

Gender Identity in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract – Mahesh Dattani a noted Indian playwright, tries to shatter the stereotypical representations of woman in his plays. He is able to see beyond the accepted institutions and beliefs of the conventional society. The paper tries to present how the playwright, in his play *Tara* has portrayed dexterously the pathetic struggle a woman undergoes in her life. Women are marginalized and are at the receiving end of the oppressive structures. The reason behind is the gender politics. Women fail to voice their opinions or represent leadership in all walks of life. So, the play exposes an average Indian mindset in the present times.

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INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most significant contemporary playwrights writing in English who is responsible for successfully launching the Indian theatre in English. He is the first Indian playwright to the honoured with the coveted Sahitya Academy Award for his *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays*. He has won international acclaim and recognition for his stage plays, screen plays and radio plays. His significant works include *Where There's a Will* (1986), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999). Dattani has contributed a lot to Indian Drama with his innovative and experimental work of contemporary relevance.

He deals with some of the unacknowledged issues prevalent in the contemporary Indian Society. His is the genuine voice of the urban middle class society of India. His main concern is the family through which he unravels the dynamics of human relationships as his characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constraints of gender or repressed desire. It can be said that his plays are slices of life which represent reality as it exists- he writes about what he observes, whether it is communal discord (*Final Solutions*), politics and crime (*Seven steps Around the Fire*) or homosexuality (*On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*)

Dattani's play *Tara* throws light on our attitude to gender. Gifted with the ability to see beyond the accepted and conventional attitudes and established institutions, Dattani attempts to shatter the stereotypical representations of woman and her society in his plays.

Talking about Gender Politics in the play, Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* theorises the relation between

sex difference and sexual politics and defines politics as an *unequal* system of power relations.

According to her patriarchy is both a universal and basic system of political oppression. The power structures in different societies produce different kinds of sexual oppression. Sexual politics is a system which is brought about by women's consent to their own oppression. 'Sex', according to her is a biological construction and 'gender' a social construction.

Whenever a choice has to be made between male and female, it is always the male who is chosen.

It is almost inevitably the women who are marginalised, and who are at the receiving end of the oppression, whether it is articulated by men or by women. The reason behind is the gender politics and systems of power that prevail in the society.

Tara brings to light the bizarre reality of the woman playing second fiddle to man. It is a pathetic dramatic representation of the suffering of two Siamese twins. The play is a picture of the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced but still differentiates between male and female child. Dattani has highlighted the atrocities perpetrated on a female in a society where a lot of hue and cry is raised for female emancipation.

The fact of the matter is that women's lives have been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, all cultures and all countries.

In *Tara*, Mr. Patel, the native of Gujarat is married to Bharati, a Kannadiga. Their relationship turns out to be a failure due to cultural diversities and cultural prejudices. Mr. Patel did not get his parents' approval for this marriage so was forced to leave his parental home. This became a cause of insecurity in Mr. Patel,

coupled with the birth of Siamese twins. He finds himself isolated; the insecurity increasing with the interference of Bharati's parents in his marital life. He was forced to agree for surgery on his twins. After the surgery, Tara becomes a cripple, Bharati goes insane and Mr. Patel becomes violent and aggressive.

Bharati felt helpless and did not have the nerve to refuse the suggestion of her father. Gender prejudices prevalent in the society come to the forefront when during the surgery; the male child is given preference. This decision not only takes away the life of the girl but also ruins the life of the boy who was very much attached to his sister. The fateful leg which was preferred to be given to Chandan, could not only make Tara a perfect woman; but would have been completely successful on her body.

Tara, a spirited, intelligent girl, is denied her limb, her rightful opportunities and consequently her rightful place in life for no other reason than her gender. Ironically, the leg which was given to Chandan became useless after a few days making him handicapped for life.

Chandan and Tara are separated after the surgery and they start to reformulating themselves. The separation becomes a reason for their loss of confidence, companionship and even their will to survive. Chandan starts considering himself responsible for Tara's suffering and finds very difficult to accept the fate his sister was subjected to. He leaves for London, with a new identity 'Dan', becomes a writer and withdraws himself completely from the external world.

Tara, in spite of being much smarter than Chandan is not encouraged to discover her abilities when her father's indifference towards her is repulsive and disgusting, and her mother's creative acts of love are equally oppressive. Tara is the epitome of the talented, yet marginalized Indian womanhood.

Patel : Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for his higher studies.

Bharati : And Tara?

Patel : When have you ever allowed me to make any plans for her?

Bharati : I'm stopping you from making plans for my daughter?

Patel : Don't lie. Bharati! You don't want me to, and you know it --- you have to face it. (PP. 30-31)

He blames his wife and father-in-law for the damage done but his complicity in the whole operation cannot be denied.

Patriarchal system of India had imparted power to men and subordination to women. Women are thus considered to be essentially passive and emotional; fit

only for home-making and procreation. On the other hand, men are thought to be active and rational; therefore given a prominent role in the public and private sphere.

Hence, tasks have been assigned for men and women; which means if a boy is seen doing a task meant for girls he is ridiculed. Patel doesn't like his son helping his mother to knit as he considers it "unmanly". He differentiates between his son and daughter continually and wants Chandan to go to college or to the office with him and become a "man".

Patel : I was thinking – it may be a good idea for you to come to the office with me.

Chandan : What for?

Patel : Just to get a feel of it.

Chandan : You can take Tara. She'll make a great business woman.

Patel refuses to accept what his son says

Patel (firm) : Chandan, I think I must insist that you come

Chandan : We'll both come with you.

Patel : No! (6)

Chandan represents the modern age man who respects the womenfolk and appreciates the efforts put in by them to keep the home.

Tara is shown craving for normalcy and completeness her entire life. She is aware of her handicap and forbears the humiliation with great difficulty when people react to her artificial leg. Chandan, also suffering from the same disorder is sexually attractive to girls like Roopa whereas Tara is unfit as sexual object so she faces mental agonies.

Dattani has also raised the issue of killing of a girl child. In spite of all the propaganda of equality between male and female and equal opportunities for all, female foeticide is still rampant. The government makes laws but people devise novel and advanced techniques of killing the girl child. Dattani talks about female infanticide and shows how young girls are killed in this highly insensitive society. Tara feels very disturbed when Roopa informs her that, in old days the Patels used to drown their daughters in milk. Ironically, she finds it very normal and does not react a bit.

In determining gender relations, the issue of dowry plays a major role. Dowry was given as a compensation for not demanding anything from the family property. If the girl does not marry, she is deprived of everything and in case she becomes a

divorce, is unacceptable in her family who think it a disgrace to own her. Bharati's father, a politician and would be Chief Minister first forcibly gives the leg to Chandan as he wants a male grand-child and then leaves his whole property to Chandan; depriving Tara of even a single penny.

Mother-Daughter relationship is also governed by Patriarchal rules. The decision taken by Bharati's father regarding the 'fateful' leg sours the relation between Bharati and her husband. Guilt-ridden, Bharati tries to show more love and affection to Tara. She tries to expiate her sins by donating a kidney to Tara but could not save her life. For Tara, her mother is her strength. When she comes to know of the truth, the whole world comes crashing down upon her. She cannot accept the truth and ultimately dies.

Dattani portrays Tara as a strong woman who in spite of her disability is strong and ambitious. She is a new age woman who, unlike the women of old generations, desires to make plans for herself on the basis of her intelligence. She is a wise girl who is able to discern her father's dislike for her.

Her bitterness towards her father becomes evident in the following dialogue when Chandan tries to convince her of her father's care.

Chandan : Yes should you should care – for people around you.

Tara : How do you expect me to feel anything for anyone if they don't give me any feeling to begin with? Why is it wrong for me to be without feeling? Why are you asking me to do something that nobody has done for me?

Chandan : I don't know. Somehow it is wrong to be selfish.

Tara : Selfish? Yes I am. I have the right to be selfish like everyone else! (51)

Feminism is interpreted in different ways by different people – ranging from a wish to change the whole system to the desire to bring equality within the sexes. It is a desire of many that a woman should be given respectable individual liberty at least in her own home.

Bharati and Tara are denied this liberty and injustice is done in the name of construction of gender identities. It harms not only women but the men too. Dan carries the guilt of having wasted Tara's leg and contributing to blighting her life. He has to suffer for the patriarchal sins committed by his parents and grandfather. He has to ask for Tara's forgiveness and explain how much harm we create by marginalizing the feminine. Here comes Dattani's concern for androgyny – that if we can learn to value both sides of ourselves, give equal importance to the feminine and the masculine, we

would have an altogether different world. This is why the play ends with both of them whole and complete, with two legs each, because they are finally, in his memory, beyond nature, society and science.

The play thus showcases the plight of women Tara and Bharati who are helpless as they are denied equality and privileges of life. They suffer inevitable pain, are twice handicapped as they are women. Dattani has very ably highlighted the injustice done to women in a hostile environment.

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