

Challenging Masculine Norms: A Psychological Study of Stereotypical Gender Conflicts in Classical Dance and the Positive Transformation through Dance in Anmol Arora's Novel, *the Last Dance*

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Abstract

In India, classical dance is often identified as a woman-centered profession. Society often criticizes men who choose classical dance and then name them effeminate and gay. Dance is so far considered as entertainment, but Anmol Arora's *The Last Dance* mainly explores creative approaches to Indian classical dance in treating the psychological pain of men for being a classical dancer. The novel depicts the impacts of conventional masculine traits in India and the mode of resistance in Indian classical dance through the leading character, Chandrasekar. The protagonist, Chandrasekar, strives to revamp the stereotypes and sustains in his profession despite all the humiliation and psychological pain in his life. Eventually, he breaks stereotypical gender ideas of society on Indian classical dance and attains the pinnacle of success as a male classical dancer with the help of dance. The purpose of this study is to manifest the therapeutic value of Indian classical dance and to understand the diplomatic public notion that dancing is viewed as an "effeminate and suspect activity for a male body" (Migdalek, 2015, p.76) and how Chandrasekar changes this view. Based on the thematic analysis, the Masculinity of Chandrasekar is analysed through the lens of psychology.

Keywords: Masculinities, Gender stereotypes, Toxic, Hegemony, Classical dance, Resistance.

1. Introduction

Hinduism places a strong emphasis on dance in a variety of settings, mythological tales, and historical eras. Once, dance and dancers received high social status in Hindu society for enhancing people's lives. In Hindu culture, dancers help people lead their lives ethically and morally. They used to narrate myths and legends through dance forms. However, after some decades, social changes, stereotypical perspectives, and social stigmas against dancers caused those to lose their identity. As a result, people are not fully aware of the benefits of Indian classical dance forms. Hence, the study focuses on classical dancers to highlight our tradition's importance and address the conflicts faced by dancers in India. Some researchers and theorists have experimented with dance therapy to analyze how dance can heal the psychological pain of victims. However, both male and female Indian classical dancers are facing social stigmas. Notably, men are treated as effeminate in society, but some of the dancers have shared their experiences on how dance helped them overcome psychological pain. Anmol Arora brings out these issues in his novel "*The Last Dance*," after interviewing many dancers. Thus, the study focuses on male dancers' conflicts and their modes of resistance.

The term "gender" is used to refer to the distinctions between individuals based on their sex, men and women, such as roles, norms, and expressions constructed by society. Whereas masculine and feminine traits are fixed by society for practice and to sustain in their community. In such a case, Masculinity in India has an expansive range of ideas which are supposed to define certain rules and roles for men. Every individual in this society wants to be identified within the family, profession, and culture, and it is a complex task for both men and women in the world to fit themselves under the social construction to gain social status. Society imposes certain common traits on men and women, but they fail to realize that these fixed notions can be ambiguous when set under pressure. Particularly in the case of India, gender status becomes a stereotypical practice in society, constructed by the interference of different religions and cultural ethos. Virginia Woolf strongly describes in her essay "*A Room of One's Own*," "it

is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so." One's personality and identity often start to take shape with gender. They are developed based on whether individuals conform to established gender norms or find it challenging to relate to them. However, these gender ideals not only impact one's personality and behavior but also imply limitations on the development of the entire potential of human beings (Matud, 2019). Moreover, this inability is further assumed to lead to "failure for men to achieve a masculine gender role identity," resulting in attitudes like homosexuality, negativity towards women, or defensive hypermasculinity (Levant, 2009). The socially constructed gender norms are clearly divided into binary opposites such as strong-weak, dominant-submissive, logical-emotional, and provider-receiver, corresponding to men-women.

2. Literature Review

According to David and Brannon (1976), traditional masculinity ideology consists of a few components, including the belief that men should not exhibit feminine traits and vice versa. Masculine traits are broadly classified as including virility, the ability to defend the honor of one's family and women, and the capability to safeguard group boundaries and resources (Yim, 2006).

However, according to Carl Jung's concept of Anima and Animus, the coexistence of femininity in Masculinity and Masculinity in femininity is inevitable. As a result, the line between these binary opposite ideologies becomes blurred. Through her review of existing theories, Anne Constantinople has invalidated the polarized concept of femininity and Masculinity (Smiler, 2004). The deconstruction of this binary opposition arises from the sociological understanding that men's life opportunities and social experiences systematically differ from women's. When dance comes into the picture, gender perceptions become more complicated to break in society. It indirectly forces women and men to accept stereotypical beliefs, where men are perceived as dominant and women as submissive. These norms and ideologies of gender become ingrained in people's minds to create and sustain their identities in society. These shared beliefs are widespread among Indians, making India a patriarchal society for the past three decades.

3. Methodology

The study used thematic analysis of qualitative data from Anmol Arora's *The Last Dance* to examine the long-term impacts of abusive experiences of classical dancers, particularly Chandrasekar, and the traumatic effects in their lives and the hardships of coping with the challenges of their existence. In order to identify the themes that arose from the protagonist's traumatic and abusive experience and how it affected his dance career, the necessary steps must be taken. It is essential that the meaning of the text not be altered, no new information, sentences, or paragraphs be added, and no significant information be removed. The formality style used in the original text must be maintained in the rewrite. This research scrutinizes an inexplicable shame faced by male classical dancers from the perspective of masculinity studies, a type of qualitative research that focuses on how dancers make sense of their experiences. Furthermore, the prime aim of this Masculinity study not only sheds light on the profound shame that the male dancers faced but also illuminates their lives through the significant hard work of dance by which they get relieved from the pain of psychological, physical, and societal stigmas.

4. Psychology and Masculinity

Masculinity is a socially constructed concept of the prime characteristics that define a man. The term is often associated with a man's physical appearance and intrinsic qualities such as strength, power, etc. There is a binary opposition of men being considered the breadwinner, the leader of a family, and a leading figure, and women being at home, nurturing and taking care of the family. The "inter correlated personality traits and role behaviours" (Orlofsky, 1981) defining femininity and Masculinity have always been socially and hegemonically constructed. According to Spence and Helmreich, Clusters of socially desirable attributes traditionally associated with masculine and feminine personalities. (1978, p. 3). Being at the center, men have historically enjoyed the privilege of deciding who belongs to the periphery. These stereotypical gender roles and societal norms are being reconstructed and deconstructed in modern society. Prominence and achievement have been considered significant as far as masculine traits are concerned. From when men were hunter-gatherers, succeeding and being victorious have been very important to prove their manliness. If a man fails, he is not considered man enough. So,

failure is something that every man fears. This "fear of failure and social self-esteem" (Orlofsky, 1981) has been deeply ingrained in the psyche of men and passed on from generation to generation.

Having the privilege and power in society, men have portrayed their dominant world, where women have been the relative beings. Culture, religion, literature, and society are examples of Androcentric and Patriarchy. However, Masculinity, in-turn, is a by-product of patriarchy. Culture serves as a tool to transfer such gender-oriented ideologies throughout various generations.

This tends to examine men, Masculinity in Indian classical dance and their conditions, and challenges they face in their profession because men are becoming more interested in the formal economy and less interested in arts as global capitalism intensifies. This paper aims to analyze the disjunctions, ruptures, and problems in Indian classical dance practice. Men restrict themselves to classical dance, and so classical dance becomes female arenas. In addition, it is an essential modality to study male dancers and their plights in society, by which people understand and rethink Masculinity instead of judging them under stereotypical perceptions.

5. Men in Indian Classical Dance

Literature has focused adequately on the conflicts of multiple societies and communities. It has explored the issues faced by dancers, the backbone of our Indian tradition and culture. The researches such as gender identity, identity crisis, psychoanalytical studies, feminist studies, and masculinity studies focus less on Indian classical dancers and their conflicts. Edrie Ferdun summarizes, Many people in our society associate the term 'dance' with femininity and female qualities. This cultural label can hinder dance's potential as an effective educational tool, as it discourages participation from individuals who do not want to be associated with gender stereotypes and practices. It is important to recognize that dance is a form of expression that can be enjoyed by people of any gender. (Ferdun, 1994, p. 46)

Dance and training have long been associated with gender and gender roles in world culture (Kraus et al., 1991; Sanderson, 1996; Posey, 2002; Stinson, 2005). Dance is an art of life, giving vivid and different feelings through movements. Specifically, Indian classical dance forms bring the knowledge of people through myths and legends by enacting the different emotions and psychology of the characters. In her work, *To Dance Is Human* (Hanna, 1979), she clearly explores how dance has an essential position in human life, examining the meaning of dance in action. Classical dance forms in India remain a typical stage for both men and women. However, the gender stereotypes corrupt the mentality of people to believe classical dance is meant only for women and not for men. Many dancers regret that society does not like to admire a man on the stage. So, male classical dancers gradually hesitate to perform and seek female classical dancers to support them on stage.

Kiran Subramanian a, male classical dancer expressed his experience in *Time of India* that how he has been treated: "Not many people liked me taking dance as a profession. My friends and relatives literally moved away from me. They thought it was below the dignity of a man to put on makeup and dance. They didn't want to be known as the friends or relatives of a dancer. As much as it hurt me, it created an aggression to prove my best and I took it up seriously." (Sangeetha, sep18, 2018)

It is clear that society has the wrong perception and tries to fit into stereotypes simultaneously. For decades, male classical dancers have proved that any man can be attractive and complete with tenderness and compassion. Though they are against the stereotypical masculine traits, they still survive in dance and sustain their masculine construction. Therefore, the study gives more impetus to find how men in dance resist social stigmas and construct their identity in society. The contributions by Connell (1995), Emig & Rowland (2010), Tarrant (2008), and Haywood et al. (2018) have all enhanced the masculinity studies in literature that identify performances and embodiment as crucial components to understanding men's experiences of Masculinity.

Masculine traits should be constructed by individuals depending on their convenience. Anmol Arora has displayed this in his work *The Last Dance*, through the male protagonist Chandrasekhar who struggles at the maximum when he tries to construct his masculine traits at his convenience, and he does not give up his classical dance but suffers silently. Society has to rethink masculinity traits without influencing gender perceptions. Gender identity is understanding the differences between genders, not forcing or imposing societal ideas. Therefore, clearly understanding Masculinity, particularly in the classical dance of India, is significant.

Recent research has focused on men and masculinities to expose male dancers' emotional problems and mental stress due to gender stereotypes. Especially male classical dancers in India struggle to survive in society due to these stereotypical notions of masculine traits. However, they declined this practice, managed with this mechanical stress, and sustained it in their profession until now. Ramsay Burt (1995) provides a solid explanation of masculine representation in dance, particularly the present construction of unfairness is that the male dancers in India today continuously involve homophobia as gay or effeminate in dance. This constant pressure leads them to psychological pain, but they never try to give up their dance. According to dance movement therapy, dance can treat traumatic and psychological pain to recover. Hence, dancers indirectly gain these benefits from being a dancer. Dance helps them to recover from the psychological pain and failure through the pleasure of dance. It helps them indirectly.

In the magazine *Hindustan Times*, the famous contemporary male dancer, Akram shared his experience of how he was treated in society by his own family when he chose dance as a career. "Award-winning British-Bangladeshi dancer-choreographer Akram Khan unfortunately had no option but to face gender and sexuality issues head on when he started dancing." (Gupta, Madhur) The protagonist Chandrasekar in Arora's novel *The Last Dance* declines this notion and how he resists these social stigmas of the society on men and Masculinity. This study also tries to analyze the obstacles that are encountered by the protagonist Chandrasekar and how he copes with his psychological conflicts. Finally, he succeeds while revolting against all the impediments that he faced for being a male classical dancer with the help of dance. Dance is his passion, which drags him towards his dream to achieve. In another aspect, some of the research and experiments on DMT (Dance Movement Therapy) explore that dance can treat psychological pain, traumatic experiences, and some neurotic diseases. So, dance only helps the protagonist to overcome the pain that he undergoes.

As Rowney Connell says (Connell et al., 2005) Gender practices have a significant impact on how individuals experience their bodies, personalities, and cultural identities. These practices shape the perceptions and behaviors of both men and women, influencing their interactions with one another and with broader societal norms. It is crucial to understand the complex ways in which gender practices operate in order to promote more equitable and just social relations. By examining the various ways in which gender is constructed and reinforced, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and respectful society for all individuals.

Chandrasekar resists the stereotypical gender traits.

Anmol Arora is a contemporary writer whose novel is a new arrival in the field of Indian writing, and his novel portrays the classical concerns that bring out the conflicts of men in dance. Arora aims to highlight male dancers' strong ambition in classical dance against all the obstacles. In India, male classical dancers are not given due recognition compared to female dancers. Male classical dancers face humiliation and psychological problems due to social stigmas. Society calls them Effeminate boys and rejects them in marriage platforms due to these wrong notions of masculine traits. Therefore, the author in his novel *The Last Dance* narrates the sufferings and discrimination of men through the central character, Chandrasekar.

From the earlier research, it is clear that the male classical dancers and their life learning experiences are very much negligible; whatever we know about them brings concern that is linked to dominant ideas of Masculinity, that is, pervasive homophobia, and boys are neglected and face harassment (Gold, 2001; Patrick, 2001; Williams, 2003). In Anmol Arora's novel, Chandrasekar feels the utmost social isolation and has never met his basic needs. Lack of social support and unenthusiastic bitter experiences made Chandrasekar persevere and stay strong in his dance profession.

Williams states that "social isolation and a lack of same-gender peers/teachers in the dance environment, a need to talk about issues but not having a supportive person to talk with, in some cases, having family members who did not support or discouraged their desire to dance, a need to keep their dance life a secret from academic peers, fear of or actual teasing and harassment by peers, perceptions of homosexuality regardless of the dancer's sexual orientation, teachers, parents, and directors attempting to justify dance activities by relating them to sports." (p. 57)

Chandrasekar has encountered all the problems at an extreme level in his dancing career, similar to what Williams states about male dancers' condition.

The novel begins significantly by discussing the impact of gender construction and the sufferings of a classical dancer. It also focuses on how they break the obstacles of gender bias. Chandrasekar is a classical dancer who grew up in a wealthy family. His father is a renowned classical dancer yet consistently restricts him from Delhi. However, against his father's warning sign, he starts a dance school without his father's permission. Though Chandrasekar's father is a famous dancer in his native, he is still scared about the shame that he faced and will not be faced by his son when he plans to go to Delhi. Because his father feels insecure about his son, they may humiliate him, and it is the most challenging to survive as a male classical dancer in a strange place without his influence. "They are loud, brutish, lack etiquette, and have no sense of culture. Go to Kolkata if you must. at least, they appreciate art and culture." (Arora, 2019, p. 20). The above lines define that Chandrasekar's father has insecure feelings about his plan to go to Delhi. Chandrasekar's words reveal the reflection and impact of the social stigmas he experienced in his life as a male classical dancer. However, Chandrasekar continues his voyage to Delhi to begin a classical dance school. Later, when the people know that he is a male classical dancer, it becomes difficult to get a single room to stay. Society thinks classical dance is a less intriguing career, more than that the lady whom he approaches to get a room for rental says, "Are you in love with a flexible dancer? Asked a middle-aged Punjabi landlady with a booming laugh when I told her I was a dance teacher. What are your plans for marriage?" (pg.37). Chandrasekar replied, "I am not interested in starting a family. I want to focus on building my dance school first." (pg.37) again the lady owner commented "Nonsense! Are you a homo?" (pg.37).

This woman's attitude shows her deeply rooted in the stereotypical perspectives on gender. Most people think that a flexible body is meant only for women. Therefore, they humiliate and insult male classical dancers when their body naturally becomes flexible due to their dance forms and style. In this novel, Chandrasekar does not want to follow these stereotypes even when society ill-treats him as an effeminate boy for being a male classical dancer and he struggles a lot to attain his goal as a dancer. Devadasis of Hindu temples enhances classical dance so people consider it a feminine platform. This wrong notion makes people tease and oppose men who choose classical dance. In most of the places, male classical dancers are marginalized by society. It is visible through the male protagonist, Chandrasekar, in this novel. He says, "Single man like me were considered miscreants and notorious. We were treated with more suspicion and hostility than, perhaps, terrorists." (pg.38) Anmol vividly shows the psychological pain through Chandrasekar and how this society treats a man involved in classical dance.

Society should rethink these stereotypical thoughts. Moreover, Man has to develop his identity based on his interests and expertise. Although society is skeptical about some gender construction, it still forces people to follow it. In the novel, both men and women are constrained by certain social circles or expectations, which are thoroughly explored through the protagonist's experiences, Chandrasekar. He is portrayed as the male protagonist and one of the finest male classical dancers. Despite facing mistreatment and societal prejudices, Chandrasekar remains steadfast in his passion for dance and refuses to give up.

According to Wainright and Turner (2006: 242), training the body can increase a person's physical capital. This includes four main aspects: speed, strength, stamina, and suppleness, which collectively make up what is known as 'athletic physical capital'. Without discipline, a classical dancer cannot achieve the necessary 'attack' (sharp, clean, and incisive movement) required for style and effect.

Arora projects Chandrasekar as a stubborn character who breaks these assigned gender stereotypes whenever society humiliates him for being a male classical dancer. People often suspect male dancers' manliness since most of them carry feminine traits, which are socially constructed. It is pretty challenging to scrutinize the traits of gender. Everyone is unique, and People should construct their gender traits in their comfort zone, not by the force of cultural or social practice. Otherwise, it leads to mental depression and psychological problems. Many individuals are dissatisfied with their bodies when they do not conform to the internalized ideals of their gender (Grogan, 2010, p.760). Particularly in classical dance, it is too difficult to get married to a man who chooses classical dance as his profession. Therefore, Anmol Arora emphasizes the impact of gender stereotypes in his novel, *The Last Dance*, and explores how this social practice of gender affects male dancers.

In the magazine *Very Well Mind*, Mack Exilus, a mental health clinician, states, "One thing I have seen with men with anger issues and violent paths is that these are behaviors that are learned. Many times that violence or that anger is a way to protect vulnerability." (Sheppard, Sarrah) These learned characteristics of manliness become toxic pressure for men when they follow directly or indirectly and become a cause for violence and sexual abuse in society. Men rarely get their space to express or accept their vulnerability. Often, society fails to consider the emotions and feelings of classical dancers.

Dance is a mode of resistance.

Anmol Arora presents this pain through the male protagonist Chandrasekar when the entire family of his beloved stands against his love for being a dancer. When Chandrasekar falls in love and tries to marry his girlfriend, her family feels insecure about this profession and suspects his manliness due to traditional gender construction. "A dance teacher?" her mother asked. That is not a man's job. What do we tell the khap panchayat? That your husband wears ankle bells to work every morning?" (Arora, 248). Though his heart breaks and he leaves his dance school at first, Chandrasekar receives a huge inspiration only from dance. When we go back to history, it is clear that those who learned classical dance never gave up their dance in any case or situation. Birju Maharaj, Mayadhar Raut, and Mohan Khokar so he could break all his barriers and construct his own identity.

The impacts of gender stereotypes affect Chandrasekar. However, he energetically overcomes this stigma through his untiring dance. Though he struggles a lot, he never gives up his dance and realizes that only classical dance helps him overcome his psychological pain: "I decided to prove them wrong. Dance could change lives. I was going to show them how" (Arora, 249). Anmol Arora weaves his story on Masculinity in dance and figures out both pain and remedy for the pressure of traditional gender traits. He explicitly expressed the social rule of Masculinity and society's expectations for being a male dancer. The author challenges the misconceptions of Masculinity in society while choosing male dancers in classical dance in Indian society. The protagonist lost his beloved and gender identity since he chose dance as a profession. It is a wrong stereotypical belief that the one who chooses classical dance as a loving career will struggle to survive in society. There are Indian classical dancers like Dananjayan, Birju Maharaj, and Myadhar Raut who changed their painful experiences into success. Similarly, the protagonist in this novel uses dance as a medium and turns all his loss, anger, and frustration into effective use of dance to achieve his determined success.

6. Conclusion

Anmol Arora narrated the novel while focusing the lights on both sides of the dancer's life. The novel proves how dance transforms dancers into stubborn and positive to attain success instead of losing their hope and identity. Social stigmas on male classical dancers are not new in Indian society; the continuous pressure frustrates them. Some male classical dancers have given up their dance due to these stereotypical social pressures. Conversely, marginalized dancers try to fit them under the stereotypical masculine traits, and the disruptive nature of cultural resistance is strongly depicted. Therefore, young male dancers must have the courage to study classical dance and take it up as a career. Chandrasekar experiences another complexity: the marginalization of being considered sub-human. Society should acknowledge that the extreme disparagement pushed him to maintain and challenge his individualism, independence, emotional detachment, and daring. Finally, Chandrasekhar overcomes all his barriers and transforms his negative emotions with the help of dance. After a short detachment from his dancing career, he finds self-satisfaction and healing can be found only in his Dance profession.

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