



## THE UNDETECTABLE ISSUE OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *TARA*

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### ABSTRACT

*Mahesh Dattani is a well-known celebrated modern Indian – English playwright. His plays always deal with the intricate dynamics of the modern urban family. In his many plays, he aptly deals with various issues like homo sexuality, gender discrimination, and socialism and child sexual exploitation. Dattani is a playwright who challenged the edifice of Indians as they have been presented in the modern English theatre. This paper is a humble attempt to study the gender-based injustice and male child preference over the female child in an Indian family. The play Tara deals with the emotional disjoining of two Siamese twins and the manipulation of their mother and grandfather to favor the boy child over the girl child. This play also deals with the issues of class and society and conventional values.*

**Key Word** - Urban family, homo sexuality, gender discrimination, socialism, child sexual exploitation, conventional values.

### INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani, the most unorthodox and contemporary playwright of Indian English drama has used the medium of stage to present the invisible issues to the audience as theatre is the mirror of real life. Erin Mee calls Dattani “a young playwright who can create a new generation in the Indian English Drama which deals with the invisible social issues”.<sup>1</sup> Dattani has won Sahitya Akadami award for English literature for his play *Final Solutions*. Dattani puts Drama on a very high platform and argues, “Well, I think this is a wrong perception prevailing among the academics, especially the view that writing for the stage is inferior to



writing a novel or writing poetry. I think it is important to keep in mind that the playwright is actually an artisan.”<sup>2</sup>

*Tara* is the third work of Mahesh Dattani. This two-act play was published earlier as *Twinkle Tara*. This heartbreaking story of two Siamese twins addresses the question of gender in many ways. The play *Tara* is narrated by Chandan, the male half of the whole of which the ‘other’ is Tara. Mahesh Dattani has presented a very strange reality of the Indian society in which woman is enemy of woman. This play is about the courage and spirit of a handicapped girl-child, a Siamese twin born in a Gujarati family.

Mahesh Dattani mentions in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramanyam : “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.”<sup>3</sup>

Erin Mee writes in the note of the play “*Tara* centers on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favor the boy [Chandan] over the girl [Tara]. Tara, a feisty girl who isn’t given the opportunities given to her brother [although she may be smarter] eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name to Dan, and attempts to repress the guilt he feels over his sister’s death by living without a personal history. Woven into the play are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values.”<sup>4</sup>

The twins have three legs between them with the major blood supply vein in the girl’s side. However, as tradition requires, it is essential for the boy to survive with two legs. She (Tara) could have survived but her mother takes decision to give the extra leg to her twin brother, Chandan. Tara’s mother has allowed a leg to be amputated from her Siamese twin even though fate has its own plans and Chandan’s leg is not accepted by his body resulting in another amputation. Perhaps it would have suited Tara’s. In the whole play Dattani spreads a bitter truth of child abuse deeply rooted in the Indian society. 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 favors what is ‘male’, but many people in India see it as a play about the girl child.<sup>5</sup> Every girl child born in an Indian family suffers some or the other kind of mistreatment. Dattani’s *Tara* is a typical woman character and she has been extensively acclaimed and differently interpreted on gender and race. Dattani boldly expresses the exploitation of Indian women in his work as it is very much visible in Indian society, as the privileges are intentionally given or would women be ever considered equal to man, is a big question to be answered by every individual and the society at large. There is differentiation between a male and a female child. All half truths about equality of male and female as well



as the claims about providing equal opportunities to women in all the fields are artificial. Dattani has brutally opened all the forbidden subjects from under layer of society and put them on the theater for the public to review.

The play *Tara* revolves around Chandan and Tara Patel. A dangerous operation is done to separate the twins at the time of birth which leaves Tara crippled for life. The play explores and exposes the typical Indian mind set which has preferred a boy child to a girl child. Discrimination, prejudice, double standards of society and age-old myths are all examined; what appears is a work that provokes and disturbs. The fact that the discrimination is done by the victim's own mother (as mostly countryside Indian women does ) whose preference to the male child makes the play more heartbreaking and suggests indirectly that it is woman, not man who continue the sequence of injustice to woman right from the minute of their birth. *Tara* is not just the story of the protagonist of the play. It is about the story of a girl child born in any traditional orthodox Indian family. This situation gets aggravated and turns worse if the girl is physically or mentally handicapped. It is a better example of child-abuse that is common in every section of the Indian society. Every girl child born in an Indian family does undergo some kind of exploitation and is very much aware of it as the privileges that are denied to them are deliberately or involuntarily provided to the sons. Mr. Patel is always conscious of the insult that Bharati had often put on him by using her father's prosperity as a force of strength against him. It was the same strength that Bharati had used in taking the unfair decision of separation of the Siamese twins through surgery.

Indian societies have always a patriarchy perception. All decisions in family are taken only by the elder male of the family. Even if there is a female member who is elder to the male, she is not given as much authority as the male. Mr. Patel's father-in-law, the elder in his family, is a powerful and prosperous politician. He bribes the doctor Dr. Thakkar with the sanction of a piece of land in Bangalore for his hospital. Dr. Thakkar falls from his high status in the society. Instead of taking a right medical decision of leaving the leg with Tara, he sold his conscience for the lure to fulfill his ambition. Mr. and Mrs. Patel are warned by the surgeon that in almost all the cases of such kind, one of the twins always dies by the age of four. Being aware of this crucial fact, they cause wrong to the innocent girl - child Tara. Tara effectively serves its dramatic purpose to bring out the significance and tenderness of a girl to prove her guts in the world of male supremacy. The name Tara correctly suggests a star; the child is a bright and a shining star that is a source of happiness for her family. Dan can't have a complete life but for Tara. Tara has been shown as a female character with guts while her brother has shown unimaginative. The father of the two, however, is tense upon securing the future of the boy. The conversation between Bharati and Chandan reflects Bharati's concern about her daughter.



*Bharati: "I wish your father would pay more attention to Tara."*

*Chandan: "He does. He does not like to show his affection."*

*Bharati: "Do not tell me about your father. He is more worried about your career than hers." <sup>6</sup>*

Tara's potentiality is sacrificed in the name of gender. Identity crisis becomes a chain with which a female is chained when the question of choice between male and female arises. After failure of surgery, Bharati is full of guilt as she has spoiled the life of her daughter. She tries to overcome this feeling of guilt by giving excessive love and care to Tara. Her concerns are explicit when she says, "Yes. I plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It's what she...deserves. Love can make up for a lot." <sup>7</sup>

Her feeling of guilt makes her mentally disturbed. The quarrels between husband and wife also increase leading to tension in family. She tries to lessen her guilt by transferring blame to her husband and proving that she loves Tara more than he does. Patel remarks, "You know she loves you. You're sure of that. Don't make her choose between us, for God's sake! You are ruining her life because you are sick. I want to help you, Bharati, please allow me to help you." <sup>8</sup>

Bharati even bribes Roopa to play with Tara. "Roopa says: And to think I pitied you! Oh! I think you are disgusting! I only come here because your mother asked me to. No, she didn't ask me, she bribed me to be your best friend. Yes, your loony mother used to give me things....Now that she's finally gone crazy; I guess she won't be giving me much. So goodbye." <sup>9</sup> Bharati's guilt drives her to insanity.

The society is a structure in which everyone has to live and die. Tara is killed by social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. At the end of the play, Dattani shows Chandan apologizing to Tara in some heart-touching lines. In order to overcome his sense of separation and guilt consciousness Dan decides to compose his autobiography in which Tara naturally appears as an indispensable character reminding Chandan that how life was exasperating and alone without her. Dan apologies to Tara for doing this "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy." <sup>10</sup> Tara is not merely an individual character but she rises as an epitome, an emblem of the Indian girl child who is defeated and calm in the name of tradition and modernity. In the play, Mahesh Dattani not only aptly shows how girls are subjected to prejudice in an educated society but also stresses upon the fact that how the discrimination is done by women.



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