

GENDER DISCRIMINATION: A SOCIAL EPIDEMIC REFLECTED IN MAHESH DATTANI'S TARA

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Abstract

Violation of women's right has become a social epidemic. Every year thousands of women are tortured and killed in different circumstances and millions of women throughout the country live on abject deprivation. The most importation factor in women's subordination is seen because of India's patriarchal society where men are superior and women are thought as inferior. Mahesh Dattani 'a fresh arrival' in the domain of English drama in the last decade of the 20th century is one of the India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights in English. His play Tara , circles around the severe and traditional issues of gender biasing prevailed in Indian society. Through this play he has succeeded to touch the hearts of his audience as well as his readers.He attributes Tara an identity who is suffering from identity crisis in this modern gender biased society.

Key words: Gender discrimination, identity crisis, conservative society etc.

Human rights are intrinsic to all human beings irrespective of nationality, place, sex, colour, caste, religion or any other position. But, unfortunately, violation of women's right has become a social epidemic. All most all the countries of the world, irrespective of their advanced or backward socio-economic conditions have not been free from this malpractice. Every year thousands of women are tortured and killed in different circumstances and millions of women throughout the country live on abject deprivation. To look at this, the Government of India has taken many steps to improve the position of women in India . Many amendments are provided to secure the position and status of them like the Domestic Violence Act, the indecent representation of Women Act, Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention Act) etc. But no fruitful result is seen throughout the country. Today the ground reality is that women are suffering from severe discrimination as manifested in India's Sex Ratio 940/1000. (Census, 2011)

Gender inequality really becomes the foremost issue of violation of women's rights in India today. The most importation factor in women's subordination is seen because of India's

patriarchal society where men are superior and women are thought as inferior. All the traditional literature, all social rules and regulations of World- wide from ancient times to now generally have been framed from male perspective. This leads to the neglect of women's rights and their problems. Freedom is attributed to boy but severe restrictions are given to girls, curb on all opportunities for growth and fear instilled to them not to 'cross boundaries'.

Mahesh Dattani 'a fresh arrival' in the domain of English drama in the last decade of the 20th century is one of the India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights in English. Besides prolific and prominent Indian playwright, writing in English, Mahesh Dattani is also well- known as a film maker, stage director, screen writer with several scripts and productions to his credit. His plays have been anthologized in single volume called *Collected Plays* by Penguin. Most of his plays have been translated and performed in regional languages of India and have been included in the syllabus of several Indian and foreign Universities and schools.

Success has become darling for Dattani, after he has turned the first playwright in English to receive the Sahitya Academy Award for his collection *Final Solution and Other Plays* in 1998. This highest award for long literary work in the country has opened a new door for debate, analysis and critical appraisal of dramas in the spectrum of Indian English Literature. Dattani, after receiving the prestigious award, speaks:

“Well I think this has been really a kind of endorsement that Indian English Theatre in the country has been looking for, because until now it seems as if it belonged to a fringe section of society and that it was seen as not quite theatre, not quite art, that it was more of a kind of theatre club of thing. And perhaps justifiably so. I am not saying that it is not entirely unwarranted that feeling and opinion. But I think since so much has actually happened and there has been a serious attempts to, you know, have a kind of movement in this direction. Because there are English speaking people and there enough people who want to do theatre and sight in the language, so this has been a kind of endorsement of that efforts.”⁽¹⁾

Besides being a dramatic artist, Dattani is a sociologist who raises some prominent issues concerning the various maladies, contaminating the healthy tissues of the Indian society. He has created images, characters and plots echoed with the reality of today and bares life to bones and acts as a spokesman for all marginalized people. His main intention is to expose the malicious, ugly and unhappy things of life. He makes places into the group of writers who advocate the cause of true art from theory, universal in taste and essence, appealing to all sections of society, never bound to any caste, class and creed. So, daring and innovative, Dattani has made Indian drama in English, a major genre of social critique today. The theme of his plays bear the testimonial of varying tone, temperament and treatment which are heavily charged with socio-political, emotional and psychological issues like HIV positive, eunuch, physically challenged people, gay, lesbian, gender- identity, revelation and the pressure of the past, the hollowness of middle class life in urban India, Hindu- Muslim hostility, catching up in the current of capitalism etc. He has an ability to amalgamate the traditional beliefs with ultra- modern disposition and conviction through his stage plays, radio and screen plays. The theme of the family covers a large chunk of his plays where its members are found to be struggling and wrestling with one another. The best example of such play is *Tara* which circles around the severe and traditional issues of gender biasing. The play is contextual and pertinent in the light of the escalating

incidents of foeticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. On the question of what gave him idea for the play, Tara, Mahesh Dattani said:

“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 or female self and half of the female self is, whether your gender is male or female, is definitely given the lower priority”.(2)

Women and gender discrimination is a violation of women’s right becomes a global phenomenon. Dattani has presented this bizarre reality of the women who are playing second fiddle to men through his play *Tara*. One of Dattani’s best loved plays the world over, *Tara* addresses questions of gender through ‘bias against girl child’. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramaniam, Dattani has himself made a statement-

“I see *Tara* is a play about male self and female self, and the male self being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst”.(3)

In these lines of Dattani, it becomes amply clear that this play is being enacted as a microcosm of practices and psyche of the society. History has been witnessed to a cruel and inherent bias against its female members since ages. Many changes are seen in societies, but the politics of gender have never been completely erased from its face. Invariably, it is the society which assumes a deterministic role over the life of a girl, which ordains tenets for their existences. As human being, every couple has a desire to be blessed with child. But unfortunately, most of the Indians no longer consider it a blessing, if the child happens to be a girl, because the trends of son preference is a well-documented fact which is deeply imbedded in most of the parts of the Indian society for centuries. An Indian proverb expresses this disdain for daughter more colourfully ‘raising a daughter is like watering a shady tree in someone else’s courtyard.’ Even, many parents, while going through abortion have been heard to say to unborn girl ‘We donot need you; send your brother’. They expect that son will provide emotional and social care to parents in their old age. This preference for son over daughter is driven by the mentality of the most of the Indian parents and how a girl child has to face unnecessary sufferings by her physical deformity given by the family is reflected in Dattani’s *Tara*. The whole drama is circling round one dark secret and its exposure. The twin: *Tara* and *Chandan* are successfully operated and separated by Dr. *Thakkar*. They have three legs between them and the third leg is supplied by *Tara*’s blood system. The probability of the leg’s survival is greater with *Tara*. But *Bharati* (*Tara*’s mother) and her influential father have decided to join the third leg to

Chandan. In the pursuit of acquiring this nasty design, the doctor is bribed with plot of land in Bangalore by Bharati's powerful and political father. Patel, the father of the children could not object muscularly enough and he also ultimately has become accomplice of this mean conspiracy. The leg that has survived only for two days with Chandan could have been accompanied with Tara forever, but Tara is divested. The only fault of her is that 'she is a girl'.

Indian society has been rapidly changing and people are coming out fast from their homes to earn independently, yet the socio-economic conditions of India have not been altogether altered. Still, man appears to be better placed than women in every position. Dattani has very deftly dealt with the fate waiting, for the girl child. The social norms, economic standard and cultural factors, combine to create the social norms in which the girl child has to live and die. Tara is killed by this social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. Her potentiality is sacrificed at the altar of gender discrimination by this revelation that has been ultimately done by her own parents and grand father. This decision is not on the basis of medical ground but due to gender biasness which is deeply rooted in our society.

In this play, Dattani plays with the idea of female infanticide and hegemonic patriarchy that are prevailed among the Gujratis, when he exposes the grandfather's indulgence for Chandan by leaving his property after his demise and not a single amount to Tara. What an irony the grand father is playing. He himself a social reformer, but he discriminates his own grand-daughter. His thinking is a testimony of the kind of treatment that is meted out to girls in Indian society.

Mr. Patel: (father of Tara) and Chandan are talking:

Patel: He (Grand father) left you a lot of money.

Chandan: And Tara?

Patel: Nothing.

Chandan: Why?

Patel: He could do what he wanted to do.(4)

Patel, the father has also played a negative attitude towards his daughter in someway. He thinks that son should obviously given the greater chance than his daughter. So, he continuously favours Chandan for higher education in abroad, and to have a bright career, though, Tara is more sincere in her studies. No plan is made for her future career. What an irony! A great gap! A step-motherly treatment! Even today, inspite of fundamental improvement in women's status, in India, the conservative and superstitious mind of large number of people are against the higher education of girls. Bharati tells Chandan:

"I wish your father would pay more attention to Tara. He is more worried about your career than hers."(5)

Tara is dearly loved by her father, but he has lofty expectation from his son. He insists Chandan to join him at his office and says a big "No", when Chandan says:

" We'll both come with you".(6).

It shows that Tara is worthy of some human consideration and compassion but nothing beyond that. This ethos is articulated in a powerful dialogue by Bharati's address to Chandan—

"It's all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes Chandan, the world will tolerate you. The world will accept you-but not her!"(7)

Chandan also knows that Tara is capable of facing the world on her own way. Therefore he says -"She'll make a greater business woman"(8).

But no consideration is given for her feelings that what she wants. Really, Tara is the victim of this collective social system. Elucidating the context of gender discrimination in the drama, Dattani speaks in an interview:

“Well, I think it is the revelation in the end about, you know, Tara’s love for her mother which until then was unquestionable. She suspected her father for having done something, you know, was in some way, but she had no idea what it was, but her love, her mother’s love was unquestioned and she did not question that, so when she comes to know of the truth of what we, I mean, we only have the father’s version. We don’t know whether that is the real truth or no again, but it does sort of break her away like a shooting star from the mother, and I think with that she –that’s tragedy, she dies, but we know that’s the end of Tara, and I think that’s somehow all the attitudes towards Tara and relationship between her mother, her father and her brother, which we see through the play. In hindsight you can see where it was coloured or where it was blinkered or where it was being compensated for.”(9)

Bharati, the mother exhibits hollow sympathy and empathy towards Tara and does all attempts to bring ill repute for Patel in the eyes of her daughter. But when Tara learns from her father about the true account of her separation from her brother, her mind swings too far. Love for her mother turns into hatred. She says:

‘And she called me her star!’(10).

Being a mature girl, now Tara gradually learns that her friends consider her status as secondary. At their hands she feels humiliated. She has started to realize that she can do nothing but live as a parasite as a burden to others. In an emotional speech she tells to Chandan:

“ Oh, what a waste! A waste of money. Why spend all the money to keep me alive? It cannot matter whether I live or die. There are thousands of poor on the roads who could be given care and attention, and I think I know what I will make of myself..... May I can start an institution that will do all that. Or I could join Mother Teresa and sacrifice myself to a greater cause.”(11)

This above statement shows that Tara is an energetic girl who has all the qualities of a normal girl. If she has been given moral support by her parents, she might have shown like a star as her name signifies. Unfortunately, she feels her life becomes a burden on this earth. At the end, Tara, the bright star dies. Her complete life could have done wonders and she would have scored the limits which her brother Chandan could have. But her potentiality is sacrificed under the cruel hands of a gender-biased society.

It is noteworthy that discrimination against Tara continues after her death also. Chandan, who has always been interested in writing, has come to England for higher studies. He transferred himself into a Don and has started to write his own tragedy by apologizing to Tara for doing this-“Forgive me Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy.”(12)

Through this play, Dattani shows an overwhelming relevance to contemporary reality. It is important to make an overview in this context that what is significant is the use of the medium of theatre to deliver the messages which are strong and need to be thought properly. In an interview about Tara, Dattani clearly mentions that evoking sympathy about Tara’s character is not only focusing this writing exercise but also casts light on the feminine sensibility of males, which when expressed is met with disappointment. It is a system of discrimination against women.

In this journey, Dattani makes comment to one of the burning topics of the 21st century which is perceived in our cultural milieu. Through this play he has succeeded to touch the hearts of his audience as well as his readers. He attributes Tara an identity who is suffering from identity crisis in this modern gender biased society.

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