

Dattani's Tara: A Reflection on Indian Society on Injustice and Inequality Bias towards Women

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Abstract— This paper tends to explore the destiny of women in general and specifically the destiny of a girl child in a male chauvinist society. In short it dramatizes the women of the past and the status of the women of the present and predicts the women of the future. This comes out to be quite relevant while throwing light on the context how women are forced to behave, have a particular code of conduct and keep mute what may come but when they demand justice in this patriarchal society, they are doomed. This plays tends to enlighten the minds of women of the present to strengthen themselves and also to enlighten the minds of the female in general. Tara is not merely a fictional character but strongly emerges as an archetype and an icon of the Indian girl child who is forced to be vanquished and remains submissive in this so-called traditional and modern world.

Keywords— Gender, patriarchal society, male chauvinist, archetype, etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

“There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.” - Maya Angelou.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most leading and serious contemporary playwrights in English. A director, actor, and writer, Mahesh Dattani was born on August 7, 1958. In 1986, he produced his first play *Where There's a Will*. There are several other plays written by him like *Tara*, *Night Queen*, *Final Solutions*, *Dance like a Man* and many other. His plays deal with the social, gender and contemporary issues. One of his films *Dance like a Man* has won the award for the best picture in English. His plays and writings focus much on actual life problems.

Tara, a bitter example of child abuse prevalent in the Indian society, is a two-act play which puts in the picture a tale of conjoined twins, a boy and a girl (Chandan and Tara), who are surgically separated with more weightage given to the boy. The operation was so intended that being a boy, Chandan had a due advantage over Tara as he would take the name of the family forward. In this preference, Tara is left disadvantaged, dejected, broken and finally passes away. This simple narrative highlights the subordinate role of women in Indian society where even in the developed modern world, the cultural traditions and the caste system doesn't allow a female to lead a normal life. Indians worshipping Durga, Kali and Saraswati, Sita comes out to be a sham as India only ranks number one in female foeticide, thus bringing the in-rooted societal hypocrisy to the limelight.

As mentioned earlier, Dattani's plays are about the marginalized sections of our society, minorities and women. They also present real problems and sometimes cause

controversy. It also projects issues related to discrimination, including religious prejudice, and homosexuality. The struggle of women in a patriarchal society with gender bias and prejudices are rooted up with power in his plays. In the domain of Indian English Drama, Mahesh Dattani's plays have emerged as 'fresh arrivals'. His works also expresses his political beliefs without being instructive or revolting. According to Erin Mee:

“by pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre. [319]”

Gender inequality – its history, how people experience it in their lives, the way it varies in intensity and form across time and place, the beliefs that make it seem natural, and much more are widely known phenomena. This paper explores gender inequality and psychological facet of women in relation to the character Tara. It will also focus on the ways one can identify and verify the causes of social phenomena which also induces and subjugates womanhood in general. The play *Tara* focuses on gender discrimination in our society. It is not just the story of the protagonist of the play, but it is the story of every girl child born in Indian urban or rural family.

Tara is an enthralling and emphasizing play that questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways. Just like her name, Tara is a girl who wants to twinkle and shine, just like her name. But fate meets its destiny.

This play is about two children, a boy and a girl joined together at the hip, they can be separated only surgically. This surgery means the death of either of the two. The partiality and injustice starts here true to the statement which prevails that a woman herself is the worst enemy of other women. The mother prefers the male child and thus strengthens the chain of injustice. The first thought behind selecting the male child is, he will carry forward the family name, and on the contrary, the word girl is always associated with “dowry”. The situation becomes even worse, if the girl is physically challenged or there is any deformity in her, then the dowry too will not work out and the girl child is to be doomed forever. She will remain unmarried and bring defame to family. Every girl child born in an Indian family suffers from some kind of exploitation and if there is a boy child in the family, the ill-treatment is very much visible as consciously or unconsciously all the privileges are offered to the son.

Dattani as a playwright breaks the unity of place, time and action in the very beginning of the play. After the soliloquy of Dan, when he is shown in London at the lightning speed, then he appears in Mumbai from present to past. Here, he is able to disregard the unities by the help of lighting along with the music effects. Dattani very cleverly uses the lights to highlight the action wherever he wants, at any level without any breaks for change of scene. It is the use of lights and music, which gives the play the feeling of unity of action. Music is so well used that it strengthens and enhances the mood of characters. Faded music for past and flash backs and different music represent typical, natural characteristics, for example when Tara is hurt or fight between Bharti and her husband takes place or when the dark secret is revealed.

He successfully uses the resources of theatre. Like most of his plays, he again forces the present to confront the past – a past that is dark, hidden, and shameful. Dattani suggests that unless we as individuals, families, and communities frankly tackle our past, and sweep off the skeletons in our cupboards, we will not be able to exorcise the ghosts of the past or future which reminds us of an American play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams which like *Tara* is also a memory play. The protagonist Tom Wingfield, works both as a narrator as well as a character in the play [18]. The play, quite similar to *Tara* is also an amalgamation of speeches, music, and painful memories.

Tara opens in London. The scene is that, Chandan, (Dan) now a playwright is remembering his childhood days spent with his sister Tara. He is trying to write a story about his own childhood but he unintentionally writes Tara's story as Tara and Chandan are the two sides of the same self, like a coin, rather than two separate entities. The play revolves around these two Siamese twins. The operation (dark secret) at the time of birth to separate them, leaves Tara crippled for life whereas Chandan emerges as the privileged one. A clear paradigm shift of Dan turns his anguish into drama by writing about his sister's childhood. Even after their unfair and manipulated division, which is done against the law of nature, they are emotionally united. This play also deals with the theme of gender discrimination and social consciousness in modern society which shows the partiality towards the male child in highly educated and an upper middle class Bangalore society. The story of the play is about the twins who are born with three legs and blood supply to the third leg was from the girl child. Father, mother of the twins and doctor decides to fix the third leg on to the male baby's body so as to complete the child. While on the other hand to immobilize female child, the decision was taken to make male child physically fit and complete was not on the basis of medical ground but was influenced by their politician grandfather. A patriarchal society with male domination is reflected in the role of grandfather who donates all his property and wealth to the male child. Dattani expresses his ideas right in the beginning of the play through the character of Tara where she says, "...Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb." [325] exhibiting the fact that they were indivisible and when they were separated, it was done with great injustice to the girl child. Womb was a

congenial and a secure place for both of them, and when they left that abode; it led to disappointment and destruction in the life only of the female self which clearly reflect the idea of marginalization. This reminds us of Anita Desai's Sita from *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, where she is pregnant with her fifth child. She is dejected and depressed with the futility of the world and does not want to deliver the child, instead wants to keep safe inside her womb [5]. What makes her different from Tara's mother is only the idea of equality amongst her children, where she could not stay biased from any of them and loved all of them equally.

In our society, male child is considered an asset and female child a liability. This is mainly due to certain misconceived religious beliefs and the problem of dowry which is embedded in Indian society. To name a few, harmful practices like female mutilation, foeticide, gender-based violence, child marriages, gender-based marginalization are some of the evil practices that prevail in our society. It leads in preventing women, of any age, in realizing their rights and prerogatives and eventually succumbing to the evils existing in the male dominated community in Indian scenario. Pre-natal sex selection and termination leads to the death of innumerable girls all over the year. In *Tara*, there is reference to the fact that girl babies were killed in Patel families by drowning them into milk, so that if people asked about it, "they could say that she choked while drinking her milk" [349]. Reference to these kinds of violence and discrimination against the girl child by family member shows attitude and mentality of the prevalent practices in the Indian society. In the play it's tragic as well as pathetic that the mother is also supporting the act of attaching the third leg to the boy's body. It is our cultural heritage that boy is always superior to girl, which is why mother herself decides for the betterment of the boy child. The common method of obtaining higher death rate for girl children than boys is neglecting the girl child and their rights to exist and live during early childhood.

Every girl child born in an Indian family suffers from some kind of exploitation and if there is a boy child in the family, the ill-treatment is very much noticeable as consciously or unconsciously all the privileges are offered to the son. This is because getting dowry is regarded as a male privilege. Throughout the play, 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, it consists of her parents and her brother whom she is very close to. Besides exposing the typical Indian mindset and preference of a boy child to a girl child, the drama looks at the triumphs and failures of an Indian family, comprising of father (Patel), mother (Bharati) and two children (Chandan and Tara). Tara is a lively girl, who does not get enough opportunities as his brother, eventually wastes away, and dies. Chandan escapes from the reality and settles in London; where he changes his name to 'Dan'. Dattani has presented the bizarre reality of women playing a secondary role to man. In this play, the idea of female infanticide is presented. This filthy practice is still present in some places of India. The drama also suggests Patel's hegemonic patriarchy, when he insists that proper division should be made in the gender roles.

Tara symbolizes the modern society, which claims to be liberal and advanced but in fact, it has a crippled mentality. It is a society, where mothers are educated today, and women are considered and worshipped as 'Devis' like 'Durga', 'Kali', 'Saraswati' etc. Still there are differences between male and female child. All the promises of equality between male and female, equal opportunities to women in all the fields are false. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst". [134]. 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]. Woven into the play are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values. [319].

Tara's parents are educated even then they made such discrimination. Bharati's father can also be considered responsible for this mishap. Nevertheless, the question that arises here is, if Bharati had been influenced by her father's decision then why didn't Patel come forward and stand against that? He was the father of both the children and he should have been strong enough to fight the discrimination. The relationship of Bharati and Tara becomes weaker on the discovery of truth. Although she loves Tara a lot, but her subjugation to the expectations of society and her preference for her son, makes her compassion for Tara weak. When Chandan enquires, whether she has any plans for Tara, she says, "Yes! I have plans for her happiness. I mean to give her all love and affection, which I can give. It's what she deserves. (9)". Bharati is quite fearful about the future of her daughter; "It's all right while she is young. It is 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! Oh!. when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty, thirty is unthinkable and what about forty and fifty! Oh God! (349)."

To shed her burden of guilt and to assert her moral superiority over her husband, she shows extra maternal love and concern towards her daughter. She also tries to expand her love by the act of donating her kidney to Tara, which ultimately turns futile. Dattani establishes that mother and daughter relationship proves secondary to the orders of patriarchy. 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, she has 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,

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. (320)

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. She is a victim of collective social system. Her father is not much different from her mother. She had favored 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. Patel 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" [16]. This play raises a few questions of discrimination, i.e. religious prejudice, gender discrimination. This play does not only deal with gender issues and the treatment of girl child in a male dominated society, but also deals with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of several girl-children even amongst most educated and urban families. The root problem of discriminatory treatment being meted out to girls lies in the status of women in society.

Maya Angelou also writes in new ways about women's lives in a male-dominated society. Girl abandoned by their parents in, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* we see gender discrimination as the main theme. In this poem, she sketches the agony of a girl child in male dominated society. Similarly, in the play from the very beginning itself we can experience this discrimination [6]. This is not only the case of Tara but the entire womanhood. Dattani has presented the strange reality of women playing a secondary role to man. Male are seen as the providers and the role of the girls are neglected. This dirty practice is still present in some part of India. The drama also suggests supremacy of Patel when he insists that proper division should be made in the gender roles.

Bharati had to follow her father's decision. She had to accept whatever is given to her. She had favored Chandan at the time of operation. Patel makes Bharati responsible for everything and escapes from his responsibilities. Doctor represents supreme position in the play. He operates the twins, but he has done an unjust operation under the pressure of Bharati's father, Patel. Dr. Thakkar, the god-like, 'life giver', knows the reality. When Tara was deprived of the leg, Dattani appropriately shows that in this society it is an annoyance to be a girl. In India, the male species is considered and treated as the first sex, thus corresponding with Simone De Beauvoir's' idea of *The Second Sex*. This reflect worldwide phenomenon. Dattani highlights the real face of our political leaders. He managed and convinced the doctor shows another face of corruption [2].

Tara realizes the real story of her physical disability during her life time. She held her mother responsible for her plight and agony. She cannot accept the truth. Even though she is more intelligent, bright, insightful, and talented, is discouraged from the beginning of the first day of her life. "This isn't fair to Tara. She deserves something better. She never got a fair deal." [330] Parents never gave any support to Tara. This made her lose interest in life. Further, she refuses to go to college. It is significant that discrimination with Tara continues, even after her death. Chandan, who was fascinated in writing a story about his own tragedy, Dan apologizes to

Tara for doing this, “Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy.” (380).

II. CONCLUSION

Mahesh Dattani revealed the issue of gender discrimination in this play. The social norms, economic values and cultural elements have been answerable for the inequality against the girl child. Tara is a victim of this social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. In Indian society, woman is variously presented as a mother, wife, daughter and sister, even goddess. Manusmruti and Dharma Shashtra’s have laid down specific rules for the conduct of women. The women were treated to secondary position in all walks of life. Though the literacy rate of women has improved, now a days, they are given secondary status in household, offices, social and public places, even then women are exploited and harassed in Indian society. Woman is subjected to violence and harassment everywhere.

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