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## Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a distinguished contemporary Indian playwright in English who works as a writer, stage and film director, actor, and theatrical personality. His plays are on the issues that arise in Indian contexts. He writes about those who are on the margins of society, such as minorities, women, gays, and transsexuals. The purpose of my paper is to investigate the female child's trauma in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*. The predicament of Tara is akin to those of myriad unfortunate Indian females. In this conservative society, there are numerous obstacles to nurturing a girl child. On the one hand, they discover empowerment through good education,

financial success, and individualism in society, yet our culture is unable to decimate long-held biases against them. "The girl child is still an undesirable arrival into an Indian home, even when the family is ostensibly educated and even has exposure to Western ideas," argues Dr. Jyoti Sharma (1). In this play, Tara is the daughter of an educated upper-middle-class family in Bangalore. The play's plot revolves around twins who are born with three legs, with blood circulation to the third leg coming from the newborn girl's torso. Only one of the twins could have two legs, while the other had to make do with one. The unwavering pronouncement to attach the third leg to the boy child's body to complete the child. This decision was not based on the medical ground but due to gender discrimination and injustice towards girl children in our Indian society. Dattani is concerned with gender discrimination and inequality toward girl children. This is done not because the girl is incapable of surviving in the merciless hands of society, but because societal conventions, economic standards, and cultural elements are to blame for this horrific activity. All of these circumstances constitute an ideology in our society in which the girl child must live and die. In this case, a girl's potential is sacrificed on the altar of gender, in which a female's role is also unforgettable and unforgivable, resulting in this unwelcome criterion.

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, Injustice to Girl Child, Social System, Discrimination, Prejudice

Mahesh Dattani is a dramatist, actor, dancer, director, and mentor. In 1998, his play *Final Solutions* got the Sahitya Akademi Award for Indian English drama. Although he has written several plays in English, he hails from such a background with hardly any literary aromas. Some of these plays have been considered and are now part of the curricula of Indian and international universities. He was born on August 7, 1958, in Bangalore, and attended Baldwin's High School and Bangalore's St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science. His mother tongue is Gujrati, but he received English language schooling along with his siblings, which enabled him in learning English as a second language. He holds a bachelor's degree in Arts and a master's degree in Marketing and Advertising Management. He began his work as a copywriter for an advertising agency before joining his family's business.

Dattani writes plays about scintillating issues that are relevant to today's society. He focuses on the issues that some of his predecessors have addressed in their plays, such as gender discrimination, child sexual abuse, patriarchy, and taboos that are not allowed to be acknowledged vociferously, such as homosexuality and the plight of eunuchs, and, of course, he writes vis-à-vis communalism, which is an apple of discord among various castes, classes, and colours.

In *Where There's a Will* and *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani depicts patriarchy's constitution and authoritarian attitude, gender discrimination in *Tara*, and the heart-wrenching topic of child sexual abuse in *Thirty Days in September*, as well as the contemplated status of eunuchs and their marginality in society in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, homosexuality and LGBT issues in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Bravely Fought the Queen*, and *Do the Needful*,

respectively. Communalism in *Final Solution* and Some other predicaments blur the tension and the prejudice of superiority in *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child*, in which a foreigner feeds her breast milk to almost an orphan child having forgotten the condition of her child, believing in humanity and having firm faith in God, because HE is omniscient and helps kind-hearted human beings.

The objective of this paper is to discover the girl child's ordeal in a culture dominated by male chauvinism. *Tara* by Dattani is a drama that addresses the issue of gender discrimination in contemporary Indian society. Woman in a patriarchal society is "the image of the woman holding the mirror to her face is the typical feminine image. In a male-dominated society, a woman is valued for her beauty and sex appeal. She is always afraid of her beauty withering with time and therefore she holds up a mirror which tells her of her youth, beauty and sexual attractiveness remain intact" (Satwana Halder, 62).

Since the dawn of civilization, women have grappled with a myriad of subjects. They have been stereotyped as sex objects and vulnerable members of society. From dawn to dust, they have been given to do numerous domestic chores to accomplish. And they are obligated to do the assignment within the time constraint, irrespective of whether they are suffering from a headache or backache. Paula Kaplan, in her book, *The Myth of Woman's Masochism*, asserts, that the myth that "women enjoy their suffering" becomes "responsible for profound and far-reaching emotional and physical harm to girls" (1).

Dattani's play *Tara* is a two-act stage play that was first performed by Dattani's Playpen performing Arts Group on October 23, 1990, at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bangalore as *Twinkle Tara*. It was subsequently performed as *Tara* by Theatre Group, Bombay on November 9, 1991, directed by Alyque Padamsee, and received the Sahitya Kerala Akademy award for the same year.

*Tara* is the story of Siamese twins who were conjoined from the hip down and had three legs. They were surgically separated, and one of them may have two legs. The two legs were suited for Tara's body because Tara's body supplied the majority of the blood, but they (legs) were given to Chandan, albeit the linked leg was eventually flaked off because it could not sustain as dead flesh. The premise of the play *Tara* is the emotional separation that develops between two conjoined twins after their mother and grandfather manipulate their physical separation to favour the male (Chandan) over the girl (Tara).

It has been seen that boys have been given more chances to survive than girls have. Whenever the opportunity comes to choose between boys and girls, the preference will come for the boy to the girl. Society has been always giving supremacy and superiority to men over women. In *Tara*, Dattani beautifully depicts how patriarchal attitudes, authoritarian conduct, and social norms controlled girls. Tara has a better chance of surviving if she has two legs, but in the absence of a property heir, the patriarchal system favours a boy (Chandan) over a girl (Tara). According to Santwana Halder: "It is a society, in which an influential politician has a nefarious deal with a renounced physician who forgets all about professional ethics for more material comfort. It is society, again, in which girl children are provided with equal opportunity: the boy and the girl receive the same education, medical treatments, etc. - but the

girl is never actually the heir of the family and so making any plan for her is superfluous..." (66).

Dattani is an experienced and expert dramatist to mirror us to see the deep-rooted face of gender discrimination in society that is very difficult to shrug off. Rome cannot make it in one day; therefore, it is not easy to crack the shackles of discrimination against girls based on gender where they are born, live, and die. It is not only the notion of contemporary society but it has existed since ancient. Gender discrimination is the notion that men do but women have an equal part in this- women also discriminate women from men. They also will prefer males to a female when the chances come. When Chandan asked Roopa to choose between the two, she chose male:

CHANDAN. What would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl?  
Who would you choose?

ROOPA. A boyfriend definitely?

CHANDAN. Definitely?

ROOPA. Yes. It's bad enough studying in a girls' school. I would definitely want a boyfriend.

CHANDAN. No, no. I didn't mean that!

ROOPA. Oh, boy child and girl child. Say that!

CHANDAN. What would your choice be?

ROOPA. Mmm ... I would be happy with either one.

CHANDAN. That's not the point. In the film, I mean- the Nazis will only allow her to keep one child. The older one would be taken away to a concentration camp or something.

ROOPA. How nasty of the Nazis!

CHANDAN. Would you send your girl child to the concentration camp?

ROOPA. Definitely not! I think it's more civilized to draw her in milk if you ask me (365).

In an interview with Lakshmi Subramaniam, Mahesh Dattani admits "I see Tara as a play about the male and the female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst". In society, women have long faced discrimination. They have been living in the most deplorable conditions, regardless of their social background, class, colour, race, or culture.

Tara is the daughter of a middle-class, self-professedly educated family. They (Tara's parents) are highly regarded in society because of their education, but when it comes to choosing between the conjoined twins, they prefer the boy without evaluating that Tara could survive easily and comfortably with two legs because Tara's body had a better chance of surviving than Chandan's. However, the social milieu played a pivotal role in the surgical separation procedure. Bharti's father, who is an affluent politician who has respect and dignity, is the owner of a large property and needs an heir, which is why he interferes in the selection of a boy successor (Chandan). Bharti's father, who never appears on stage, plays a malevolent role in the play, and he is to blame for the Patel family's awkward predicament of gender

discrimination. He is the one who pays Dr. Thakkar to do surgery in Chandan's favour. When he left money for only his grandson, Chandan, and nothing for Tara, it was a social concern that boys are given the golden opportunity, and this tendency for male chauvinism persists unabated.

Dattani's Tara illustrates another reality: money, which is seen as more powerful than anything else. Dr. Thakkar's choice to take a bribe for completing unethical work by denying Tara's leg, which was related to her blood circulation in her body, was swayed by money. The third leg was joined to Chandan's body, but it was unable to draw blood and was soon severed. Dattani's drama teaches us that someone who has no place in society cannot be deemed exceptional. His drama intends to "reflect the malfunction of the society but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world" (K.G. Manikrao).

Dattani's Tara teaches us that most of the time, girls subordinate their wish for their parents to see their brothers happy and established. When girls marry, they depart to their in-laws' house, but boys reside with them, which is why parents prefer to spend more money on boys than on girls. Girls, on the other hand, are more intelligent and accomplished than boys. "Millions of girls who are allowed to live are fed and educated less than their brothers... By starving millions of girls so that their brothers can eat marginally, better... The treatment of little girls moulds the psyche of their brothers, who internalize the view that their needs- as males have preference over those of their sister" (The Hindu).

Bharti, Tara's mother, who played an equal part in making Tara crippled and depriving her of normal life, accepts that "she (Tara) must make more friends. Chandan is all right- he has his witty, but she... He is different, he is somewhat self-contained, but Tara... She can be very good company and she has her talents. She can be very witty and of course, she is intelligent. I have seen to it that...more than makes up in some ways for..." (21). Bharti, Tara's mother, a daughter of a prominent politician and the wife of an educated man, having forgotten everything in her wish for a son, colluded to make Tara's life the worst it could be, depriving her of every happiness. However, afterward, she felt embarrassed about the sin she committed against Tara, and a repentant expression appeared on her face. She attempted to alleviate it by donating a kidney to Tara. She, as a woman, made a distinction between man (son) and woman (daughter), preferring the son to the daughter. Women are perpetrating violence on women in this situation. Satyabrata Pal asserts: "the extent of the violence against the girl as a fetus, and infant shows how deep the bias in India is against women and why women will be secure only if we as a nation introspect and change" (The Hindu).

Tara lives in a society where society itself creates the canon and code of demeanor for girls to live. Tara is an illustration of such a victims where a girl has to sacrifice her endowment and intelligence on the altar of gender. Her life has been sacrificed on the altar of gender. Women always have been doing this practice and Tara is no more exception. "Since time immemorial, the female body is seen as a means for comforting, rejuvenating, and even entertaining the male body. Going a step further, it would not be wrong to assert that the female body is also seen as an instrument for alleviating male deficiencies and deformities" (Web

Source). Tara is crippled to make Chandan complete. Tara is deformed to improved Chandan deformity. Moreover, it is very sad to say that none could have dared to oppose when this iniquitous task was taking place.

Mr. Patel, Tara's father, was only against it, but he sat still, waiting for the process to begin, the horrific crime against a daughter whose only offense was that she was a girl. Tara was paying the price of being a girl with her life. It appears that Mr. Patel's latent yearning was also at work. He, too, is made of the same blood and flesh, so how could he be against it?

Mr. Patel who has an oppositional attitude, an uncouth and an authoritarian; and a caring husband simultaneously, says, "Maybe I'm expecting the worst. It may never happen nothings are getting out of hand. I must worry about her. Yes. I am worried about my wife" (336). It is Patel who discloses to Tara and Chandan the intrigue which was constituted by Bharti and her father. He says:

A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were slightly better than the leg would survive... on the girl. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. That evening, your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. Except- I couldn't believe what was told me that they would risk giving both legs to the boy...maybe if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn't right and that even the doctor would realize it was unethical! The doctor had agreed, I was told. It was only later that I came to know of his intention of starting a large nursing home the largest in Bangalore. He has acquired three acres of prime land- in the heart of the city from the state. Your grandfather's political influence had been used. A few days later, the surgery was done. It didn't take them very long to realize what a great mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh that could have might have been Tara. I-I was meaning to tell you both when you were older, but..." (57-58).

The above excerpt from the text encapsulates the play's whole theme: Tara's untimely death was hastened by Bharti's father's villainous and imbroglia work, Bharti's full consent and desire to have a complete son, Dr. Thakkar's avaricious compels him to do this unethical job in need of money and three acres land in the prime heart of Bangalore city to begin his own nursing home, all of which contributed to Tara's untimely death. And Mr. Patel's answer was passive as if he was just a man witnessing everything and not daring to speak out against what was going on. He tried to escape from all actions and wanted to prove himself a nobleman and a loving and caring father. Dattani also presents the role of a doctor in society. A doctor who is supposed to be a God of Earth and whose job is to save the life of people can commit such types of crimes in want of money. Dr. Thakkar's faux pas and his Faustian deed with Bharti's father which society will never forget him for. It seems as if he could be reasoned and tried to make Bharti's father aware of the consequences of separation as he (Bharti's father) wanted, conceivably the scenario of the play and the life of Tara and Chandan would have been something different hoping a happy life after being surgically separated. Nevertheless, in

contemporary times money is counted more than any morality, ethical job, or standards of society. In an accumulation, of course, the society, Indian contemporary social value of authoritarianism and having male chauvinism and having a male heir played a major role in depriving Tara of everything. A society set off the social notion to have a boy child to control over the family. The males have been the powerful and ruling status in society. Tara says, "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going haunting while the women looked after the cave" (328). Here, Tara justifies the plight of women who were presumed to be suitable for the domestic domain only and were confined within the four walls to look after the need of every member of the family. Virginia Woolf asserts, "Imaginatively, she (woman) is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant, She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from the history" (53).

Dattani has shown the middle-class society that is supposed to itself well educated and has a respectable status in society. He is an expert in mirroring the real conditions of girls who have been living in a crucial society where they have no respect and honor. When Tara wants to know how the girls were being treated in the Patels' family, Roopa, Tara's neighbour, says, "Since you insist, I will tell you. It will not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girls babies. You know dowry and things like that so they used to draw them in milk... they could say that she choked while drinking her milk (349)".

Chandan is profoundly affected by Tara's death, as he was completely innocent and unaware at the time this action (surgical separation) was planned. That could not have occurred to Tara if Chandan had been aware of it. Chandan grew enraged when he discovered his parents had made a mistake that had a negative impact on his life. To get away from it all, he traveled to London and changed his identity to Dan, intending to create a drama about his twin sister based on memories of isolating himself in London "in a bed-sitter in a seedy suburb of London, thousands of miles from home". The guilt that Chandan recognized was tormenting his thoughts, as he understood that his sister Tara did not receive a fair deal from nature or society. Chandan was the only one who actually helped Tara with her difficulties, yet it appears that he was the one for whom everything had occurred to Tara. He, on the other hand, is the one who feels Tara's suffering. Had it been in his hand, it would not be befallen over them what they have now. Chandan does not want to go to university until Tara goes.

Tara was born and lived in a paradoxical society where women have no important role, if they have anyhow, it goes to nothingness. Dattani, on the question of where did he get the idea from, wrote the Tara play. He answered:

Well, basically, it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated, and of course, they were invariable of the same sex and there was the thing about a fused leg and which had the quantities of left and right so there had to be some careful consideration as to which twin was supplying the blood to the leg and the journal went into the detail because obviously, it was a very unique operation and separation. Although that was the inspiration I think by then having

written *Dance Like a Man*; I was prepared to take on the gender issue head-on, and I think that was a powerful metaphor. Again, you know, the play is misread and, you know, people tend to focus on the medical details but that's really not what the play is about. It's a metaphor either for being born equal as male and female and sharing so much more and with the surgical separation comes to a cultural distinction and prejudices as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and female self and half the self (female) whether your gender is male or female definitely given the lower priority (Interview with Sachidananda Mohanty)

Dattani elucidates that he himself prefers male superiority to a female and his plays are not "to be seen and heard, not literature to be read". His play *Tara* has twofold intentions; first, to expose the modern educated urban family whose adherence to the conventional attitude of favouring anything that is masculine, the second purpose is to expose the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession. Basavaraj Naikar says that some of Dattani's plays' themes "are embarrassing, irritating and shocking the puritanical sensibility of Indian audience, his courage, condour and honesty in depicting the sensitive issues of life is appreciable" (132).

*Tara* and Chandan are physically separated, but they are still emotionally intertwined. *Tara* emotionally touches Chandan more than anybody else does. They are as "two peas in one pot", and it is unblemished when *Tara* says, "May we still are. Like we always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out..." (325).

*Tara* is not the story of only Dattani's *Tara* but is the story of every girl child who is born in contemporary Indian society. What is done to *Tara* is happening everywhere and to every girl like *Tara*. Though they (girls) have proved themselves in every sphere of life, they are still being discriminated against everywhere based on gender. They have touched every border of success but they are still tightened to the shackles of the age-old, deep-rooted notion of gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is the most heart-piercing discrimination against girls. They sometimes sacrifice themselves and succumb to their desire for their brothers' welfare. It is undoubtedly, gender discrimination is a common issue that we encounter in most of Dattani's plays.

*Tara*'s sparkling charm has been contaminated by society owing to gender prejudice. She is left in society to deal with all of the unpleasant realities. There are several setbacks that are sufficient to asphyxiate any girl's passion, yet despite having faced numerous difficulties in her life, she maintains an optimistic outlook on life. She is content with her existence. She is looking for a nice approach to be remembered by individuals who are similar to her. She says, "I will spend the rest of 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. I will be very happy if I could because that is really what I want" (370).

*Tara* disclosed the quality of a girl though she is a crippled girl; she can incinerate herself for others' welfare. She compares men to women and says to Chandan, "Women grow



mature faster". She added, "We (women) are more sensitive more intelligent, more compassionate human beings than creeps like you..." (51). Tara secretly longs for her two legs when she expresses her desire for real legs:

TARA: I would wish for both... I would wish for both... I would wish for two of them.

CHANDAN: Two Jaipur legs?

TARA: No, silly. The real one (266).

Tara is an innocent victim of society's injustice, which is what she suffering from, has to carry the burden of being physically disabled all through her life. Satwana Halder reveals Tara's condition "If Tara were like any crippled girl (like Laura in Glass Menagerie) her story would be a pathetic one, drawing sympathy from others. But Tara's case is tragic as it is revealed to her that there was a conspiracy behind her deformity and that her mother whom she has loved most and who has so long expressed her concern for her daughter, contributed to that conspiracy" (58).

Dattani says that parents are the finest protectors of their children, but what happens if parents themselves are involved in a plot against their children? Tara's mother, maternal grandfather, and, of course, Mr. Patel, who are meant to be Tara's guardians and defenders, all play a role in plotting against her. Dr. Thakkar and the concept of society both contribute to Tara's crippling and deprivation of all nice things in life. Tara's delineation has been made in this case for the sake of a boy child. G.J.V. Prasad aptly remarks: "This is a play about the injustice done in the name of construction of gender identities- this hierarchization and demarcation of roles does as much harm to men as to women" (141). Bharti, Mr. Patel, and, of course, Chandan all had regrets on their faces in Tara. When Bharti realized her transgression to Tara, she burst out laughing. She was on the verge of becoming agitated because of it. It's a common occurrence that decent people's decisions may haunt them for the rest of their life. One of them is Bharti. She now suffers from chronic schizophrenia because of the sin she committed against Tara. She played a part in Tara's early death and deprived her of the chance to live. She wants to relieve herself of her guilt by lavishing her with her mother's love. Tara wants to donate her kidney, and she wants to donate it to her. When Mr. Patel objected, she grew agitated. She realizes her sin leads to stigmatized motherhood, consequently suffering nervous breakdown and metamorphosis. Whatever it is, it is her motherly love when she showers over Tara: "Tara! My beautiful little girl. Look at her smile! Smile, Tara. Smile again for me! Oh! See how her eyes twinkle. You are my most beautiful baby" (58). Now Tara became an apple of her eyes. When Tara herself became aware of her deformity, she longs for her two natural legs. Bharti expressed Tara's helplessness when she tries to console herself and talks to Chandan, "Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you but her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty" (349). Dattani's goal with Tara may be to highlight societal concerns such as gender discrimination, patriarchy, male preference over females, political power and money, greed, and superiority, all of which are prevalent in society. A crippled and incomplete boy child is considered more vulnerable than a complete girl child is. Anish Rajan aptly remarks, "Tara is sacrificed because she was a girl and had no

right to have a better life than her brother. The idea of a complete girl child and an incomplete male child is so shocking that the sacrifice of girl is accepted than a handicapped male child" (69). Tara and Chandan would have lived happily if Dr. Thakkar had denied doing such an operation as Bharti's father claimed, and if he had done his work ethically and according to medical reports. Everyone contributed to the creation of an uncomfortable environment in which the family's joy and harmony had vanished. Subhash Chandra comments, "Tara is not killed by any individual, but the socio-cultural system which is responsible for her death", "the beliefs, the attitudes and the prejudices that are deep-rooted in the collective cultural psyche become instrumental in taking Tara's life" (157). In Tara, Dattani breaks every relationship. Because no one cares for Tara except Chandan, her brother; a little bit later, her mother Bharti, when realized her mistake but it was very late and all her effort to show motherly love was in vain, no more use of it. There is neither family nor society, and, of course, Nature has not played a fair deal with Tara. It seems women always have been marginalized since ancient times. Manu, the powerful Indian sage, said, "In childhood must be a female be dependent on her father, in youth, on her husband; her lord being dead, on her sons, if she has no sons, on the near kinsmen on those of her father; if has no paternal kinsmen, on the sovereign; a woman must never seek independence" (V. 148).

It would be preferable to end this paper with the phrase that "Dattani takes the family setting again and again and uses the family home as his locale and fragments them" (ix). Dattani portrays a conflicted Tara family, in which cultural beliefs are involved in creating a situation in which a girl's life is sacrificed on the altar of gender. She gets murdered just because she is a woman. Even today, most females do not have the opportunity to select their own careers. For them to walk, talk, and chalk their abilities, society creates rules. Tara and Chandan are physically separated by society, but mentally they are inseparable.

Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins who are conjoined at the hip and have three legs. Dr. Thakkar undertook unethical work for money and land in the center of Bangalore city to create his own nursing facility, therefore they were surgically separated. Dr. Thakkar undertook unethical work for money and land in the centre of Bangalore city to create his own nursing facility, therefore they were surgically separated. He surgically separated them and amputated two legs from Chandan's body, which was soon cut off due to a lack of blood supply. Dattani fails to provide a fair environment for girls (women) to have a happy life in Tara.

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