

# CHALLENGING TRADITION AND EMBRACING MODERNITY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI AND VIJAY TENDULKAR

Riyaz Mohammad\*, Pitta Paul Francis\*\* and  
K.V. Rama Rao\*\*\*

## Abstract

Tradition and modernity are the two essential aspects of human evolution. Although tradition and modernity are widely considered direct opposites, they are indeed interlinked and inseparable elements since modernity is possible only when traditions are re(-)formed. The main aim of modernity is to help society develop and liberate humans from the constraints of often outdated traditions. In this context, the contribution of literature, especially Indian drama, to advancing Indian society is highly appreciable. Among the numerous Indian dramatists who deserve a special mention for their relentless endeavors to challenge and transform the traditional mindset prevailing in society, Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar stand out due to their bold exploration of themes such as gender inequality, the dominance of patriarchy, homosexuality, child sexual abuse, and religious violence. Both Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are notable figures in Indian drama, recognized for highlighting the issues and challenges experienced by marginalized communities. This research paper aims to compare the works of Tendulkar and Dattani, specifically examining how they portray the conflict between tradition and modernity in their selected plays. The methodology adopted for the study includes qualitative research

\*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English and Foreign Languages, S.R.K.R.Engineering College, Bhimavaram

\*\*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Gudlavalleru Engineering College, Gudlavalleru.

\*\*\*Senior Assistant Professor of English, Sri Vasavi Engineering College, Pedatadepalli, Tadepalligudem.

focusing on textual analysis and the plays chosen for the study are *Kamala* and *Dance Like a Man*.

*Keywords:* Indian Drama, Tradition, Modernity, Patriarchy, Hegemony

## Introduction

As playwrights, both Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar are remarkable in portraying the predicaments of marginalized communities of society. Their plays explore everyday problems faced by middle-class urban Indian society. They give voice to the unheard and invisible sufferings of the marginalized sections such as LGBTQ who are subjugated and exploited in numerous ways. They also portray the pains and problems of women whose lives are often no better than those of the other marginalized sections. Both these playwrights have contributed enormously to the growth of Indian drama. Vijay Tendulkar, originally a Marathi writer, significantly reshaped Indian drama with his artistic dexterity by addressing both temporal as well as timeless issues. He is also renowned for having most of his plays translated into English and other Indian languages, solidifying his position as an imposing force in contemporary Indian English drama. Tendulkar's influence extends beyond Marathi theatre, as he has been a pioneering figure in Indian drama for nearly four decades. Despite his origins in Marathi regional theatre, Tendulkar has established himself as a distinctive presence in Indian English drama, probing into unexplored realms of human awareness and uncovering deep-seated feelings of dissatisfaction and unrest. His dramatic art draws from various traditions such as Naturalism, Expressionism, and Folk Theatre, and reflects the influence of journalistic trends. Tendulkar's unique approach to addressing sensitive issues like gender bias, political corruption, homosexual relationships, and the suffering of marginalized communities is marked by innovative techniques that set him apart from his contemporaries. For instance, in his play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, he employs the mock trial technique to compelling effect. In *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar, like Osborne, demonstrates a mastery of verbose dialogue. In *Kamala*, he utilizes the media as a tool for the mechanization of power, intensifying the oppression faced by marginalized communities. This play also incorporates expressionism and flashback techniques. As a dramatist, Tendulkar's work reflects a fusion of Western ideology's twilight and the traditions of native theatrical forms. He does not merely imitate theatrical conventions but strives to create fresh dramatic forms for each innovative idea.

He opines, “Every play is not for everybody [...] a play is a work of art when it reveals its theme and essence exclusively through its mode attendant detailing rather than through statement and speech.” (Choudhary 106)

In contrast, Mahesh Dattani is a contemporary writer who primarily crafts his works in English, contributing significantly to Indian English theatre. Tendulkar’s influence has been instrumental in shaping Dattani’s creative path, as both share a commitment to addressing contemporary societal issues. Dattani’s characters are firmly grounded in the urban, cosmopolitan landscape of modern middle-class India. Dattani’s creative prowess and his dramatic dexterity helped Indian Drama in English develop beyond mere imitation, transcending limitations. Writing since the late 1980s, Dattani’s plays, much like Tendulkar’s, challenge societal norms and conventions. His artistic journey raises thought-provoking questions related to gender, and other critical issues such as homosexuality, lesbianism, and gay relations. John McRae comments, “For the plays of Mahesh Dattani are not and never have been merely entertainment, although first and foremost he knows a play has to keep an audience engrossed, caring about the characters, following the twists and turns of the plot, until that final cathartic, uplifting, moving resolution.” (54)

Dattani has consistently spotlighted the challenges and dilemmas within contemporary Indian society, seamlessly integrating them into his dramatic narrative. What sets him apart from Tendulkar is his ability to pose pertinent questions that confront endless human issues. In contrast, Tendulkar, while reflecting on the problems and concerns of contemporary Indian society, has not made them an inherent corner stone of his dramatic art.

Dattani’s brilliance stems from his versatility as an artist, being not only a playwright but also an actor, director, and dancer. On the other hand, Tendulkar is primarily a naturalist and realist. Drawing from his experiences as a journalist, Tendulkar confronted the harsh realities of violence, oppression, and exploitation within society. He recognized that the normalization of such cruelty had become an ingrained aspect of life, and he sought to bring it to light by exploring its various manifestations in his work.

### Conflict between Tradition and Modernity in *Kamala* and *Dance Like a Man*

Tradition can be described as the cultural inheritance of values passed down from one generation to the next within a society. It encompasses

a wide range of social codes, cultural practices, religious rituals, and human relationships, among other aspects. These traditions serve important social functions and hold significant cultural relevance. They have the power to preserve the identity and heritage of a nation and its people, often spanning millennia. The term “tradition” finds its roots in the Latin word “tradere,” which essentially means to convey, to entrust, or to preserve for future generations. Throughout history, tradition has held a steadfast influence over Indian culture, adapting and incorporating new customs as times change.

On the other hand, modernity signifies a historical period marked by the emergence of certain sociocultural norms, attitudes, and practices, particularly evolving during the Renaissance. Modernity is characterized by a critical examination and, in some cases, a rejection of traditional values. Key characteristics of modernity include individualism, the pursuit of freedom, and the promotion of equality. It can be seen as a constantly evolving set of beliefs and ideas that shape our daily lives.

In his play *Kamala*, Tendulkar offers a revealing representation of a quintessential Indian middle-class setting and employs satire to critique the social institutions of ‘politics,’ ‘marriage,’ and ‘modern journalism.’ Through the persona of Kakasaheb, Tendulkar effectively conveys his impressions of politicians and journalists. Both Sarita and Kakasaheb serve as the playwright’s tools to satirize the contemporary notion of journalists who are willing to make significant efforts to achieve their objectives. Tendulkar’s work highlights three crucial societal issues: the forward-thinking modern individual, the condition of women in independent India, and the emergence of instant journalism.

Jaisingh Jadhav is shown as an investigative journalist, and the depiction of his newspaper reporting approach is presented critically, contrasting with Kakasaheb, an old-school journalist who embodies the genuine principles of journalism. Kakasaheb, hailing from the Gandhian era, had previously used his newspaper as a tool to resist British rule. He expresses regret over what he views as the demise of the true essence of journalism. He declares, “I’m honoured. Who asks after me now? I’m a back number- a remnant of times past. A dead journalist who’s just about staying alive!” (Tendulkar 05). He comments on the contemporary approach to journalism which primarily offers detailed accounts of events without providing any solutions or remedies, effectively highlighting the shortcomings of this modern approach. Kakasaheb’s perspective on contemporary journalism underlines the relentless pursuit of materialistic success

in modern society.

This clash between modernity and tradition is also evident in Dattani's play, *Dance Like a Man*, where Amrit Parekh represents traditional values, and his son, Jairaj, embodies a modern lifestyle. This difference leads to an ongoing conflict between the father and the son. The play *Dance Like a Man* comes across as a vivid portrayal of the conventional family structure. Dattani illustrates how the ostensibly progressive father attempts to control the actions and behaviours of both his son and daughter-in-law, despite his reputation as a forward-thinking individual. The play clearly portrays the clash between tradition and modernity by highlighting the conflicts between the elderly father and his youthful son. Amritlal Parekh upholds traditional values, while his son, Jairaj, strives to challenge and alter them through his actions.

*Dance Like a Man* explores the realm of dance, both as a profession and a vocation, raising thought-provoking questions about whether a man can pursue dance as a career and whether a woman should be allowed to prioritize her dance practice over family life. The play highlights significant themes including the clash between traditional and modern values, the career choices and societal roles of women within a patriarchal framework, and the clash between tradition embodied by Amritlal Parekh, a rigidly conservative father, and modernity represented by Jairaj. Commenting on the representation of the ideological differences between Amritlal Parekh and Jairaj, Gouri Nilakantan Mehta rightly remarks, "Tradition is dismembered by the depiction of bygone days, and memories are also reflected by showing changes in historical time periods." (103)

In *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani endeavours to illustrate that individuals are not only shaped by external social norms but also by their inner moral compass. The perpetual conflict between personal motivations and the expectations of family, society, and cultural norms forms the dramatic backdrop of the play. *Dance Like a Man* essentially serves as a journey of self-discovery for Jairaj as he confronts the ideals he wishes to uphold amidst the external pressures thrust upon him by the world around him. This inner emotional tumult of Jairaj is vividly reflected in Jairaj's voice. He comments, "The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares – what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic?" (Dattani 406). The core theme of the play revolves around how societal norms can tarnish the quality of life for both men and women. The play's

dramatic structure emphasizes the notion that individuals must contend with and resist these social conventions. In our society, the importance of individual identity often takes a backseat within this rigid social framework.

Much like Jairaj, Jaisingh Jadhav is similarly ensnared in the self-serving, unethical, and suppressive realm of modern journalism, where he tries to establish his unique identity. Additionally, the matter of gender discrimination is intricately linked with individual decisions, personal growth, and self-definition. It has its influence in shaping a person's character, and any suppression of it is likely to yield dire consequences. This bias is reflected in the choice of role models, professional accomplishments, behaviours, attire, and moral values.

This signifies that the playwright was deeply driven to portray two profound passions: a desire to see himself as a dancer and an overwhelming fear of the social stigma associated with dance, often treated as a feminine art, and a man's pursuit of dance being viewed with shame in society. Jairaj possesses a fervent love for dance and is willing to defy all the constraints imposed upon him by his father, Amritlal, a symbol of patriarchal authority. Amritlal is also against his daughter-in-law, Ratna's wish to learn dance from a Devadasi, the temple dancer traditionally stigmatized as a prostitute in society. He disagrees by saying, "Why must you dance? It doesn't give you any income. Is it because of your wife? Is she forcing you to dance?" (Dattani 415)

For Amritlal, Jairaj's decision to pursue a career in dance and embrace the life of an artist is nothing short of a challenge. His conventional beliefs are deeply entrenched in cultural norms, and stepping beyond them is perceived as sacrilegious. In his eyes, Jairaj's identity holds little significance. Preventing Jairaj from pursuing dance becomes Amritlal's obsession, leading him to conspire with Ratna to achieve his goal. He makes Ratna understand that her success in the field of dance depends on her helping Jairaj break free from his obsession and make him a 'manly man.'

Amritlal vehemently disapproves of his son's interest in dance and he also objects to Jairaj's association with other dancers. The play vividly portrays the ideological conflicts between generations, with Amritlal Parekh embodying traditional values while Jairaj seeks to challenge these norms by following his own aspirations. This deepens the tension between Amritlal and Jairaj. In defiance of the beliefs and constraints imposed by Amritlal, Jairaj and Ratna decide to leave their home. Their departure symbolizes the broader confrontation

between conventional conservatism and progressive modernity, encapsulating the struggle between a traditional father and his son with a contemporary outlook. Jairaj and Ratna leave behind the old restrictions imposed upon them.

Jairaj liberates himself from the rigid and traditional family norms. However, the dramatist evokes feelings of empathy and sorrow when Jairaj, along with Ratna, returns after two days. It appears they have experienced the harsh realities of the outside world, leaving them feeling frustrated and drained. Modernity tastes the bitterness of defeat, similar to the futility experienced by Jaisingh in *Kamala*. His effort to expose the corruption within the flesh market targets influential politicians and financiers, leading to his imprisonment in an attempt to protect the interests of these influential figures and suppressing freedom of the press. Jaisingh fails to control himself and blames the editor for corruption. He takes risks to confront the competitive world, not realizing that he is merely a pawn of capitalist powers until the paper's proprietor dismisses him. Jaisingh's ambition blinds him, and his unrelenting pursuit of success makes him insensitive, ultimately resulting in his not only losing his job but also damaging his marital life. Both Tendulkar and Dattani endeavour to unveil the harsh realities that can leave the youth feeling drained. The initial youthful revolution against the inflexible and obstinate older generation is quelled, as Jairaj compromises his revolutionary spirit to appease his traditional father.

### Conclusion

*Kamala* and *Dance Like a Man* both prominently feature the motif of domination stemming from restrictive, traditional, and unsupportive environments. Through these plays, Dattani and Tendulkar make an elegant juxtaposition of the traditional and modern mind-sets of the people, disparaging the stubborn nature of conservative people who cannot face the inevitable change. In essence, *Kamala* and *Dance Like a Man* present the contrast between conventional norms and modern perspectives, interwoven with issues related to gender, marriage, and career, all presented in a compelling, authentic, and artistic manner. Both plays underscore the significance of accepting inevitable change while preserving certain conservative values and traditional beliefs that form the very foundation of societal morale. These works reflect the remarkable qualities of their authors, elevating Tendulkar and Dattani to the status of world-renowned writers. While numerous authors have explored the theme of the



clash between tradition and modernity, the realistic approach of Tendulkar and the artistic perspective of Dattani lend their plays a timeless relevance.

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