthala, was ostracized by post-independence Indian society for her attempts at revitalizing the art form and caring for the tawaifs or professional singers who were trained in it. By setting up Naina Devi's talent and strength as a source of inspiration for today's Indian woman, Dattani's play pays homage to India's classical heritage and to the middle-class artists and activists willing to risk their reputations by keeping these traditions and their performers alive. On a similar level, the focus on Bharatanatyam in *Dance like a Man*, is in many ways inspired by "a few young dancers from 'respectable' families [who] shocked the public by learning the dance from the devadasis [who performed it]. . . . It is to the credit of these enthusiasts who fought society that we are today still linked with this grand classical art form" (Dattani, "Playwright's Note" 107).

Dattani's attempts at validating and giving voice to pre-colonial art forms through postcolonial drama is significant for several reasons. It reinforces the connection between the aesthetic, the sensuous, and the spiritual, which is typical of several indigenous art forms, but which has, for the most part, been elided in colonial and postcolonial India. In addition, it uses these art forms to provide a transgressive space that both critiques middle-class Indian morality and provides alternative and

progressive ways of being in the world. As my article shows, in Dattani's plays, instead of progressive social behavior being inevitably embedded in colonial and postcolonial modernity, fairly liberatory models of sexual and gendered behavior can be found in the purest forms of pre-colonial art forms.

For instance, thumri like Bharatanatyam in its truest form is unique in its blending of the erotic and the spiritual; in fact, in Naina Devi's words, "in the final analysis the most erotic words are inspired by our spirituality" (qtd. in Lakshmi 42). However, this vision is unfortunately lost in most postcolonial middle-class re-presentations of pre-colonial art forms. In a review article written in 1944, Iyer, who is, as mentioned earlier, generally regarded as having revived Bharatanatyam in South India, distinguishes between non-professional dancers whom he refers to as "cultured" and professional dancers or devadasis. Lakshmi notes that, "Although, he praises many devadasis for their art he does not use the word 'cultured' for them. Rather, he believes a woman dancer should be 'modest'" (xviii). Iyer's ideological biases are also manifested in the more recent controversy about well-known dancer Rukmini Devi who is said to have replaced *sringara* (erotic) with *bhakti* (devotional) *rasa* in her performances (Lakshmi xxvi). In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani criticizes this hypocritical middle-class morality through his satiric creation of the Indian patriarch Amritlal and the primarily male middle-class audiences who lustfully applaud the dance performances of Ratna and Lata. However, the flashback that concludes the play endorses the blending of the erotic and the spiritual that is typical of the actual tradition. In death, Jairaj and Ratna are able to forget and forgive the petty rivalries that made up their life. As they embrace and dance together they achieve the complete harmony of body and spirit, dancer and dance, that is so much a part of the traditional dance form.

Throughout the play, Dattani shows how Bharatanatyam functions as an alternative space for Jairaj and Ratna, providing them the opportunity to embrace more emancipatory gender and sexual roles than those permitted them by regular society.

In an essay entitled "Thinking Beyond Gender in India," Ruth Vanita describes the "normative heterosexuality found in contemporary India

(531). She writes, “Despite their political differences, today, most feminists and non-feminists, rightists and leftists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians in India share the basic assumption that, although there are many abuses within heterosexual monogamy, this system is nevertheless the best available” (531). Yet, as Vanita goes on to show in the same essay, India also claims a long tradition of people who have opted out of heterosexual narratives. Most notable among the latter are the bhakta and sant poets like Mirabai, who, like their European counterparts, show “a trajectory of critique, protest and opting out of the heterosexual system, followed by the forming of alternative community and friendship networks” (535). Dattani’s work clearly suggests he belongs to this tradition.

At a time when with a few exceptions, there is still little representation of homosexuality in postcolonial writing, and Article 377 of the Indian Constitution continued to criminalize sexual behavior between consenting adults of the same sex until its recent repeal in July 2009, Dattani has been one of the few authors to write about the lives of lesbians and gays in plays like *On a Foggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), which was made into the film *Mango Souffle* in 2002, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. His work is also remarkable for its depictions of other socially-marginalized communities like the hijras in *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) and HIV-positive Indians in his script for the Hindi film *Ek Alag Mausam* (2003). *Dance Like a Man* presents a critique of “normative heterosexuality” by showing its limitations for all three couples in the play and by presenting dance as a creative space that enables the creation of more equitable ways of being in the world.

As Dattani says, his “plays show that both men *and* women pay the consequences for not playing by prescribed gender roles” (Dattani, personal interview 6 December, 2006). To that end, his plays depict female identity differently from how it is often presented in the postcolonial novel. Following the example of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, many of the postcolonial novels of the eighties and nineties use the form of national allegory to tell the story of the creation of a post-independent India and have to a large extent been responsible for generating claims like Fredric Jameson’s now infamous “*all* third-world literature” *must*

be read as “national allegory” (65–88; emphasis added). As critics like Josna Rege have pointed out, this form tends to present women in their symbolic roles of mother and wife and does not serve their interests as women (367). Consequently, women writers have often chosen other forms of expression like the short story (Mohanty and Mohanty 2). Dattani uses theater to break away from the use of national allegory; in fact, his play *Dance Like a Man* presents a feminist critique of the limitations placed on men and women by a patriarchal national culture.

The brand of nationalism of Jairaj’s father, Amritlal, proves to be one of the major determinants of post-independence national discourse. Like other Congress Party leaders, Amritlal is deeply influenced by British value systems even though he is antagonistic to them on a political level. Thus, he refuses to wear English clothes but remains concerned that his son is interested in dance rather than cricket and believes that his “priority is to eradicate unwanted and ugly practices which are a shame to [Indian] society” (151). Like the British he sees devadasis only as “unfortunate women” in need of “education and reform” (151). Moreover, he appears to have no awareness of the colonial influences embedded in nationalist ideology that sanitized Indian culture and helped deprive devadasis of their profession.

While Amritlal is sufficiently influenced by British liberalism to allow his son to marry outside of his community in an attempt to create an integrated India, he is not tolerant enough to let him be a dancer. In fact, he is increasingly threatened by “the femininity” of Jairaj’s dance instructor or guruji and by Jairaj’s decision to grow his hair long and learn kutchipudi.⁶ The inherent misogyny of Amritlal’s views is made evident when he tells Ratna, “A woman in a man’s world may be considered progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic” (166). Amritlal is liberal enough to consider equality between men and women provided it is the woman who adopts male attributes and not vice versa (personal interview 4 June, 2003). Needless to say, Amritlal’s wife is literally written out of existence: there is not one mention of her in the play. This denigration of the feminine is reaffirmed by late nineteenth-century Victorian views of masculinity with their emphasis on a ruggedness of spirit, as manifested in books like *Tom Brown’s School Days* (1857)

but is in complete contrast with the gender ambiguity found in certain pre-colonial performances and upheld by the “Father of the Nation,” Gandhi. Thumri singers, for instance, most often performed texts that were created by male writers for elite male audiences. Consequently, they were dealing with “a kind of male definition of female sexuality” (Lakshmi 302). Yet, as one of Naina Devi’s students and a well-known thumri singer in her own right, Vidya Rao reveals, thumri subversively functions as “feminine voice.” Not only were thumri singers aware of the irony of their situation (Rao, “Interview” in Lakshmi 302), but the form itself is “always extending the space available to it. . . . Both because of what it [is] doing and the ways in which it [is] doing this, thumri appear[s] to be relentlessly questioning the established and accepted structures of music and indeed our ways of understanding the world” (Rao, “Thumri” 479).

Gandhiji or the “Father” of the modern Indian nation also somewhat ironically presented an alternate view of sexuality. Leela Gandhi writes:

Combining a unique (but also recognizable) set of ingredients in anticolonialism, vegetarianism, and a formative antipathy to “modern civilization,” Gandhian *ahimsa* or nonviolence is, indeed, predicated upon a rigorous refusal of heteronormative masculinity. In Gandhi’s understanding, the *ahimsaic* agent or activist is obliged to feminize the activity of resistance by emulating the normative, albeit stereotypical, selflessness of motherhood, self-containment of the widow, and so on. His own “queering,” as it were, of gender positions is frequently expressed in his aspiration to transcend gender relations, or the desire, as he puts it, to ‘mother’ his companions and, in so doing, to become “God’s eunuch.” (93)

Dattani follows the precedent set by thumri singers and Gandhiji in his use of Bharatanatyam to queer dominant heteronormative traditions. In *Dance Like a Man*, there are numerous references to the god Shiva, who transcends prescribed gender roles. As Uma Narain writes, every Bharatanatyam dancer is aware of the myth of Shiva as “Ardhanarishwara combining the dance of the eternal Man and Woman—the unity of

‘Purush’ (the supreme divinity) and ‘Prakriti’ (nature). Shiva is the complete cosmic Being as Ardhanarishwara, embodying both the strength and compassion of the masculine and feminine principle” (180). In *Dance Like a Man* Ratna begins to learn to dance the divine dance of Shiva and Parvati from Cheniamma, and she and Jairaj name their son, Shankar, one of the synonyms of Shiva. Further, Jairaj wants to teach Shankar the tandava nritya or Shiva’s dance of destruction, and right at the end of the play, after they have both moved beyond their earthly lives, Jairaj and Ratna come together in perfect harmony as they dance the dance of the divine god.

While each of the three examples—thumri, ahimsa, and Bharatanatyam—I have used suggests an alternative way of being, I do want to emphasize that none of these alternatives is perfect. Thumri singers, like temple dancers, had to ultimately please their patrons, whose pleasures defined their performances. Despite its radical potential, Gandhian ahimsa, as Ketu Katrak points out, imposed many limitations on women since it stressed their ability to sacrifice themselves and “promoted a traditional ideology wherein female sexuality was legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifehood, domesticity—all forms of controlling women’s bodies” (395–96). And, finally, despite an innate desire to transcend gender boundaries and “dance like a woman,” Jairaj too succumbs to the latent homophobia present in Indian society as seen in his comments about the Yakshagana dancers he performs with (177).⁷

As a heterosexual man committed to and inspired by India’s classical dance forms, the young Jairaj does, however, have the potential for a similar queering of normative heterosexuality and transcending of traditional gender relations. He appears to be a supportive husband; in fact, his wife, Ratna, admits the main reason she married him was that he would allow her to dance. Ratna, too, does not adhere to Amritlal’s notions of manhood and is initially supportive of Jairaj learning to dance. Later in the play, both Jairaj and Ratna appear to be loving and supportive parents to their daughter, Lata. However, the Amritlal/Ratna pact that was intended to turn Jairaj into a “man” breaks his “manhood” by turning him into a drunkard and ruins his marriage and his dance career. Despite the transformative potential embodied in Jairaj, he is

ultimately no match for the heteronormative forces that make up his world.

Nevertheless, despite the the tragic events in Jairaj's life, his dance performances have their subversive moments. For instance, he dresses up in his wife's costume to dance the erotic *ashtapadi*⁸ in front of the army, the overtly masculine institution responsible for safeguarding India's national identity. The fact that Ratna is too afraid to do this erotic dance in front of army personnel is the first step towards undermining the idea of the army as protector of the nation. The army reinforces the same heteronormative nationalism and masculinity as Amritlal, but the parallels between the two implicitly suggest the well-established fact that the institution, just like Amritlal, is ultimately capable of destroying those it claims to protect.

Later Jairaj points out, "They [the army personnel] loved it even more when they found out I was a man. Of course, knowing the army that may not be very surprising" (177). Jairaj's comment queers the hyper-masculinity of the Indian army; furthermore, at no point does the play suggest that Jairaj might be attracted to other men. As previously mentioned, his comments about having to drink vodka with Yakshagana performers with "plucked eyebrows and painted lips" might be read as downright homophobic, yet his desire to embrace the gender ambiguity of India's classical dance forms suggests that he is capable of transcending the normative heterosexuality that persists in much of India's daily life. Thus, even as Jairaj's vision refuses to be part of a heteronormative nationalist ideology, the play makes no claims about his homosexuality. Rather, by rejecting both oppositions, it embraces the alternative vision of desire found in the dance form prior to its sanitization.

Heteronormative cultural values are reinforced once again as Ratna's performance of Bharatanatyam wins approbation from male audiences who, unfamiliar with the more spiritual aspects of the dance, delight to see a young, beautiful woman in front of them. Years later, Ratna and Jairaj's daughter, Lata, with her "heaving bosom," partakes of the same kind of commodification when she wins praise from male critics for her performance of *Geetagovinda*.⁹ For instance, the critics adored "her sculpturesque poses and flourishes" (174) regardless of the fact

that she accentuated her gestures to emphasize their provocative nature. Although Lata is able to see through the pretensions of her audience and critics, her mother continues to buy into the commodification of the dance form rather than protect its integrity: she spends her time packaging India's "cultural traditions" for international audiences and wheedling Dr. Gowda into including Lata in his troupe of performers for the Festival of India in Canada. Moreover, her willingness to be bribed away from Chenniamma's teaching signifies her own loss of artistic integrity, and though her youth and beauty do win her a degree of success, Ratna is never able to achieve the greatness she desires.

Nor is she able to achieve happiness in her marriage. Ironically enough, Ratna's deliberate ploys to overshadow Jairaj when they dance together turn him into a drunkard and kill their son, thereby undermining patriarchal institutions of marriage and lineage. Ratna and Jairaj's son, Shankar, is Amritlal's pride and joy since he represents the possibility of turning into the man that his father never became. However, Jairaj has his own dreams for his son and says that he looks forward to the time when he will "teach him how to dance—the dance of Shiva. The dance of a man and when he is ready, [he'll] bring him to his grandfather and make him dance on his head—the tandava nritya . . . The lord of dance, beating his drum and trampling on the demon" (185). Here Jairaj embraces another version of Shiva, not the Ardhanarishwara of compassion and androgyny but the hypermasculinity of Shiva the destroyer, a shift that once again suggests the fluidity of identity that the god represents in different performances. Both versions of masculinity (the colonial represented by Amritlal and pre-colonial/alternative represented by Jairaj) are rudely ended when Ratna and Shankar's ayah unwittingly gives the baby a dose of opium in order to ensure that he does not wake up and cry for his mother when she is at her dance performance. Shankar's death, inadvertently caused by the Ratna/Amritlal alliance, destroys the sanctity of the heterosexual marriage and the possibility of a patriarchal lineage. Ratna is however less a criminal than a victim of the patriarchal system she seeks to manipulate. Because of the restrictions placed on upper-caste women in post-independence India, marriage is the only means by which Ratna can secure the freedom to practice the dance

she loves so much. Even her marriage does not protect her from the advances of an uncle who sees her as a woman of easy virtue because she is an “entertainer.” When Vishwas voices his reservations about the erotic ashtapadi that Lata performs, Jairaj points out that Ratna danced it thirty years ago. Vishwas admires both Ratna’s courage in performing a movement that so clearly contradicts middle-class ideas of femininity and also Jairaj’s liberality in letting his wife dance like this, but it is clear that given a choice, he would rather his own wife not perform this particular movement.

Lata’s marriage to Vishwas, the son of a multimillionaire “mithai-walla”¹⁰ who owns half the buildings on Commercial Street and who keeps himself prosperous with black-market money, suggests the direction urban, middle-class India is going to follow. Vishwas represents the nouveau riche, who have no understanding of Bharatanatyam but who tolerate and even support it under certain conditions. Thus, Vishwas agrees to let Lata continue to dance if she will give him two children. When Vishwas tells Chaganlal Chadani, a Marwari¹¹ entrepreneur interested in tearing down Jairaj’s ancestral home and building a shopping complex in its place, to “call back after ten years” because “he [Vishwas] may be interested in [his] offer” (123–24), his words represent the way in which capitalism overrules historical tradition. According to Dattani, within the Gujrati community manhood is defined by an ability to make money (personal interview, 4 June, 2003). Vishwas’ words suggest that making money is one of his top interests. In this way Vishwas is much closer to Amritlal, who made his money from selling bungalows, than to Jairaj, whose financial dependency on Amritlal, coupled with his love of dance, fail to make him a “real man” in the eyes of society. The Lata-Vishwas alliance suggests that the temporary aberration presented by Jairaj and Ratna is over and that the heteronormative status quo is being adopted once again.

At the end of the play, Jairaj’s house is demolished and he and Ratna move to “a posh flat” for their few remaining years. Lata calls her parents to say that her baby’s first word sounds like “jalebi,”¹² suggesting that unlike her parents she has gracefully given in to the values of her husband’s commercial world. Despite her artistic promise, there is no

indication at the end of the play that Lata will continue to practice the dance her parents loved so much.

Instead, the play ends with a vision of a young Ratna and Jairaj laughing and getting ready to dance together. As he watches his recently deceased wife come towards him, the now-dead Jairaj comments:

We dance perfectly. In unison. Not missing a step or a beat. We talk and laugh at all the mistakes we made in our previous dances. . . . We were only human. We lacked the grace. We lacked the brilliance. We lacked the magic to dance like God. (193–4)

It is a powerful vision, and yet the fact that it can only be achieved in death is perhaps an indication of how Dattani feels about the obstacles that continue to plague Indian dancers today. Jairaj and Ratna's final performance holds out the promise of the spirituality embodied in the devadasi tradition of Bharatanatyam but does not neutralize or elide the challenges and problems endemic to this tradition. In Dattani's own words:

I would like to challenge the assumption of what is Indian. Does that mean traditional theatre forms? Yes, they're wonderful, they're very sophisticated, they're impressive, but are they really India? That's something I would like to question and challenge. Are they really reflecting life as it is now, that is the question I would like to ask. They're fine, but there is the danger that if you look at them as if they're quintessential India you're doing those forms a great disservice, because you're not allowing them to change. What we need to do now is to look at those forms and say we're approaching the twenty-first century, this is who we are and this is our legacy, so where do we take that. (Mee 25)

By examining different artistic traditions from a historical perspective, I would argue that Dattani's plays, in particular *Dance Like a Man*, point the enterprising critic towards new ways of being postcolonial in the twenty-first century. Instead of discarding the past or presenting it as

an artifact, they reinvent its different aspects to make meaning for our present and future.

Notes

- 1 By the second half of the nineteenth century, novels from England had begun pouring into India giving English settlers a means of keeping in touch with the culture back home and providing Indian readers who were educated in English access to literary models that influenced their own writing—both in English and in the vernacular. The first novel to be written in English was *Rajkumar's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1864. See Mukherjee's "The Anxiety of Indianness" and "Nation, Novel, Language" (166–86, 1–29).
- 2 See Hawley and Rege. Rege quotes Professor Vrinda Nabar of Bombay University as saying that the hostility towards Indian writers in English was much worse in the sixties. However, a survey of criticism on Anglophone writers suggests continuing ambivalence if not outright hostility on the part of their critics. Rajan writes:

The writers [in English] of this generation are bonded in a kind of (predominantly) male fraternity (replicating a vaguely Bloomsbury ethos), belonging as they do to the same post-independence generation, and sharing a similar background of upper-class affluence, public school-elite metropolitan college-foreign university education, and membership in influential professions like journalism, the civil services or the academy. . . . While their actual political consciousness may be non-existent, or at best naïve, their hegemonic class affiliations give them a stake in the post-Independence political sphere that cannot be discounted. In contrast, writers in Indian languages are likely to be more "professional," that is, to make a living solely from their literary work. They are also more often likely to be implicated with literary, cultural and political movements in their states, such as progressive writers' groups, the Dalit protest movement, Dravidian reformism etc., than writers in English who tend to be individualistic. (88)

See Sunder Rajan (71–92). I would argue that Dattani, both in his upbringing and education (Dattani attended Baldwin's high school and St. Joseph's College of Arts and Sciences in Bangalore) and in his career and affiliations (playwright, director, actor, screenplay writer, dancer, activist), in many ways crosses this somewhat illusory divide that Rajan sets up.

- 3 See, for instance, Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Suleri's *Meatless Days* (1989), Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991), Mehta's *Raj* (1999), and Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999), to name a few.
- 4 See Dattani's *Collected Plays Vols. I & II* (2000, 2005), which include radio plays like *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, and *Do the Needful*, and films like *Mango Souffle* and *Ek Alag Mausam*.

- 5 Naina Devi (1920–1993) sang thumri, a devotional love song most often sung to the god Krishna, which gained preeminence in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (the last ruler of Avadh) in the nineteenth century.
- 6 Kutchipudi is a classical dance form from Andhra Pradesh. Traditionally only men take part in kutchipudi. Female roles are played by men.
- 7 Yakshagana is a dance which developed in Andhra Pradesh in about 1250 AD (Bhavnani 81). It was later adopted and practiced in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Kothari 132). Traditionally men played female roles in Yakshagana.
- 8 Gitagovinda is popularly known as “ashtapadi” (Miller xi).
- 9 “Gitagovinda” literally means the “Love Song of the Dark God.” It was composed by the Bengali poet Jayadeva in the twelfth century. The poem concentrates on the love between Krishna and Radha and is renowned for its eroticism (Miller ix).
- 10 A “mithaiwalla” is a seller of sweets.
- 11 A Marwari is originally someone from the Jodhpur region of Rajasthan, frequently a Jain, and a moneylender, banker, and businessman by profession. Because of their professions, Marwaris are often looked at critically by other Indians who think that they have money but not much culture.
- 12 Jalebi is an Indian sweet made with flour and buttermilk.

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