

Gender Dynamics in the plays of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*

Mrs. G. Lalitha

Research Scholar, BESTIU
Asst. Professor of English
MALD Govt. Degree & PG College
Gadwal, Telangana

Dr. Sirisha Iruvuri

Research Supervisor, BESTIU
Associate Professor
Department of English
Nalla Narasimha Reddy Engg. College
Hyderabad

Abstract

The role of gender as per the theatrical discussions of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Sara Ahmed is explored in the plays of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man*. This study focuses on the gender issues of each drama through its main characters, so that by comparing how gender factors interact in these two plays and examining what elements are needed to analyse these works from a stand point interconnected with men-women. In *Angels in America*, the narratives of characters like Prior Walter, Louis Ironson and Roy Cohn confront themes on masculinity, gay sexuality and power in the face of AIDS crisis but those same questions would inform every play that Kushner has written. Their conflicting relations help us to understand the themes of identity, power, politics and social expectations from the lens of a gender, Likewise Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* also quite suitable to explore gender troubles with the help of analysis of major characters, Jairaj, Ratna, Lata and Amritlal Parekh. Through the close examination of their dialogue, actions and their motifs this article tries to explore new insights of gender dynamics in contemporary literary discourse.

Keywords: Tony Kushner, Mahesh Dattani, Gender Dynamics, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed

Introduction

Gender dynamics or gender interplay can be defined as sociocultural defined phenomena of the gender. Gender dynamics mean the sociocultural relationships and interaction between people based on their gender. These gender defined identities are defined by traditional beliefs of society, cultural influences and power structures. The society, culture and power influence behavior and character of the individual personalities in various settings. Judith Butler defines gender roles as socially constructed phenomena that decide how men and women should behave. It is crucial to note that gender dynamics studies are very complex and vary across cultures, societies and countries. Gender dynamics have been continuously facing challenges from the established norms of society. The great empathy is essentially required to understand gender

troubles in relation to gender equality and gender sensitivities to create more harmonious inclusive society.

Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* emphatically presents gender dynamics that radically challenge the established norms of the society. Character interactions in this play fiercely debate social and cultural expectations and influences. Gender roles of masculinity and femininity are overthrown under social pressures in a fluid landscape created by the play wright. The roles of weak feminine Louis, the gay man Prior Walter, the effeminate Belize, a representative of conflicted homosexuality Joe Pitt and power and authority over human sexuality figure Roy Cohn reflect the greater interplay of gender identities in a society grappling with the AIDS crisis in America. The play challenges traditional gender binaries and overthrows gender stereotypes by giving voice and space to the characters to exist authentically and going beyond the expectations, limitations, and hypocrisies of societal norms. The character Roy Cohn always tries to pretend with social hypocrisies in the play. Lauren Berlant, the prominent cultural theorist and queer feminist theorist rightly observed in her book, "On the Inconvenience of other people", "the word "inconvenience" draws attention to how uncomfortable attachment can be when it threatens one's sense of self. a threat that is simultaneously feared and wanted, illustrating the ambivalence of politics and social interactions(Berlant 3)." Her concept of "inconvenience" is quietly true to the nature of Roy Cohn in this play. His role displays complex social connections that exist between identify and power. Roy Cohn bluntly refuses to accept his true identity of homosexuality. Even he warned his doctor Henry not to reveal his disease as AIDS instead to reveal it as liver cancer. He struggles between these identities struggles throughout the play. He fought defense against his true identify as "inconvenience" of emotional vulnerabilities and social expectations. His gender performance becomes a tool in the hands of rigid social power structures.

Similarly, Mahesh Dattani's *Dance Like a Man* severely criticizes the gender roles in traditional Indian society, which is still rigid to change in gender aspects. The central character is Jairaj, a passionate Bharatanatyam dancer whose ambition clashes with fierce patriarchal forces played by Jairaj's father, Amritlal Parekh. Dattani, in the disguise of the character Jairaj, condemns the hypocrisies of social community leaders who appreciate female Bharatanatyam dancers but vehemently avoid male involvement in learning this dance art form. Dattani, himself, and Jairaj in the play firmly believe in art for art sake they won't tolerate societal pressures on artists, either female or male, in the pursuit of art. The constricting gender roles defined by societal norms in pursuing the Bharatanatyam dance art form as a feminine thing that is not allowed to males is the main social debate in this play. Jairaj has been continuously suppressed by his father and even by his wife Ratna to pursue Bharatanatyam dance. The play emphasizes not gender stereotypes defined by society and culture but embracing one's own authentic self. The character Amritlal Parekh is also portrayed like with some shades of Roy Cohn. They are considered social community leaders. Their roles are dignified pretensions in social power structures. They never accept changes to established notions of society. Amritlal also strongly emphasized the notion of Berlant "inconvenience." He vehemently disagreed with his son Jairaj's pursuit of feminine dance, Bharatanatyam. Jairaj's feminine actions related to dance movements and appearance challenge Amritlal's rigid notions of masculinity. His disgust and hatred of Jairaj's pursuit of dance reflect his defensive mechanism to protect his own self-respect, and he tries to protect his son's respect in the eyes of society. He felt greater

inconvenience to convince his son, and his son Jairaj has confronted severe inconvenience from his father and society, which have become hindrances to his ambitions.

Gender dynamics in literature have become an everlasting subject of inquiry in the contemporary world through the interaction of interdisciplinary studies including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and literature. It has gained paramount importance in recent research studies. The various feminist and queer rebellions in recent days have caused revolutionary changes in patriarchal societies. People started to think empathetically about their existence. These movements forced society to overthrow its old, restrictive thinking patterns on gender. Gender is not a fixed or biological construct; rather, it is a fluid and socially constructed negotiated identity. Furthermore, examining gender dynamics in literature provides a distinctive perspective for analyzing more general societal problems and cultural issues. For instance, we can learn about the mechanisms of power, inequality, and discrimination by examining how characters move through gendered environments and gender expectations.

Theoretical Discussion

The burgeoning field of queer phenomenology offers a unique lens through which to examine the construction and performance of identity. Sarah Ahmed's seminal work, *Queer Phenomenology*, is particularly instructive because she posits that bodies navigate space and time along predetermined "lines" that dictate normative behaviors (Ahmed 21).

This theoretical framework is invaluable for exploring the characters and narratives in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. By applying Ahmad's concepts, we can examine how characters are positioned along and against these normative lines in this play. For instance, the play's exploration of hidden homosexuality, AIDS and gender identities challenges the heteronormative and cisnormative lines that frame American society in Reagan era. The major characters in this play experience the marginalization, isolation and resistance from the society. These gender troubles can be seen in serious character interactions between Roy Cohn and his doctor Henry. Roy Cohn vehemently opposes to reveal his true identity of homosexuality. He even warns his doctor Henry that not to reveal his disease as AIDS but rather as liver cancer.

Henry: Roy Cohn.. You are... you have had sex with men, many many times, Roy, and one of them, or any number of them, has made you very sick. You have AIDS.

Roy: AIDS. Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean AIDS, Homosexual, Gay, Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that (AA Scene 9).

The dialogue between Roy and his doctor Henry provides deep insight into the complex interplay of identity, power and denial in the face of a life-changing diagnosis. Roy immediately denies the diagnosis of AIDS won't decide his true identity. He strongly rejects to accept as homosexual person. Roy is a powerful community leader. His general mentality is always to use his power over the situation; he wants to bring under his control. By denying his identity as a homosexual, he is trying to maintain the illusion of his power's invincibility. He is not considered a marginalized gay community by any member of society. The underlying fear and defense mechanism in his words can clearly be seen as he is referring to the strong norms of society. Roy

Cohn's strong reaction highlights the stigma attached to the disease for the LGBTQ community. These conversational exchanges emphasize the power of language to define and erase identities. Roy Cohn's resistance to labels reveals the complexities of self-perception and social classification. He tries to protect his image and status in hypocrite society. This scene is a crucial point in the play, highlighting the cultural and psychological limitations of people faced during the AIDS epidemic. The character Roy Cohn effectively reflects the anxiety and rejection that often accompanies illness among those identified as marginalized members of the LGBT community.

The following conversation between Prior Walter and his friend and former drag queen Belize shows the performative gender roles.

Belize: All this girl-talk shit is politically incorrect, you know. We should have dropped it back when we gave up drag.

Prior: I'm sick, I get to be politically incorrect if it makes me feel better. You sound like Lou.

(Little pause) Well, at least I have the satisfaction of knowing he's in anguish somewhere. I loved his anguish. Watching him stick his head up his asshole and eat his guts out over some relatively minor moral conundrum—it was the best show in town. But Mother warned me: if they get overwhelmed by the little things . . .

Belize: They'll be belly-up bustville when something big comes along. (AA Scene 5)

Belize and Prior Walter's conversation explores gender, identity and performance, highlighting the performative nature of gender and the complexities of identity. Prior Walter's illness allows him to transgress societal norms. The dialogue critiques societal values and expectations, highlighting earlier disillusionment with superficial issues and a disregard for larger societal issues. This dialogue aligns with queer phenomenology by challenging normative gender roles, exploring the body as a site of experience, and examining the social construction of reality through characters' experiences of suffering and transformation, and the limitations of social values.

Next, this theoretical framework is used to comprehend the conflict between traditional ideals and personal ambitions in Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*. A simple conversation between father and son often represents the central conflict of the play in the following excerpt.

JAIRAJ. I can't even have a decent rehearsal in this house.

AMRITLAL. You can't have a decent rehearsal in this house? I can't have some peace and quiet in my house! It's bad enough having had to convert the library into a practice hall for you.

JAIRAJ. Why did you do it if you didn't want to?

AMRITLAL. I thought it was just a fancy of yours. I would have made a cricket pitch for you on our lawn if you were interested in cricket. Well, most boys are interested in cricket, my son is interested in dance, I thought. I didn't realize this interest of yours would turn into an . . . obsession.

JAIRAJ. Didn't you have your obsessions?

AMRITLAL. If you mean my involvement in fighting for your freedom, yes, it was an obsession.

JAIRAJ. You had yours. Now allow me to have mine. (DLM Act I)

The dialogue critiques societal values and expectations, highlighting earlier disillusionment with superficial issues and a disregard for larger societal issues. Representing two different generations with opposing ideals, Amritlal and Jairaj are shown to be at odds with each other throughout the play. Amritlal's notion of a "normal" cricket-playing son fit the patriarchal norms of the day. To meet these expectations, Jairaj challenged the traditional male role. Blaming each other, father and son's obsession with each other reveals a more serious, underlying tension in their relationship. Amritlal's "obsession" with freedom and Jairaj's "obsession" with dance are very different. Throughout the speech, the power dynamics within the family are emphasized. Amritlal initially had the upper hand as he was the father and owner of the property, but Jairaj's stubborn responses indicate that the balance of power had shifted. Queer phenomenology can be used to analyse this discourse in the light of masculinity of bodies.

Jairaj's decision to study dance is a physical protest against the expectations placed on him by his patriarchal society. While Jairaj challenges conventional wisdom, Amritlal speaks for the older generation. This dialogue demonstrates the process of learning and enacting gender roles. Analyzing this situation helps us understand the complex relationship between father and son as well as the social pressures that people who don't fit traditional gender stereotypes must face.

RATNA. I'm human and so are you! So what if you couldn't support your family on your own? You were interested in . . . higher things. Something better than just working for money alone. And since your father had this house and could support us, there was no reason why we couldn't . . .(DLM Act I)

Gender pressure on men is demonstrated by this conversation between a husband and wife. Due to Jairaj's ambition and disagreements with father Amritlal, he and his spouse fled their home and sought refuge with Ratna's uncle. The pair once more chose to return to Amritlal's home since Ratna's uncle was trying to have illicit sex with her. Amritlal and Ratna put pressure on Jairaj this time to abandon the dance. Social normative masculinity is challenged here. Jairaj's decision to study dance calls into question the conventional notion of masculinity. The drama is around his struggle to balance his artistic goals with societal expectations. Jairaj's body turns into a battleground since he wants to express himself through dancing but also has to comply with the masculine ideal. The dialogue shows how both Jairaj and Ratna have internalized gender norms, explaining how gender roles are learned and acted out according to social norms.

Sara Ahmed quoted the text of Ellis in her book "Queer Phenomenology", as it states:

For Ellis, sexual inversion is certainly about the "direction" of what he calls the sexual instinct. As he states: "When the sexual instinct is directed towards persons of the same sex we are in the presence of an aberration variously seen as 'sexual inversion' ... as opposed to normal heterosexuality" (1940: 188).

Ellis views sexual inversion as an aberration, viewing homosexuality as a deviation from the "normal" heterosexual orientation, thereby upholding the heteronormative evaluation of all sexualities. The study highlights the historical pathologization and medicalization of

homosexuality, which contributed to the stigmatization of homosexual desire. Both plays examine societal expected gender roles, which are consistent with the idea of sexual inversion as an abnormality. Heteronormativity imposes binding restrictions that can't be easily overcome by the characters such as Roy Cohn and Amritlal Parekh. The portrayal of sexual inversion as a medical issue aligns with societal beliefs, as seen in *Angels in America*, capturing the cultural context of the time.

Furthermore, Sara Ahmed quotes the text of Judith Butler in her book, as it states:

The naturalization of heterosexuality involves the presumption that there is a straight line that leads each sex toward the othersex, and that “this line of desire” is “in line” with one’s sex. The alignment of sex with orientation goes as follows: being a man would mean desiring a woman, and being a woman would mean desiring a man (Butler 1997b: 23).

According to Butler, the idea of heterosexuality is created as the inevitable and natural transition from one sex to another. This serves to uphold the notion of a binary gender system and the mandatory heterosexuality that frequently goes along with it. The concept suggests that sexual orientation is primarily linked to biological sex, thereby establishing a rigid and restrictive understanding of sexuality. Prior Walter and Jairaj's characters challenge the notion of gender alignment, highlighting the performative nature of gender and the fluidity of sexuality.

Sara Ahmed states that, “The discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go “off line” to reach such objects. To go “off line” is to turn toward “one’s own sex” and away from “the other sex.” To turn away from “the other sex” is also to leave the straight line (71).” Her concept of ‘going off the straight line’ gives a compelling framework for understanding the experiences of Joe Pitt and Louis Ironson in the play AA. The play genuinely explores the complexities of queer desires and identities. It challenges the heteronormative restrictions of a straight-line progression from one sex to another. Joe Pitt frightened about his marriage to Harper put societal pressure on him to conform to the straight line path. Though he was in straight path yet he finally fell in love with Louis. This ‘going off the line’ is adopted by Joe Pitt with guilt, confusion and condemnation, as evidenced by his character’s journey throughout the play. Louis Ironson, on the other hand, approached sexuality and same-sex sensitivities in a more flexible manner. He challenges the conventional wisdom of a set sexual orientation through his encounters with males. His persona eloquently conveys LGBT aspirations that are not limited to a binary framework but instead can require a diverse array of experiences and relationships. The play genuinely explores the complexities of queer desire, focusing on the relationship between Joe Pitt and Louis Ironson, who deviate from the expected heterosexual trajectory. Through Sara Ahmed's concept, the play breaks the rigid social categories and affirms the diversity of human experience.

Then coming to Michel Foucault’s theoretical application, he states in his book *Care of the Self*, Human Sexuality, Volume 3:

Artemidorus almost always has them figure on the side of the "signifiers," and almost never on the side of the "signified." They are images and not meanings, representation and not represented event.... It is apparent at a glance that Artemidorus' interpretation quite regularly discovers a social signification in sexual dreams. True, it sometimes

happens that these dreams forecast an abrupt change in the state of one's health-an illness or a recovery-and it happens, too, that they are signs of death (26-27).

According to Foucault, dreams usually reflect the social and personal fates of the dreamer rather than just the dreamer's imagination. This has a lot to do with Prior's personality. Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* revolves around Prior Walter, a guy who undergoes a sequence of visions and dreams that are predictive and go beyond ordinary dreams. According to Michel Foucault's suggestion in *The Care of the Self*, these visionary experiences might be understood as social signifiers that both predict and reflect larger cultural and political changes, rather than just being subjective projections. The drama revolves around Prior's prophetic dreams, which provide future insights, mirror societal worries, and eventually determine his own course. According to Foucault, dreams frequently have social and cultural connotations. The position of the dreamer in society is reflected in such dreams. The dreamer is positioned as an actor under the direction of socially prescribed norms, much like a performance on a stage. The actors' or performers' future societal roles are defined or hinted at in these dreams. Additionally, Prior's participation in the play is related to Foucault's emphasis on the dreamer as an 'actor on the sexual stage'. Prior, as a two shade character who represents both victim and prophet, negotiates a difficult interaction between internal and external factors. That is accurate to the *Angels in America* play, Prior had dream-like glimpses of his illness, demise, and future.

Prior's dreams represent the hopes and fears of the LGBT community throughout the AIDS crisis, acting as a collective voice in addition to being purely personal visions. His visions foreshadow historical occurrences like Reagan's ascent to power and the political atmosphere of the time. This is consistent with Foucault's theory that dreams convey social significance. Prior's developing prophetic identity is influenced by his dreams. They influence how he views himself and his place in the world. Hence Prior Walter's visions become more than mere self-fulfilling dreams according to Foucault's lense of dream perception. These are narratives with a social embeddedness that both foresee and subvert the prevailing power structures of their contemporary days of America. Kushner presents a potent indictment of US society and a potential future by casting Prior Walter as a dream-prophet.

Further Michel Foucault states in his book *Confessions of the Flesh Human Sexuality Volume 4*:

The life of individuals, in what it may have that's private, quotidian, and singular, thus became an object, if not of a takeover, at least of a concern and a vigilance that were doubtless unlike those of the Hellenistic city-states or those exercised by the first Christian communities (220-221).

According to Michel Foucault, there has been a substantial change in the way people are viewed and treated in contemporary cultures as opposed to past eras such as the Hellenistic city-states or the early Christian communities. That is also true to traditional and modern Indian communities. Life used to be primarily focused on the community or group in the past historical days. However, modernism also brought more focus on the individual. Even the most private, ordinary, and unique aspects of peoples' life in the modern era are scrutinized and questioned. Even while it's not referred to as a "takeover," there are signs of increased outside observation and control over private life. This suggests that institutions or systems that monitor and influence people's behavior should be established. According to Foucault, a new kind of authority is emerging in contemporary civilizations. This power uses subtle processes of observation,

classification, and normalization rather than overt repression. There has been a change in social control from physical to more widespread. In essence, Foucault is contending that although the modern individual appears to be more autonomous, they are also exposed to novel kinds of observation and impact.

This Foucault's conceptual lens can be truthfully applicable to Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man*. The characters Amritlal and Jairaj represent rigid structural past social life and free rebellious contemporary life. Amritlal is the first generation principled man who fought for Indian independence and spent his life for the social cause. Amritlal is a living example of an earlier generation's principles. His life is based on social norms and tradition. Even while he may not be under as much overt surveillance as people in later contemporary eras, the expectations and social conventions of his day have a big impact on his life. Rather than adopting a strictly individualistic viewpoint, his decisions, from his work to his son's upbringing, are informed by a community ethic. His understanding is limited to the society of heterosexual gender roles. He would find it difficult for guys to act like women, thus he could not stand it when his son pursued learning dance, which is, in his opinion, a female art form.

Jairaj is an exemplary character for individual freedom that represent contemporary modern world. Jairaj, on the other hand, symbolizes a turn toward a more independent way of thinking. His quest for Bharatanatyam is an act of defiance against the conventional roles that have been placed upon him. He defies the expectations and conventions of society, which is indicative of the growing emphasis that contemporary society places on individual fulfillment and self-expression. Even Jairaj, meanwhile, is not immune to social forces completely. He ultimately reaches a compromise because he wants his father to approve of him, which shows that the group is still having an impact on him.

Foucault's observation that modern individuals become objects of "concern and vigilance" is particularly relevant to the character of Jairaj. Even though Jairaj is not exposed to the overt monitoring techniques of later modernity, social expectations and opinions have a significant impact on his existence. His decision to study the traditionally female art discipline of Bharatanatyam places him outside the bounds of conventional masculinity. Because of this divergence, his family and community are watching him closely and are concerned about him. His behavior is continuously analyzed and discussed, which reflects the growing demand on people to live up to social norms.

Thus, Dattani's play sheds light on the intricacies of personal action in a dynamic social environment. Even though Jairaj epitomizes the modern individual who seeks to forge his own path, the pressures of tradition and social expectations continue to limit him. Even if he is unyielding to change, Amritlal is a product of his period, moulded by a slowly vanishing social morality. The conflict between these two generations is a reflection of the larger shifts in society that Foucault pointed out. The play makes the argument that although people may now have more freedom to follow their dreams, they also have more pressure to live up to society expectations and norms. Despite appearing free, the person is still caught up in a complicated web of power dynamics.

Conclusion

This analysis has explored the complex interplay of identity, power, and society through the lenses of queer phenomenology and gender roles. It is clearly evident that how Roy Cohn, Prior

Walter, Amritlal Parekh, and Jairaj handle the conflict between their own aspirations and those of society by analyzing their respective personas. The idea of "inconvenience," as defined by Lauren Berlant has proven to be crucial in comprehending the unease and opposition resulting from difficulties with conventional gender and sexual identities. Sara Ahmed's notion of "going off the straight line" offered a valuable framework for analyzing the experiences of characters who deviate from heteronormative expectations. By examining how these characters resist and subvert dominant narratives, we have highlighted the performative nature of identity and the fluidity of sexual desire. Michel Foucault's theories of power and surveillance provided a historical and sociological context for understanding the characters' experiences. Amritlal and Jairaj exemplify the shift from a more collective, tradition-bound society to a more individualistic, yet still socially regulated, modern world. It is demonstrated through this comparative analysis that the plays *Angels in America* and *Dance Like a Man* give the rich tapestry for exploring the complexities of gender identities and the impact of social structures on individual lives. Hence this research emphasizes how critical it is to keep examining the ways in which society, power, and identity interact to shape the human experience.

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