

Mahesh dattani's play Tara: A tale of gender discrimination

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's play Tara deals with the theme of gender discrimination in society. The present paper seeks to discuss and analyze how Dattani has represented the issue of marginalization of women in the play. Through the moving story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, the play highlights how a boy child is preferred to a girl child in an Indian family. Dattani considers gender discrimination unnatural and unethical and brings out complex and multidimensional nature of the issue. The play depicts pervasiveness and deep rootedness of patriarchal values in the collective consciousness of society. These values are internalized by women through the process of socialization which makes women vulnerable to discrimination and oppression. Women act as a tool in the hands of patriarchy to perpetuate patriarchal values. In the play, Bharati the mother of Tara spoils life of her daughter and later suffers from guilt due to her inhuman act. Her guilt leads her to insanity and creates problems in family also. The play also touches on the issue of gender based division of labour and how this division creates barriers in the way of creativity and talent for both genders. Both Tara and Chandan are differently abled but she has to face double marginalization being a girl. Dattani also exposes insensitive attitude of society towards the differently abled persons. Misuse of science and technology has been shown through the character of Dr. Thakkar.

Keywords: Gender, Discrimination, Patriarchal, Guilt, Marginalization

1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is a leading playwright in English. He has honour to become the first English language playwright who won the Sahitya Akademi award for *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998. Bold themes and unusual style of his plays have attracted the attention of audiences /readers. Through his plays, he has tried to bring invisible issues of society such as child sex abuse, incest, plight of transgender and woman etc into light. As a sensitive playwright, he throws light upon the lives of marginalized sections of society and tries to sensitize and make mainstream society aware about their problems.

The preoccupation with 'fringe' issues forms an element in Dattani's work-issues that remain latent and suppressed, or are pushed to the periphery, come to occupy centre stage-quite literally. With Dattani, this becomes the only way to actually push these 'invisible' issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence. (Chaudhuri 47)

The present paper seeks to discuss and analyze how Dattani has represented the issue of marginalization of women in the play *Tara*. The play shows the discrimination against girl child in society. The play was first performed as *Twinkle Tara* at the Chowdhia Memorial Hall, Bengaluru, on October 23, 1990 by Playpen Performing Arts Group. The play starts with a scene set in London. Chandan recalls the memories of his childhood with his sister Tara and also exposes the existing patriarchal mindset of society which prefers a boy child to a girl child. On the theme of *Tara*, theatre director Erin Mee points out:

Tara centres 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 favour 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. (319)

Dattani deconstructs the binaries of gender-man and woman. In this binary, man is superior to woman. He challenges this notion and seems to claim that naturally masculinity and femininity are parts of identity of an individual. The concept of 'Ardhanarishwar' in Indian mythology also support this view. This makes gender based inequality and discrimination unnatural and unethical. Tara and Chandan, the conjoined twins, represent two sides of a self-feminine and masculine. It means, for humanity, man and woman are equal. In the play the unethical surgery symbolizes separation of feminine and masculine. The favor of Chandan represents higher status of man than woman. Tara aptly remarks:

And me. Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... And separated. (Collected Plays 325)

Dattani sees *Tara* as a play about the gendered self and seems to convey that gender based discrimination ultimately brings disaster to humanity. Both genders face troubles due to gender biased decision of Patel family.

The play shows how Patriarchy is pervasive, multi-layered and deeply rooted in social structure. It has become part of our collective consciousness. Preference of boy child is not only due to economic factors as many believe. Other factors such as religious, social etc also contribute in this preference. In the play *Tara*, Patel family is economically and politically sound. The family as a social institution is supposed to provide love, care and support to its members. Tara is not an economic burden

on the family. Still the family shows preference for Chandan during surgery which shows the complex nature of patriarchy in social system.

Tara is enthralled in that it makes use of a rather unlikely 'freak' case to lay bare the injustices in the conventional Indian family meted out to the girl child, a play that comments on a society that treats the children who share the womb differently. And as always, the stereotype comes in a friendly garb, covering the ugly truths. The Patels, on the face of it look like the ideal parents that special children like Tara and Chandan need to survive-indeed they have survived because of their dedicated parents. But there are more things that need to be revealed. (Chaudhuri 38)

During the social construction of gender, stereotyped gender roles play an important role. Male and female are assigned different roles and they are supposed to perform these roles during their day to day life. The roles supposed to be performed by male are considered important. On the basis of superiority of his roles, male is accorded higher status than female. In Tara, Dattani touches this issue when Patel asks Chandan to support him in business and expects Tara to remain in domestic sphere. This sex based division of labour is one of the important root causes of gender discrimination. Tara says, "Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they are going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave." (Collected Plays 328) In the patriarchal values, male and female are expected to stick to their assigned roles only. Performing other's gender role may become cause of embarrassment. In the play Dattani tries to deconstruct this separation of roles through characters of Tara and Chandan. Chandan is interested in so called feminine roles. He says, "I haven't decided yet. (Looks at Patel.) I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle." (Collected Plays 328) Chandan would prefer to be a writer, while it is Tara who seems more inclined to go into a career like her father's. Patel is angry with his wife and accuses her of "turning him (Chandan) into a sissy-teaching him to knit!" (Collected Plays 350) This division of labour affects not only female but male also. It also puts burden on male and limits his interest and talent.

In patriarchal society, paradoxically, women play an important role in perpetuating discrimination against women. In the play Bharati, a woman, favors the male child during surgery. It proves, in patriarchal structure, the values biased towards male are deeply internalized even by female psyche through social conditioning. So in patriarchy, a woman becomes a tool against other woman in vicious cycle. Patel reveals secret about decision regarding surgery:

A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were better that the leg would survive ...on the girl. Your grandfather and mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. That same evening your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. Except- I couldn't believe what she told me-that they would risk giving both legs to the boy. May be I had protested more strongly! (Collected Plays 378)

After failure of surgery, Bharati is full of guilt as she has spoiled

life of her daughter. She tries to overcome this guilt feeling 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." (Collected Plays 349) Her guilt feeling 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." (Collected Plays 353) 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. (Collected Plays 369)

Her guilt drives her to insanity. The sufferings and guilt of Bharati shows how women suffer in patriarchal system and values. Later when Tara learns the truth that she was discriminated by her mother, she gets shocked and emotionally broken.

Dattani deconstructs the myth that Nature and God have made male superior to female. This myth justifies the subordination of woman against man. Dattani tries to assert that male and female are equal in the eyes of Nature and the God, but it is the patriarchal society which has artificially created gender inequality. Dr Thakkar represents the scientific knowledge which has also become a tool in the hands of patriarchs for oppression and subjugation of women. Dattani shows how various social institutions contribute in perpetuation of gender inequality and discrimination making them pervasive and deep-rooted. But he considers gender inequality inhuman and unethical. Dan considers injustice against Tara an unnatural sin:

She deserves something better. She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. May be God never wanted us to be separated. Destiny desires strange things.... But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life. A duel to the death between God and nature on one side and on the other-the amazing Dr. Thakkar. (Collected Plays 330)

Both Tara and Chandan are physically challenged. Both feel marginalized on account of this, but being a girl, Tara is doubly marginalized. In patriarchal society, physical beauty is valued more than her intelligence or inner beauty. Dattani exposes double standards of society showing how society discriminates between two physically challenged persons on the basis of gender. This double standard is reflected when Bharati says:

It's all right while she is young. 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! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is

unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God!
(Collected Plays 348-49)

Chandan feels inferiority complex due to his physical deformity. He feels, "They are not the ugly ones. We are. Horrible one-legged creatures." (Collected Plays 369) However, Tara, a strong and sensitive girl, faces the girl bravely and even pushes his hesitant brother to participate in mainstream society with confidence and show his worth, "You are afraid. Afraid of meeting new people. People who don't know you. Who won't know how clever you are. You are afraid they won't see beyond you" (Collected Plays 361)

The discrimination against woman starts from mother's womb. The incidents of female foeticide and female infanticide are common in our society. A girl is considered burden on parents financially, emotionally and socially which leads to murder of girl child. The play brings forth this point through Roopa's remarks, "since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels 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." (Collected Plays 349)

Dattani has smartly used multi-level set in the play. The lowest level represents the house of the Patels. On the highest level, there is a chair in which Dr. Thakkar remains seated throughout the play. His presence represents the unethical act of surgery which haunts and affects the lives of Patel family members. He becomes party to the partisan decision in agreeing to give the leg to Chandan despite the leg medically suits more to Tara.

Dattani's art of characterization is remarkable in the play. His characters seem authentic due to his deep understanding of society and human psychology. This is one of the reasons that audience/readers feel connected to his plays. "Mahesh Dattani's plays have variety, and his themes are of contemporary interest. He has dived deep into human heart and re-created characters with authenticity and a sense of liveliness." (Das 123)

To conclude, it can be said that Dattani has successfully negotiated with the questions of gender, disability, the family and self-identity in the play. The play has got success all over the world and is one of the most loved works of him. Taking an unusual subject of conjoined twins, he realistically touches various issues related to gender discrimination. He presents a bitter reality of society without being didactic and touches various themes with sensitive heart. This play successfully highlights the plight of marginalized women in patriarchal society in a subtle ways. Erin Mee comments, "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 India see it as a play about the girl child." (320)

2. References

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