
Short Review

Gender Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Tara

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Abstract: 'Gender Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Tara' exhibits a shocking account of the gender bias in the form of deep-rooted prejudice and discrimination that exists in Indian society against the girl child. It is a shocking pointer to the patriarchal Indian society's age-old bias against the girl child and its favoring and giving preference to whatever is 'male'. It also focuses on the family as a microcosm of society where individuals are socialized to accept certain gendered roles and to give preference to what is 'male'. The article explores how an individual falls an easy victim to the powers of patriarchy and how his life is painfully crushed between the two colliding forces of the family on the one hand, and that of patriarchy, on the other hand. Along with exposing the modern educated urban Indian family's adherence to the conventional attitude of favoring anything that is masculine, it also portrays the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession.

Keywords: Gender bias; gender inequality; gender stereotypes; patriarchy; female infanticide corruption; Indian society; conjoined twins.

I. Gender Issues in Mahesh Dattani's Tara

Mahesh Dattani is an authentic and realistic voice in the arena of contemporary Indian plays written in English. One of his significant plays which deal with the issues of gender is Tara. According to Erin B. Mee, Tara is a play about "the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favors what is 'male' (Dattani, Vol 1, 320). Besides being an insightful portrayal of Dattani's deep preoccupation with gender issues, the play also features a shocking account of the gender bias in the form of deep-rooted prejudice and discrimination that exists in our society against the girl child.

The play gains in its shocking intensity as Dattani makes his female protagonist undergo this discrimination even before she is born, while she is still in her mother's womb. Tara tells the story of two conjoined twins separated at birth involving a complex surgery by the renowned Dr. Thakkar. Besides other complications involved in such a complex surgical separation, there was one major complication, the solution of which affected the future lives of the twins in remarkable ways. Both the twins had only one leg each. Though a scan showed that the girl provided a major part of the blood supply to the third leg and the chances of the survival of the third leg on the girl were much better than that on the boy, a quick private meeting was arranged between Dr. Thakkar and Tara's mother and grandfather surreptitiously, where it was decided that they would risk giving both the legs to the boy. This decision to grant a healthy and wholesome life to the boy at the cost of permanently disabling the girl child for the rest of her life by depriving her of what was her rightful due is, in itself, a shocking pointer to our patriarchal society's age-old bias against the girl child and its favoring and giving preference to whatever is "male."

What is more unnerving here is that Tara's mother, herself, had willingly contributed to initiate and materialize such a cruel decision? As a painful sequel to such a disastrous action, Tara loses her life prematurely, and Chandan grows up away from his family as an unwholesome person, never being able to forgive either himself or his parents for his sister's tragic end.

The play starts with Chandan at his writing-table, typing furiously. At once, we are introduced to a multi-level set – the split-stage technique – one of the favorite dramatic strategies of Dattani to signal that in the "slice of life" that he presents before us, multiple realities co-exist but that only the patriarchal is starkly visible or is given a higher and elevated dimension (Chatterjee 2). The stage is divided into three levels. The lowest level represents the family, the house of the Patels. According to Erin B Mee, Dattani often takes as his subject the

complicated dynamics of the modern urban family, the members of which struggle for some freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire. In "A Note on the Play" to Tara, Mee wrote,

Dattani focuses on the family as a microcosm of society to dramatize the ways we are socialized to accept certain gendered roles and to give preference to what is 'male' (Dattani, Vol 1, 320)

The next level represents the bedsitter of Chandan in a suburb of London. Here, the focus is primarily on Chandan, the individual, whose life has been strongly affected by the complex machinations of one of the most important institutions of our patriarchal society -- the family, which is indeed both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society. The family is a strong patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole that mediates between the individual and the social structure. The highest level is occupied by the "God-like presence" of Dr. Thakkar, who is shown to be seated in a chair all throughout the play. Dr. Thakkar has been assigned the highest level to suggest his overriding power to control the individuals' lives in the play permanently. He is also the living embodiment of the medical profession, which allies itself with patriarchy to inflict permanent damage on the lives of innocent individuals, who are, in fact, soft targets of patriarchy. The multi-level setting of the stage is indicative of how an individual falls an easy victim to the powers of patriarchy and how his life is painfully crushed between the two colliding forces of the family on the one hand and that of patriarchy on the other hand.

"Separation" is indeed used in the play as a particularly important metaphor, as the twins are separated physically at first and later emotionally. Conjoined at birth, the twins Chandan and Tara have been separated 'successfully' through a complicated surgery. While the first separation is required for their physical survival, the second separation is indeed, necessitated by the demands of our patriarchal system that has always preferred the male over the female. As Chandan muses:

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.

This painful and forcible separation between the twins is made to continue throughout the play, in one form or the other. Despite being feistier, spirited, and a tougher survivor than Chandan, Tara is continuously discriminated against by either her dead grandfather, her mother, or her father. Tara's father goes about trying to push his male and female children into separate grooves, into the stereotyped gender roles that he thinks would help them fit better into society, though at the cost of hurting them both since their own preferences and aptitudes seem quite contradictory to these expectations. Chandan would prefer to be a writer, while Tara seems more inclined to go into a career like her father's.

The ideological oppositions at play here are key to interpreting the ways in which a middle-class concept of femininity and masculinity takes shape. Femininity is associated with the 'natural' bodily facts of reproduction, while masculinity itself is regarded as more 'rational', issuing from identifying masculinity with the mind. Hence, bodies need 'protecting', while minds need 'educating' [5]. The consequences of such typical parenting are to produce girls whose destiny is most likely to be domestic and find themselves allocated to (and accepting) social positions that are much inferior to males. At the same time, this kind of parenting tends to result in boys who find it extremely difficult to form effective, caring relationships, although they are socially confident and apparently successful [3].

This is exactly what the father of the twins in Dattani's play indicates through his mindset and behavior when he insists that Chandan should accompany him to his office and avoid staying at home and helping his mother. But, closely connected to this is the idea that the demands and requirements of the system translated through an ideology of family life constitute reality. Thus, at birth, all children are assigned a gender that is based on the appearance of their genitals. Their parents and others then inculcate gender by differentiating between children of different sexes through their differential behaviors towards them [6].

This kind of socialization, thus, embodies the values of power divisions of the sexist society: if one conforms, he is acceptable; if one dares to be different, he must be a freak of some kind. In Dattani's play, the biological basis of sexual difference has been emphasized, and the "roles" that their father is forcibly teaching Tara and Chandan are nothing but superficial social dressing laid over their 'real' biological differences.

Though Mr. Patel claims that he loves Tara as much as he loves Chandan, his concern for Chandan's career is undoubtedly more than Tara's. It does not matter whether Tara joins the college and completes her education, but Chandan must join the college. Not only that, Mr. Patel has carefully chalked out the future 'plans' for Chandan. No such planning has been done for Tara. It is only when Tara refuses to fill up forms for the college

and Chandan follows her that Mr. Patel consents to allow Tara to pursue her education, though significantly not for her own sake, but for the sake of her brother.

Tara's maternal grandfather had not only been one of the prime decision-makers in permanently disabling Tara even before her birth but the discrimination against Tara is made to continue even after the grandfather's death through his will wherein he leaves all his wealth and property for his grandson and almost nothing for Tara. Bharati's father has thus, been portrayed as a perfect embodiment of the patriarch, consistently upholding values in favor of the male over the female. He even goes to the extent of bribing Dr. Thakkar with a big plot of land in Bangalore to gain his complicity in performing such an unethical surgery. Dattani exposes the modern educated urban family's adherence to the conventional attitude of favouring anything that is masculine and the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession through these discriminatory activities.

The most shocking revelation that the readers, as well as Tara, is made to come across is that, despite Bharati's deep love and concern shown to Tara, it was, however, she who had taken the fateful decision of crippling Tara by depriving her of the second leg and giving it to Chandan. After the injustice has been meted out to Tara, Bharati tries her utmost to cover it up by her manifest show of love and concern for the disabled girl. Bharati's desperate attempts to compensate for the guilt perpetrated on Tara makes her bribe Roopa with lucrative incentives to secure her friendship with Tara.

However, it is self-evident that this love is anything but a mother's unconditional affection for her disabled daughter. It is merely an instrument that Bharati uses to relieve herself of the burden of guilt from which she has been suffering all through the play, which eventually gives her a nervous breakdown towards the end of the play.

Anyone individual does not cause Tara's eventual death. Rather, the socio-cultural system — the attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices deeply embedded in the collective Indian cultural psyche-becomes instrumental in taking away Tara's life [1]. Even if we blame either Bharati, Mr. Patel, or Tara's maternal grandfather for Tara's disability and subsequent death, we are never allowed to forget that Dattani presents the Patel family as the microcosm of the greater Indian patriarchal society where the discrimination against the girl-child, either in an overt or in a subtle form, has always existed.

Dattani's expression in Tara is thus in keeping with the reality that even before a child is born, gender stereotypes are at work. In Tara, Dattani also reveals the unpalatable truth that patriarchal society is unwilling to allow Tara to evolve as a fully embodied human being. She is merely made to remain as someone with a female body from the beginning to the end, from the moment she is born, till the moment of her death. Despite her increased levels of intelligence, sharpness, and vivacity, Tara's entire being is shown in the play as having been reduced merely to her sexual differentiation from that of her brother, and in the course of the play she is made to suffer severely under harsh patriarchal pressures due to this. It is clear that the sexist social world that Tara inhabits grants her an inferior and secondary status, despite her superior levels of accomplishments.

In Dattani's play, we see that Tara is always defined and differentiated in relation to Chandan, but never in relation to herself. She is the inessential confronting the essential. Dattani himself claimed that "Tara is a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favors what 'male' is." As Dattani mentioned in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramanyam:

I see Tara as a play about the male self and the female self. The male self-being preferred (if one is to subscribe to conventional categories of masculine traits and feminine traits) in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst [8].

In fact, Tara and Chandan are the two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities, so much so that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara's story. Indeed, Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover 'the neglected half of himself' as a means of becoming whole (Mee 320). The twins in the play are depicted as sharing a wonderful rapport and a delicate bonding between themselves, especially in Roopa's scenes. Here, we see the twins come together, sure and strong, almost like a single undivided identity. Separately, however, they appear weak, disabled, and desperately in need of each other's support. With the long-guarded secret exposed, Tara is shattered, and the narrative recedes back to Dan in London, where he had escaped and somehow continues to live, unable to forgive himself for Tara's tragic predicament. But Dattani does not end his play here; he rather concludes the play with the representation of the 'whole' undivided identity, together again, locked in a loving embrace, but, this time, without their individual limbs and disabilities:

Tara walks into the spot without limping. Dan also appears without the limp. They kneel, face to face. Tara embraces Dan as the music starts. The explosive opening of Brahms' First Concerto. They hug each other tightly. Slow fade out [4].

II. Conclusion

Gender and patriarchy form the conceptual and thematic staples of the plays of Mahesh Dattani. In play after play he has highlighted the plight of the socially marginalized, the underprivileged and the unfortunate who have been victimized. A conscious dramatist deeply concerned with the flaws and defects in contemporary Indian society, he repeatedly brings to light aspects of human reality that are often obscured, hidden away, or ignored because they are regarded as shameful. Through his plays, Dattani tells us, his readers and audiences, that it is important for us to confront our instincts and prejudices, to acknowledge our limitations, our blindnesses and even the wrongs we may have committed in the past in our dealings with the other human beings around us. Such a confrontation, such an admission of failure and guilt is the only way we can become better men and women. And this confrontation is cued in by Dattani by exposing our minds and visions to the alternative realities that surround us. Indeed, it is because of this that Dattani puts on display the invisible realities that run counter to our understanding of whatever we accept as normative values. Undoubtedly, Mahesh Dattani is an authentic and realistic voice in the arena of contemporary Indian plays written in English.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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