

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *TARA*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a name that guided a faltering Indian English Drama on the path of reliability, steadfastness and distinct identity. A director, actor, dancer, teacher, and writer, he was born on August 7, 1958. He writes about the marginalized sections of our society such as minorities, women, gays, and transsexuals. His works deal with burning social issues of contemporary Indian society. His plays have been staged to critical acclaim all over the country and abroad. He, in his plays, keeps women at the centre of his dramatic world and may be called an *avant-garde* feminist. His plays not only bring up gender issues and the space allotted to women in a patriarchal society, but also they deal with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of many girl-children even amongst educated, urban families.

In the present paper a study is made on Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* that explores the fate of the women in general and fate of the girl child in particular in rural or urban Indian families. It speaks about male chauvinism prevalent in the present form and brings about the stark reality of the woman playing fiddle to man. It is a comment on the predicament of women in the past, reflects the status of women in the present and dramatizes the complexities of the social setup. It is contextual and relevant in the light of the increasing incidents of feticide, infanticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. Through this play, Dattani talks of the concerns and perceptions of the new woman and shows how the women are not satisfied with the status of a homemaker bestowed on them by the male dominated society.

In the history of Post-Independence drama in English Mahesh Dattani has occupied a significant place with his multi-faceted personality. In fact, Mahesh Dattani is a name that guided a faltering Indian English Drama on the path of reliability, steadfastness and distinct identity. A director, actor, dancer, teacher, and writer, he was born on August 7, 1958. He writes about the marginalized sections of our society such as minorities, women, gays, and transsexuals. His works deal with burning social issues of contemporary Indian society. His plays have been staged to critical acclaim all over the country and abroad. Alyque Padamsee says regarding him, "At last we have playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an

identity.” He has used the contemporary sensational social issues as a theme for his plays such as – Gender discrimination in *Dance like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), and *Bravely Fought Queen* (1991), Communalism in *Final Solutions* (1993), Gay community in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), Status of hijras (eunuchs) in *Seven Circles Round the Fire* (1998), Victims of incest in *30 Days in September* (2001), and Incest, gender bias, and death in *Brief Candle* (2009). All these plays embody many of the classic concerns of the drama world. His plays not only bring up gender issues and the space allotted to women in a patriarchal society, but also they deal with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of many girl-children even amongst educated, urban families.

Dattani enjoys the distinction of being the first and only Indian English playwright to win Sahitya Akademi award for his play *Final Solutions* in 1998 thereby becoming a morale booster for other playwrights of Indian drama in English. He is the true successor of Girish Karnad and largely responsible for the revolutionary progress of English drama. He, in his plays, keeps women at the centre of his dramatic world and may be called an *avant-garde* feminist. His plays not only bring up gender issues and the space allotted to women in a patriarchal society, but also they deal with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of many girl-children even amongst educated, urban families. They are also marked for dealing with commonplace themes in the language of common people expressing their hope, aspirations, desire, frustration, joy and anguish, and effort to cope with their day-to-day problems. In the words of Shubhra Tripathi,

He has the courage to discuss unconventional themes like homosexuality, men pursuing dance as career, pain and suffering of conjoined twins, and child sexual abuse.¹

As a founder of a performing arts group called ‘Playpen,’ Dattani produced quite a few plays of his and also those of others. Though he is known for his powerful play *Final Solutions*, his equally powerful play *Tara* has won acclaim of the theatre audience in the world. The play was performed as *Twinkle Tara* in 1990 in Bangalore and won tremendous response from the public. But, next year, when it was staged in Mumbai, it was called *Tara*. According to Mithila Kumari,

Dattani is pre-occupied with age-old prejudices, traditions, and the emergency of new woman in this play. He has focused on the relative status of male and female child, and has shown how women are also to blame for their predicament.²

*Tara*³ gives us a glimpse into the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced into thought and action. It speaks about male chauvinism prevalent in the present form and brings about the stark reality of the woman playing fiddle to man. It is a comment on the predicament of women in the past, reflects the status of women in the present and dramatizes the complexities of the social setup. The play is an exhortation to the society to shed the age old prejudices against women and have a progressive outlook. It is contextual and relevant in the light of the increasing incidents of feticide, infanticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. It is not just the story of the protagonist of the play, but it is the story of every girl child born in Indian family whether urban or rural. Dattani, in an interview, answered to the question of ‘what gave him the idea for the play’ thus:

Well, basically, it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated, and, of course, they were invariably of the same sex and there was this thing about a fused leg and which had the qualities of both 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 but 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 a cultural distinction and prejudices as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and female self ...⁴

The play is divided into two acts. The scene of action is a suburb of London where Chandan, who is referred to as Dan, recollects his childhood days spent with his sister Tara. He is trying to write a story about his own childhood days but drops the idea and writes Tara's story. The entire story moves around Tara and Dan as they are Siamese twins at birth. When a major operation to separate them is planned, it is discovered that the pair has three legs between them. The medical doctor, Thakkar and his team suggest that the third leg would survive better on the girl, so that she could be normal. According to the doctor the boy would have to do with an artificial leg. But pressure is brought on the surgeon by Patel, who is supposed to become Chief Minister very soon, to give the boy two legs, though he knows that the boy's body will reject the leg. The reason is that they prefer the male child because he will carry forward the family name, and on the contrary, the word girl is a synonym for 'dowry.' The situation becomes worse, if the girl is physically challenged or there is any physical or mental deformity in her, then the dowry too will not work out. She will remain unmarried and bring defame to family. At last, the surgeon is silenced by a bribe. His worst fears come true. This results in Dan becoming a cripple while Tara is already a crippled one. What hurts Tara most is the fact that preference is given to the boy simply because he belongs to the dominant sex. She also realizes that she is denied of the opportunity of becoming a normal human being simply because she is a female. The play ends with a reverie of Dan where he and his sister hug each other happily. Thus, the play about every girl child born in an Indian family who suffers from some kind of exploitation, if there is a boy child in the family, and how the mistreatment is very much visible as consciously or unconsciously through all the privileges that are offered to the son. Sushma Seth is of the opinion that

Tara is the story of conjoined twins separated at birth, by a surgical procedure intended to favour the boy over the girl. Told through boy's reflections on his childhood memories, Tara's story is also a reflection of the feminine struggle for expression both physically and emotionally in a patriarchal Indian society.⁵

Tara, though the main character of the play, has been a victim of the social prejudices against women, she has all the traits of an emerging new woman. She is more enthusiastic and full of jest and spark of life. She has high aspiration which she cannot accomplish because of her handicapped state. She bears some kind of grudge against the society. She seems to have some kind of hatred towards the outside world. Her world is compressed and consists of her parents and her brother whom she is very close to. She is a lively girl who wants to twinkle and shine, just like her name. But she does not get enough opportunities as his brother gets, eventually wastes away, and dies. She symbolizes the modern society, which claims to be liberal and

advanced. But in fact it is a cripple mentality. Though her parents are educated they show a marked difference between male and female child. They, particularly her father, feel that giving equal opportunities to men and women is not always justifiable. Dattani in one of his interviews with Laxmi Subramanyam says thus:

I see Tara as a play about the male self and female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst.⁶

When Tara comes to know that it was her mother, whom she trusted most, made a decision to give the leg to boy, she cannot bear this truth and the shock takes away her life. She is not dead, but she is killed by the society. Otherwise, Tara could have made her boldness, her strength and fight the society to engrave a place of her own. She is more intelligent, sharp and witty and has performed much better than the male child, if only she had been given a chance by giving a leg to her. She is not deterred by the injustice done to her, but thinks that,

There are thousands of poor sick people on the roads who could be given care and attention, and I think I know what I will make of myself. I will be a cure for those people. I --- I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those. --- starving naked millions everywhere. May be 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 can do it, can't I? I will be very happy if I could because that is really what I want. That really --- [with emotion]. Oh!, bullshit I don't care. I don't care for anyone except mummy! (370).

The above statement easily shows that Tara is not deterred by the injustice done to her by her parents. She presents herself as an empowered lady to face all the hurdles. She also shows her sympathy towards the downtrodden.

Tara is discouraged from the very first day of her life. She was bubbly and energetic girl who had all the qualities of a normal girl. If her parents had given her moral support, she might have shone like a star as her name signifies. She would have been a source of cheerfulness and happiness to the family. A complete life could have done wonders and she would have scored the limits which her brother Chandan could not have. Her life was considered to be a burden on this earth because of her physical incompleteness. This made her lose interest in life altogether. Further, she refuses to go to physiotherapy or fill forms for college. It is noteworthy that discrimination with Tara continues, even after her death. Chandan, who was always interested in writing a story, makes the story, he writes, his own tragedy. At the end of the play, Dan apologizes to Tara for doing this, "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (380).

Indian society that values men and male qualities more than women and female traits gives a striking twist to Dattani's *Tara*. It reflects Dattani's concerns and perceptions of the problems arising out of clash of values, old and new. He reflects on the predicament of women in the past, comments on their status in the present. The play dramatizes his understanding of who considers responsible for their predicament and exhorts us to shed our age-old prejudices in order to have peace and harmony in family and society. There was a time when women accepted unhesitatingly the do's and don'ts men decided for them but refuse to accept that that somebody else should decide and wants to shape her life and priorities the way she considers proper:

CHANDAN : If daddy wants to stop her from saying something to us, maybe it is not good for us to hear it.

TARA : And who decides what's good for us to hear and what isn't. (354)

From the above dialogue, one may get the impression that Tara is speaking like a new woman. She easily represents the status and the attitudes of women in society.

Through this play, Dattani talks of the concerns and perceptions of the new woman and shows how the women are not satisfied with the status of a homemaker bestowed on them by the male dominated society. He also delineates their aspirations when he shows how Bharati insists that Tara and not the members of her family must decide what she wants for herself. She tells Chandan what she expects to do these days:

BHARATI : It is time Tara decided what she wants to be women have to do that as well these days. She must have career.

CHANDAN : She can do whatever she wants. Grandfather's trust will leave us both with money, isn't it?

BHARATI : Yes. But she must have something to do! She can't be aimless all her life. (326)

The women who belong to Bharati's generation are eulogized by men for their beauty. Even such women would love to enjoy when men appreciate their charm. But Tara, the new woman gives importance to her intelligence because she knows very well what she requires to live meaningfully. In the play, Tara and Roopa belong to two different classes. Their perceptions differ. Roopa accepts the predicament of girls in society and narrates what the Patel's did without any sounding concern. But Tara is surprised when she learns from Roopa the fate that waits a new born girl child.

ROOPA : Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. However, this is what I have heard. The Patel's 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.

TARA : In milk?

ROOPA : So when people asked about how the baby died they could say that she choked while drinking her milk. (327)

These lines reveal that Dattani, in the play, talks about female infanticide and expresses his views on how new born girls are kills and how insensitive the people have become.

Men always think that there are certain activities which are purely meant for women. If the men see any boy doing a work which is earmarked for girls, such boys are ridiculed for doing what they are not supposed to do. Chandan, for instance in the play, helps his mother in knitting. But Patel, the father of Chandan, does not like this. Naturally he develops a kind of hatred towards his son because he considers knitting is a girl's activity. Chandan believes in cooperation and equality while Patel doesn't believe in cooperating in women's activities and the vision of his son's generation. Patel represents the attitude of his generation that believes in blatant discrimination and ridicules the advocates of equality for women in society.

Men cannot accept the woman's intellect, and gets intimidated by her intelligence. Tara's victory, in the play, at the card game is seen as thorough cheating and Chandan is ashamed to admit her victory. Chandan sees her as a good business woman because she cheats at cards; not attributing it to her business acumen, but to her shrewdness. Tara gets hurt at this remark as it holds no truth value. Not only Chandan, even Patel ignores her future prospects and the need to engage her in any meaningful endeavour. She is forced to conform to the stereotype of the Indian Woman devoid of any intellect, deemed fit only to perform mechanical household chores. In other words she is treated as a domestic animal, which can be cared for, but not

regarded with respect. Tara quips at this: “The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave” (328). She highlights the plight of women who were presumed to be suitable for the domestic domain only. Thus, the play as a whole depicts the relegation of the relevance of the Woman, and her upper edge whenever it does assert itself in a male-dominated society. This is the reason why the Grandfather and the Mother who represent tradition prefer the male over the female; the Male is the archetypal successor or prototype of cultural progeny. This explains why the author names the play after the female child whose identity is demoted otherwise; in order to invert the dialectical pair male/female. The woman has always been hailed in philosophy, but in practice she is treated as an object to be overlooked. As Virginia Woolf asserts in her *A Room of One's Own* “Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history.”⁷

Mr. Patel, Tara's father, is an emblem of male chauvinism. He holds the absolute position in decision making about the family. Bharati has to follow his wish. She is a pathetic victim of patriarchy. She exceptionally cares for Tara, to overcome her own guilt. Tara represents the subaltern and the subjugated. She does not have any choice but to accept whatever is given to her. The suffering of Tara and Chandan is a symbolic validation to the perception that the elegance of the relationship exists not in their separateness but in their moving in a coordination or interdependence. Erin Mee says thus:

Dattani sees *Tara* as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is ‘male’, but many people in India see it as a play about the girl child.⁸

Patel's attitude is always negative. He blames his wife and father-in-law for the damage done earlier, but his position cannot be denied. He gives greater chances to Chandan, plans for his education and future career, but nothing for Tara. No consideration whatsoever for Tara's feelings. Tara is a victim of collective social system. Her father is not much different from her mother. She had favoured Chandan at the time of operation and then onwards their father has preferred Chandan. When it is about education or other facilities, he only thinks of his son. He makes Bharati responsible for everything and gets an escape from his responsibilities. He says,

... Look at the way you treat Tara. As if she is made of glass. You coddle her, you pet her, you spoil her, She's grown up ... feeling she doesn't need anyone but you! (351)

Patel thinks that Chandan would rot if he stays at home. But Chandan refuses to go to office without Tara and never thinks that his decision of not going to office is unusual because he believes that his father never shares others perceptions. Chandan and his father are two poles apart. When Patel tells Chandan that his grandfather has left him a lot of money, Chandan's immediate question is how much he has left for Tara. But Patel doesn't give any answer to this question. Instead, Patel thinks there is nothing wrong in his father's decision of leaving to grandson. The dialogues run thus:

PATEL : He [grandfather] left you a lot of money

CHANDAN : And Tara.

PATEL : Nothing

CHANDAN : Why?

PATEL : It was his money. He could do what he wanted with. (360)

The theme is innovative for it deals with the perennial familial theme. Secondly like Bernard Shaw's play *The Doctor's Dilemma* it concerns itself with the greedy nature of Doctors.

Tara, the protagonist of the play, is a woman who becomes a prey to the decision of the elders in her family. Two themes are conveniently intertwined in this powerful play. Firstly, Tara becomes a prey to the pressures of the members of her family to have a boy. Secondly, like Ridgeon in Shaw's play, the greed of doctors is also very well depicted in this play. In the play, Dattani is concerned with the feeling of guilt-complex due to a wrong decision and its repercussions, mother prejudicing children against their father, the dowry system, and the materialistic approach of medical professionals. Besides these overtly expressed themes, there are, as Erin Mee in his notes on the play rightly observes,

Woven into the play are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern life styles and values.⁹

It is pertinent to comment on the dramatic art of Dattani in this powerful play. In the words of M.K. Naik, "A noteworthy feature of Dattani's play is its technical virtuosity."¹⁰ As a theatre person Dattani makes the maximum use of 'theatre space making' which yields the maximum dramatic spaces. There are three 'stage spaces,' in this play namely, the multi-level set representing the house of Patels, the next representing the bedsitter of the older Chandan. On the higher level there is the operation theatre of Dr. Thakkar. Each space is lighted up when action is centered there. As in Tennessee William's play *The Glass Menagerie*, Dan introduces other characters to the audience. Thus, this technique of using 'theatre space' would produce tremendous effect on the audience. A play within the play is witnessed as Dan is writing a script of a drama known as "Twinkle Tara" which has comprehensive connotation as Tara is protagonist of the drama under discussion and also the literal meaning of the twinkling star. The play suddenly takes the shape of flashback and action suddenly moves back towards Mumbai where Dan and Tara had passed their childhood lives. Erin Mee in the introduction to the text remarks thus:

The main point remains in *Tara* is the play about the bias of the parents towards a girl child. In it, Dan discovers the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole.¹¹

To conclude, we may say that Dattani's *Tara* presents the bizarre reality of women playing a secondary role to man and the idea of female infanticide. Tara, as daughter, experiences the maltreatment and partiality from her parents. In fact, the purpose of this play is "to illuminate the minds of female gender for not to give preference to a male child over a female child."¹² Through this play, Dattani stresses women to look back at their journey of life. They must be like Tara and become women in real sense. The play also humbly suggests the mother not to become upset at girl's birth, not to treat their girl children contemptuously, and not to stop them from scaling newer heights in their life to come.

The play enthrallingly questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways. It shows the status of women in the 21st century. Though women repeatedly prove themselves to be successful in every field, the deep rooted gender discrimination continues among even the affluent and educated people living in a so-called modern life in the metropolitan cities. It enquires how women are not made to think or decide what to do but simply submit to the wishes of man. Women as a mother, a wife, a daughter, and as a sister turn out only to be 'women, submitting to their wills and losing their own identity.'

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A Brief Bio-Note

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