



THE NEGLECTED VOICE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S TARA

UMAR ALTAF SOF

Research Scholar
Bhagwant University, Ajmer, Rajasthan
(RJ) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one of the leading and contemporary playwrights in English. He is a versatile dramatist who is known as an actor, a playwright and a director. A celebrated dramatist in Indian English Literature and the first playwright to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award. Mahesh Dattani born in Bangalore and graduated in History, Economics and Political Science. Dattani started his career as a copy writer and became a full-time theatre professional. His play's highlight societal issues and deep unstructured lives of people and their social conditions. In most of his plays Dattani talks about the invisible issues like, gender prejudice, homo-sexuality, sexual abuse and its impact, gender identity and other social issues. This paper focuses on the character Tara an identical twin with three legs who is forced to be killed. The paper brings out the conception of 'HE' 'she' even right from the birth of a child. The play Tara highlights the emotional separation of two conjoined twins and the influence of their mother and grandfather to favor the "Boy" child over the "girls" baby. The play Tara opens with the character Chandan known as Dan who recalls his early life which had been spent enjoyably with her sister Tara. Tara is not only a protagonist of the play, but also the story of a girl child born in an Indian family. Tara is an example of women exploitation in the society.

Key Words: Exploited, Gender prejudice, Sexual Abuse, Social issue

INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is an Authentic Contemporary Voice of Indian Social and Cultural milieu. He is an intellectual heavyweight Sahitya Academy winner with a tremendous insight into Indian theatre. Dattani uses his studio at Bangalore as a centre for creative collaboration among playwrights, directors, actors and audience. There is a proper blending of Western intellectual consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques in his plays. Concepts of Brecht's Epic Theatre and the influence of Tennessee Williams, Ibsen could be seen in his plays which emphasizes on the need to alienate the audience from any illusion of reality.

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Tara is the third dramatic work of Mahesh Dattani that deals with the gender discrimination and social consciousness in modern society. of male domination in society. It is not only the story of the hero of the play, but also the story of every girl child born in society, whether urban or rural. Dattani visualizes a character from its birth, he depicts about the fortitude and spirit of a handicapped girl-child Tara. The story alternates between a mother and her father about the girl Tara with conjoined legs. The story is told by Chandan who is a chief character to bring out the destruction of a girls child Tara. The story is narrated from the view of Chandan were the author adds the notion of a society, Male and Female and their lives to live in this Earth. The paper examines a profound inception of a life that is decided upon whether to live or not to live in this Earth, a Siamese twin born in a Gujarati family. She (Tara) could have survived but for her mother's decision to give the third leg to her twin brother, Chandan. Tara's mother had allowed a leg to be amputated from her conjoined twin even though there was a great possibility of the survival of the girl. The remarks of Roopa, the family neighbor that the Gujarat is used to drown their infant daughters in milk turns out to be true in the end. Tara is a typical woman character in Dattani's plays and she has been greatly praised and differently interpreted. "Dattani himself has tried to depict the feminine side of oneself which always has to come to terms with the society which favors male in a male-dominated world." (224 Dattani)

Would women be ever put on the equal footing with men, is a big question to be answered by every individual and the society at large. Tara provides us insight into the double standards of the contemporary society which claims itself to be modern, liberal and advanced in its thinking and action, but is, in reality, not so. It is therefore clear enough to confirm that patriarchy is at work in the present society also. Indian society makes tall claims that its mothers are educated and that it worships and reveres Goddesses (Devis) like Durga, Kali, Saraswati and Laxmi. The Goddesses have been worshipped not only by women folk but also offered obeisance by men folk from time immemorial. Yet there is a world of difference between a male and a female child. All tall claims about equality between men and women are fake and hollow.

Dattani has endeavoured the herculean task of pulling out all the taboo-subjects from under the rug and presenting them on the stage for the masses to see; Dattani's Tara delves deep into the predicament of a Siamese twin. In view of Dattani's vision, it may be safely said that playwrights like Mahesh Dattani, who have courage to deal with such sensitive issues thoroughly and also to lift lid off them, should be encouraged. On the narrative plane, Tara, Dattani's third play, explores the quandry of twins, conjoined at birth, but later separated surgically and emotionally. Underlying this narrative is the true theme – the prejudice injected by the society into the individuals. Discrimination, sexism, hypocrisy and time-bound myths are all scrutinized



Erin.B. Mee, one of the critics whose observations are regarded worth their weight in gold, says in her note on Tara, that Dattani's preoccupations in the play are "the invisible Indian social issues". The critic further says: "Woven into the plays are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern life style and values". The play Tara which talks about the feelings of the Siamese twins is also about "The gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is 'male'. It is not merely about a girl child. Mee quotes one American student of hers as opining' that Tara and Chandan, are the two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan,(Chandan) in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara's story also. As Mee views,"Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole". Mee adds that yet another student felt; "that Dattani focuses on the family as a microcosm of the society in order to dramatize the ways we are socializes to accept certain gendered roles and give preference to what is 'male' (319-20 Dattani)

Yadav, another critic of plays written by Indians in English points out that Tara is about a boy and a girl (not of the same sex) for such twins are "invariably of the same sex". Dattani "takes a medical liberty" and concentrates more in the "emotional separation" of the twins than their surgical separation.

Mahesh Dattani himself had once told Sachidanante Mohanty;"Tara is about a boy and a girl, Siamese twins, I have taken medical liberty over here because Siamese twins are invariably of the same sex and they are surgically separated at birth. It was important for their survival and the play deals with their emotional separation". "The play Tara is also a metaphor for the conjoined and separated male-female entities and the male given preference over the female".

In Tara, we find the ideas of 'forced harmony' recurring as it does in several other plays Dattani has produced, Bravely Fought the Queen, On a muggy Night in Mumbai and a few more. Tara is a play that impugns the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb differently. Dattani's Tara is a touching play about a boy and a girl who are born conjoined (at the hip) and have to be separated surgically, an operation which usually leads to the death of one of the two twins.

The fact that the injustice is done by the victim's own mother whose preference to the male child renders the play more poignant and insinuate that it is women, not men who perpetuate the fetters of injustice to women right from the moment of their birth. One is reminded here of another Indian play with a similar theme Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terror (1980) also castigates the injustice done by a mother on her own daughter. In the play by



Sashi Deshpande Saru's mother does not get reconciled to the birth of a daughter. Intorrential rain had been falling at the time of Saru's birth and is regarded by the mother as a sign of a catastrophe. She displays her dislike of Saru overtly as compared to her brother Dhurva, Dhurva is cut off in the prime of his youth and the mother constantly wishes that her daughter Saru had been dead in his place. This leads to the alienation of the mother and the daughter throughout their lives.

Tara is not just the story of the protagonist of the play. It is about the story of a girl child born in an Indian family (be it urban or rural). The situation takes on a sinister note and turns gets worsened if the girl is physically or mentally handicapped. It is a bitter example of child-abuse that exists in a section of the Indian society. Every girl child born in an Indian family does experience some kind of exploitation and is well aware of it as the privileges that they are deprived of are consciously or unconsciously given to the male child. Sudhir Kakar points out: "In daughterhood, an Indian girl is a sojourn in her own family and with marriage she becomes less a wife than a daughter-in-law. It is only with motherhood that she comes into her own as a woman and she can make a place for herself in the family, community and in her life circle".

The play Tara, according to Dattani, had been inspired by Tennessee William's play The Glass Menagerie, which is based on Tennessee William's real-life story. Tennessee William's father belonged to a middle class family like Tara's father Patel. Tennessee William's mother belonged to an affluent family of the bureaucrats like Mrs. Bharati Patel. Just like the Williams, the Patels also very often quarreled over the place of woman in a family. The similarity is most striking when one considers the fact that in both the families, the mother allows the doctor to perform the surgery which disturbs the life of each and every member of the family. Just like Tennessee, Chandan too was very much attached to his sister. It is he who feels (than any other member of the family) most miserable when Tara suffers.

The play Tara opens in London with Chandan, now a playwright, recalling his past, particularly, the childhood days he had spent happily with his sister Tara. As Mee states; Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole". Dan says: "I have my memories... But now I want them to come back. To masticate my memories in Mind and spit out the result to the world in anger"(37). Mahesh Dattani had disclosed in one of his interviews to Lakshmi Subramanyan that "I see Tara as a play about the male self and the female self. The male self being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst"(129).

The privileged brother Chandan wishes to record his mental anguish over his sister's childhood in a drama. One tends to feel that in Tara she nurses some kind of hatred against



the society throughout the play. There is a kind of aversion with the outside world for Tara's little world consisted of only a few persons: her parents and her brother with whom she was very close. Her affection towards her brother and the internal anguish is articulated in her conversation with Chandan. She says:

"May be we still are. Like we've always been, inseparable. The way we started life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... and separated" (325 Dattani).

Tara explores as well as exposes the typical Indian mindset, which has, down the ages, all the time preferred a boy child to a girl child. The play portrays the victory and the failure of an Indian family, consisting of the father (Patel), the mother (Bharati), and their children (Tara and Chandan), coming to terms with the trauma of disability. This is clearly stated by Dattani himself in his interview to Lakshmi Subramanian:

"I focus on cultural emphasis on masculinity and how all the characters are at conflict with that. The parents, the grandfather the neighbor- they are all in that sense in tension with their own sensibilities, as opposed to cultural sensibilities they may have knowingly or unknowingly subscribed to". (129)

The decision made by Mrs. Patel's renders Tara crippled for life and it is noticed that Mrs. Patel's guilt gets disclosed repeatedly throughout the play. She attempts to make up for this unfortunate and wrong decision (about their daughter) through her excessive concern for her. Her sense of regret is so profound that she gets ready to donate her kidney to her daughter so that she may survive a few more years. While talking to her son, she tells him: "I plan to give her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can live. It's what she... deserves. Love can make up for a lot". (349) As the play progresses, another interesting character, Roopa, gets introduced. She is an impertinent and extremely talkative neighbour of the Patel's family. It is, largely, she who brings the strain of humour to the play. For example, she comments on how dissimilar the twins look:

Roopa: Funny, you don't resemble each other.

Chandan: not all to twins are pea's pods...

Two peas in a pod that's something we aren't Collected plays" (336-337 Dattani).

Roopa explodes into laughter at this description, much to the surprise of the twins. Roopa tells them that the imagery of two 'peas in a pod' is extremely funny. Bharati's unnecessary bullying to Roopa into friendship with Tara and even trying to bribe her into spending more



time with Tara is sickening and cheap. In the interesting conversation between Bharati and her neighbour Roopa shows that Bharati is just ready to do anything for the sake of her hapless child's (Tara) happiness: "You can watch whatever you want! Just be my Tara's friend". Bharati's internal turmoil is so strong that it often comes out in the open in her relationship with her husband. She is always complaining about something of the others. Her father's wealth is always an apple of discord between Mrs. Patel and her husband. Mrs. Patel is often seen humbling to her children about their father and especially about his attitude towards their grandfather. "Your father doesn't want us to use them. He doesn't want us to use any of your grandfather's things"(like tumblers and plates) (325).

Mr. Patel is not able to forget the insult that Bharati had often heaped on him by using her father's wealth as a force of strength against him. It was the same strength that Bharati had employed in making the wrong decision while deciding the mode of separating of the Siamese twins through surgery. Societies in India have always had a male-dominated perception. All decisions in a family are made only by the senior male member 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.

In the case of Dattani's Tara also. Mr. Patel's father-in-law the eldest among the three members of the family is also a force to be reckoned with and an opulent politician. He was the person who decided about the operation in which the conjoined leg was to be given to Chandan instead of Tara. He had even bribed the doctor with the sanction of a piece of land in Bangalore. Dr. Thakkar fell from his high status in the society without giving a second thought, along with his team, while deciding the nature of operation. Instead of taking a sound medical decision of leaving the leg with Tara. He had compromised his principles for his ambitions and the temptation.

Though Mr. and Mrs. Patel were warned by the surgeon that in almost all the cases of such kind, one of the twins always died by the age of four. In spite of this fact they did injustice to the naive girl-child Tara. Tara is neither Chandan's tragedy nor is it really of Tara. The tragic events portrayed in the play are the tragic actions belonging to everybody's life. It is Dattani's world where the playwright picks up various characters from the society; they are all puppets in the hand of their creative artist. Dattani makes the society a backdrop and showcases to us the burning issues of today. In his play Tara Dattani becomes a juggler and juggles with the following relationships: husband and wife relationship, doctor and patient, Son-in-law and father-in-law, parents and children, brother and sister. Among these various relationships the special focus in Tara is on father-daughter, mother-daughter and grandfather-granddaughter relationships. It would not be out of order to recall that Dattani wrote his plays to be seen and heard and not as literature to be read alone. Hence, Tara has a



two - fold purpose: first, to expose the modern educated urban family's adherence to the traditional attitude of favoring anything that is masculine; second, to expose the corruption prevalent in the bureau critic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession.

This gets described by Mr. Patel in his conversation with his children:

"A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl...The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive.... On the girl. Your grand-father and your mother had private meeting with Dr. Thakker. I wasn't asked to come... I couldn't believe what she told me-that they would risk giving both legs to the boy.. The doctor had agreed... It was later I came to know of his intention of starting a large nursing home-the largest in Bangalore. He had acquired three acres of prime land-in the heart of the city-from the state. Your grand-father's political influence had been used... Chandan had two legs for two days. It didn't take them very long to realize what a great mistake they have made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead fish which could have-might have-been Tara" (378 Dattani).

The long speech delivered by Mr. Patel provides the quintessence of the play. The play revolves around the theme as to how the physical separation manipulated by their mother and grand-father to prefer the boy over the girl leads to an emotional vacuum between the two conjoined twins. Tara, the hapless girl who has not been deprived from enough opportunities like her brother, ultimately dies. Chandan attempts to stifle the guilt he feels over Tara's death. He plumbs the depths of trauma and anguish and at the end of the play, Dan apologizes to Tara thus:

*"Forgive me, Tara, Forgive me,
For making it my tragedy" (Dattani 380).*

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