

## Gender bias in Mahesh Dattani's play Tara

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### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the eminent Indian English playwrights who mainly deals with the contemporary Indian society. His plays speak about the dynamics of the modern urban family. Most of his plays deal with the issues like gender discrimination, homo sexuality, child sexual abuse, communalism, problems of the transgender. Dattani holds a very distinct place in the realm of Indian drama in English. He has presented the problems of an urban life in India in a significant manner in his plays. He has a striking artistic perception that makes him different from other playwrights. His plays can easily touch the minds and the hearts of the people. Dattani's plays have a universal appeal, because the themes of his plays are contemporary and moreover his plays can be staged anywhere in the world, as he has made use of the stage in a very naturalistic way. He is the first Indian playwright who has been awarded with the *Sahitya Akademi Award*.

This paper is an attempt to study the gender discrimination in a society, the injustice based on the term of gender and the preference of a male child over a female child in a family, precisely in an Indian family. The play also deals with the physical and emotional separation of two conjoined twins.

**Keywords:** gender discrimination, injustice based on the term gender, dattani, conjoined twins, Indian family, society, universal appeal

### Introduction

Tara is one of the famous plays of Mahesh Dattani. It is one such play, which is quite famous and loved by many in the world. The play deals with the physical and emotional separation of the two conjoined twins, though the physical separation is the manipulation of the mother and the grandfather of the twins, as a preference of male child over a female one. Tara the protagonist of the play is a bright, intelligent and energetic girl who has never received the opportunities that are given to her brother Chandan or Dan. In the book *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives*, Michael Walling in the third chapter says that,

*"In Tara, Siamese twins are born male and female (the fact that this is biologically impossible gives the play a clear poetic dimension, like Shakespeare's Twelfth Night). The female twin, Tara, loses her leg and eventually her life so that the male twin, Chandan or Dan (the double naming is itself a further example of the fragmented self) can live. This metaphor is about the separation of the multiple identities available to us which social constructs require. Chandan loses his feminine self, Tara, and is distorted by that loss." (73)*

### Injustice Based on the term of gender

Tara is not just a play but it is a story of a girl born in an Indian family. As the name suggests, Tara, is really a twinkling star in her family, that makes everyone smile and feel happy, especially Chandan. The play Tara opens up with Chandan or Dan, who is a playwright in London. He recollects his past especially his childhood days which he had spent merrily with his sister Tara. Dan says,

*"Yes. I have my memories. Locking myself in a bedsitter in a seedy suburb of London, thousands of miles from home hasn't put enough distance between us. My battery charger helps on some occasion. But now I want them to come back. To masticate my memories in my mind and spit out the result to the world in anger." (Collected Plays, Tara, 324)*

The play deals with the fact that, since ages past, society has always preferred a male child over a female child. The decision of giving the third leg to the boy, which actually the girl owns, shows the gender based injustice and discrimination as well. The decision leaves Tara immobilized for the lifetime and makes Bharati to live her life with guilt till she becomes totally insane. The guilt makes Bharati over concerned for her daughter and she even gets ready to donate one of her kidneys to her daughter so that she can live for some more years. In a conversation with her son, Bharati tells him that,

*"Yes I have plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. Its'what she deserves. Love can make up for a lot." (Collected Plays, Tara, 349)*

Throughout the play, hatred against the society, from the side of Tara is noticed. She also has a kind of anger and aversion with the outside world. But she feels quite satisfied with her world, consisted of her parents and his beloved brother Chandan. Her world is little, but she still feels happy and satisfied with what she has. Her brother was very close to her and vice-versa. Her love and affection for her brother is seen in one of her conversations with Chandan, where she says,

*“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.” (Tara 325)*

Erin Mee, a theatre director, expresses her thoughts in a note on the play Tara. She 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.” (Collected Plays, 320)*

Mee also states in her note on the play,

*“I included Tara on my syllabus for a class on Indian Performance at New York University. My students loved Dattani’s work in general, and Tara in particular—several of them became so excited about the play that they wrote their final papers on it. One student pointed out that Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara’s story. Dan writes Tara’s story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole. Another student pointed out that Dattani focuses on the family as a microcosm of society in order to dramatize the ways we are socialized to accept certain gendered roles and to give preference to what is ‘male’.” (Collected Plays, 320)*

### **Other characters of the play**

The play introduces two more characters as well. Roopa, the neighbour of Tara in Mumbai and Dr. Umakant Thakkar, one of the famous doctors in Mumbai, who operated and separated the two conjoined twins.

### **Dr. Thakkar**

One of the famous doctors in Mumbai, who becomes quite famous for his outstanding work at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital in Bombay (Mumbai). The writer has shown the other side of the society as well, where the affluent and influential people, literally buy the doctors or other people with the help of their huge fortune, for their personal purpose. The affluent father of Bharati, forces the doctor to do the surgery of the twins, in order to favor the boy with the third leg, so that he doesn’t get immobilized or crippled.

Dr. Thakkar agrees to do the operation because, he understands that, his dream rather his intention of starting a huge nursing home in Bangalore, can be fulfilled only with the help of Bharati’s ‘affluent’ father. This can be clearly understood from the conversation of Mr. Patel, Tara’s father, with his children. He says that,

*“The doctor had agreed, I was told. It was only 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 grandfather’s political influence had been used.” (Tara, 378)*

From the above quote, it is evident that, Tara’s father, Mr. Patel, did not know anything. It was Tara’s mother and grandfather,

who manipulated everything, in order to favor and support the baby boy, it was them who actually differentiated between a female child and a male child.

### **Roopa**

She is a character in the play who likes to tease or make fun of others in a stupid and idiotic way. Such characteristic can easily be found out in the society. She pretends to care for Tara and Chandan, but in reality she doesn’t. She also pretends to be a very good friend of Tara and Dan but only in front of Tara’s mother at her (Tara) house. She speaks in a very bad and cheap manner about Tara and her mother when she stays out with her friends Prema and Nalini. She even addresses Tara and her mother as freaks. This is evident from the conversation of Roopa with her friends Nalini and Prema, where she states that,

*“Guess what? I went to her house! Yes. Right inside! I met everyone there. She is a real freak of nature all right, but wait till you see her mother! Oh God! I can’t tell you—she is really. . . .wandh tarah. Oh God! I’ll never go there again.” (Tara, 342)*

People like Dr. Thakkar and Roopa are really dangerous and it is really hard to trust upon these kinds of people in the society.

### **Conclusion**

The play Tara truly serves its purpose rather the dramatic purpose, to bring forth the struggle of an Indian handicapped girl, to prove and show the tenacity to the patriarchal society. She sacrifices her potentiality for the sake of her twin brother.

The play shows that Tara is the source of happiness for her family. The life which Dan had lived with his sister was the best according to him. At one point of time, he feels really bad for Tara and could not really accept the demise of her sister at a very young age.

Tara is not just a story of Tara, but it is the story of all those women who live in the male dominated society in India, and fight every day in their lives just to survive. Dattani has beautifully portrayed the Indian society in this play. His language is lucid yet subtle. His writing style also shows that he has a great command over the language.

Apart from gender discrimination, Dattani has also set forth the relationships of a husband with his wife, a brother with his sister, a doctor with patients, a mother with her children and a father with his children; which cannot go unnoticeable.

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