
Gendered Social Fabric and Identity Crisis in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract

The history of Indian English Drama demonstrates the presence of individual talents and sporadic theatrical activity. The roots of the theatre in Indian Society are certainly very old and deep. Although plays about women have existed since the origin of drama yet feminist drama emerged as a theatrical genre in the sixties bringing the burning issues of gender discrimination as well as the tortures inflicted on the female. *Tara* is the tragedy of a feisty girl who falls a prey to the gender disparity prevalent in the Indian society and thereafter proves her mettle in the world of male supremacy. Tara is an ideal character of Mahesh Dattani which has been widely applauded by the audience and the readers alike. Dattani has tried to depict the feminine side which always has to come to terms with the society that favours only male viewpoint in a male-dominated world. The playwright is concerned not only with the issue of gender discrimination in Indian society but also with the contribution of the female to the injustice towards women. Throughout the play, Dattani shows his audience the difference between sex and gender indicating that women don't have their own status and identity in the society. The play effectively belies all the propogandas of equality between male and female.

Keywords- *Chauvinism, Crippled, Deformity, Discrimination, Equality, Frustrated*

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Introduction

The history of Indian English Drama demonstrates the presence of individual talents and sporadic theatrical activity. With its long span of more than 2000 years, it has its distinct place in the scenario of world literature today. *Natyashastra* in Sanskrit by the sage Bharata manifests the inclination of the Indian mind towards the art of great drama in our country. The roots of the theatre in Indian Society are certainly very old and deep. Broadly speaking, we can say that for a few centuries theatre formed a part of the life of common people as ritualistic music and dance, story-telling and tableaux on festive occasions. Although plays about women have existed since the origin of drama yet feminist drama emerged as a theatrical genre in the sixties bringing the burning issues of gender discrimination as well as the tortures inflicted on the female. A versatile playwright of world stature, Mahesh Dattani (1958–) has been universally acclaimed as one of the authentic voices whose plays are rooted in day to day urban experience. As a unique and prominent Indian dramatist in English, Dattani has roots in the theatre, acting and directing plays and getting involved in productions, while other dramatists hardly have such experience. It is he who believes that the actor, the playwright and the director are all complementary to one another in a production. Hailed as one of the "most serious contemporary playwrights" by the giant theatre figure Alyque Padamsee, Mahesh Dattani is India's first dramatist to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to the world of drama. India's *avante garde* dramatist, accomplished screenplay writer, actor, dancer and teacher – all rolled into one, Dattani's international acclaim rests on his writing credentials which include plays like *Where There's a Will*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Almost all his plays which are usually based in Bangalore and peopled with Gujrati characters, showcase the hollowness of middle-class life, gender identity and construction, the pressure of the past, and the family as a battlefield with uneasy alliances to stifle all natural instincts and inclinations, to suppress and oppress, and to curb the essential freedom and growth. Dattani bears life to the bone, dealing with gender issues. He is a spokesperson of all the marginalized people as every individual wants to be a part of society, of the mainstream he is born in. His plays reveal the essential loneliness of his characters and the emotional price they pay in their quest for successful appearances, in their need to belong. What Dattani wishes to convey is that if family life is oppressive, it is mainly due to the operation of patriarchy embodied in the figures of the fathers and other males in the family fold. We have Hasmukh Mehta who does not think his son Ajit manly enough in *Where There's a Will*, Amritlal does not think dancing is for men in *Dance Like a Man* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* foregrounds this whole issue with its very title as our attention is immediately focused on the supposed manliness of the queen and all this leads to Dattani's concern towards gender identity. How are men and women constructed in terms of gender? What are the

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definitions of their roles and how meaningful are these definitions? Why should the bravery of a queen make her manly? Why can't Chandan, in Tara, knit, and why his sister Tara can't go to his office? Why should a man who wants to dance Bharatanatyam be branded as an effeminate? What is manly and what feminine and why should it be so? Why should men be masterly and women subservient? Why can't men and women be thoroughly open about their sexuality? Dattani raises these and a host of other questions regarding gender equality, social stratification and hierarchy.

Tara is a landmark in the history of Indian drama in English. It is the tragedy of a feisty girl who falls a prey to the gender disparity prevalent in the Indian society and thereafter proves her mettle in the world of male supremacy. The play revolves around the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, their parents Bharati and Patel, and Roopa, Tara's friend in the neighborhood. Mrs. Bharati gives birth to twins—a son and a daughter joined together at the hip and having three legs – and they are separated surgically. A scan showed that a major part of a blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl and chances were better that the leg would survive on the girl. But a decision taken by Mrs. Patel and her politically influential father, compelled the surgeon, Dr. Thakkar, to take an unethical step of giving two legs to the boy. The conspiracy was the master plan of Bharati's father, who being rich and influential in the society, badly needed an heir and as he was without son, his grandson was the next preference and hence he tried his best to see his heir standing on two natural legs. However, leg failed to draw blood from his body and, as a result, Chandan had two legs only for two days and after that the leg was amputated and both the twins had to depend on one artificial leg each. Chandan shifts to London and changes his name as Dan. He escapes there mainly to put distance between him and his past. He tries to repress the guilt in the changed environment, far away from home. He has left home, but home is not lost. He fails to forget Tara emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Chandan feels that she lies dormant in the depth of his mind from where she cannot be removed. Here we are reminded of Tars's assertion in the play: “And me, maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out And separated”. (325)

The play reveals trauma, anguish and frustration caused to Dan by past events. He tries to write a play *Twinkle Tara* on the life of his twin sister but fails to write anything as he is not properly charged to recall the past incidents and removes the sheet from the type writer. Frustrated and desperate Dan utters, “My progress so far – I must admit has been zero All I find every day is a typewritten sheet ... with the title of the play ... my address, and the date. Nothing changes, except the date”. Dan accepts that Tara deserves something better in life. He exclusively confirms:

She never gets a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. Maybe God never wanted us to be separated. Destiny desires strange things. We were meant to die and

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our mortal remains preserved in formaldehyde for future generations to study. Our purpose in life was may be that. Only that. But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life. A duel to the death between God and nature on one side and on the other – the amazing Dr.Thakkar. (330)

Tara is an ideal character of Mahesh Dattani which has been widely applauded by the audience and the readers alike. Dattani has tried to depict the feminine side which always has to come to terms with the society that favours only male viewpoint in a male-dominated world. The gender crisis gives rise to identity crisis, particularly among the women folk. With all her strength of character despite her physical deformity, Tara badly needs moral support from her parents and brother. When she feels that she is denied moral support, she loses interest in life. She suffers from an identity crisis and searches for a positive role in life:

I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those ... starving naked millions everyone is talking about. Maybe I can start an institution that will ... do all that. Or I could join Mother Teresa and sacrifice myself to a great cause. That may give purpose to my ... existence. I can do it I will be very happy if I could, because that is really what I want. (370)

The play is evident enough to confirm male chauvinism prevalent in the male-dominated society which claims to be liberal and advanced in its thought and action. A true picture of the Patel household is revealed. A typical Indian scene in which men go out for work and women stay at home, observing rituals and taking care of the household, comes out. Dattani makes full use of such a scene, highlighting the gender-based discrimination in Indian society. We see the husband and wife quarrel and the husband say bitterly that her father's money has always been Bharati's strength against him. Here Patel is getting ready for his office and proposes Chandan should go to the office with him, just to get a feel of it. Chandan says that he must better take Tara with him but Patel hardly pays heed to his son's advice and Tara looks slightly hurt. Roopa is seen listening at the door and she enters in the middle of the conversation. Tara remarks that the “men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while women looked after the cave”. (328)

Dattani is concerned not only with the issue of gender discrimination in Indian society but also with the contribution of the female to the injustice towards women. Tara is shocked to know that it was not her father but her mother Bharati who discriminated between herself and her brother Chandan from the age of three months when Bharti insisted on giving the third leg to her brother which rather suited her more. The secret about the twins is revealed by Patel and this revelation was too much to digest. Tara only exclaims about her mother, “And she called me her star!” (379) These are the last words that Tara utters in the play. It must have been so shocking for her that she can

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hardly tolerate this truth. All her love for her mother crumbles as her deceitful nature is exposed. It is supposed that Tara's frustration caused by the revelation of her mother's role to her misfortune and her posed love for her harnessed Tara's death.

Throughout the play, Dattani shows his audience the difference between sex and gender indicating that women don't have their own status and identity in the society. The play effectively belies all the propagandas of equality between male and female. When science was not so advanced, baby girls were murdered just after their birth. Roopa, Tara's neighbor in Bombay, explains to Tara how the Patels would drown their new born girl child in bowls of milk: "Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies – you know dowry and things like that – so they used to drown them in milk. So when people asked them how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk". (349)

Dattani takes every care to project Tara as a young girl full of potential and succeeds in showing how her potential was sacrificed on the altar of gender. His role is to reveal and expose the gender bias in its most bitter and heinous form. As Tanu Pant observes, “

Tara is not just the story of the protagonist of the play Tara, but it is the story of every girl child born in the Indian family whether urban or rural. The situation is aggravated if the girl is physically challenged or there is any other physical or mental deformity in her. It is a bitter example of child abuse present in the Indian societies. Every girl child born in an Indian family does suffer some kind of exploitation and if there is a boy child in the family then the exploitation is very much visible as the privileges are consciously or unconsciously provided to the son.

The dramatist, in the play, wants to emphasize that the construction of gender, the hierarchisation does as much harm to men as to women. Though, Tara is a play about the injustices done to women but it may able be called a play about the injustices done to men. The play is called Dan's tragedy and not Tara's. Tara faced an early death, but Dan, the recipient of an unwanted tragic gift, had to carry the burden of a sin of having Tara's leg and for getting it wasted on his body. He fails to get rid of the feeling that gross injustice has been done to Tara and whatever he has achieved is at the cost of his sister. He had to pay for the sins of his parents and grandparent. He has felt the full force of his guilt of having sacrificed Tara's leg. When he receives a telephonic call from his father that his mother is no more and Tara has been dead for six years even then he is not willing to go back to India. "It's just I don't think I can face life there anymore" he says to his father. Chandan longs for the liberation from the shackles of ideology and social identity. He craves for a freedom that will ensure the harmony between his inner and outer worlds. "But somewhere, sometime, I look up at a

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shooting star ... and wish. I wish that a long forgotten person would forgive me. Wherever she is. ... And will hug me. Once again". (380) His sense of guilt, trauma and anguish is so intense that, we see Chandan apologizing to Tara in the most moving of all the lines : *Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me, for making it my tragedy*. Towards the end of the play, Dan breaks down and his voice is heard :

Someday, after I die, a stranger will find this recording and play it. The voice is all that will remain. No writing. No masterpiece. Only a voice – that once belonged to an object. An object like other objects in a cosmos, whose orbits are determined by those around. Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. (Pause) I no longer desire that freedom. I move, just move. Without meaning. (379)

What Dattani wishes to convey is that we are born whole human beings, but gender—based discrimination breaks us into fragments which are called man and woman. As incomplete human beings, both men and women develop certain parts of their personality and suppress other parts and as a result both are alienated and both face suffering. The play ends with a vision of Dan in which the spirits of both Tara and Chandan appear without limping and hugging each other tightly, each with two normal legs now, suggesting that as long as they remained in society, both of them had to be crippled. The dramatist wants to send the message that gender discrimination is artificial and as long as we continue to do this kind of differentiation, we live in a meaningless condition and get nothing out of life except restlessness and nothingness. The play presents a mirror to the Indian society to see its real face and tries to shock it out of its grooved thinking.

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