

Human Relationships and Gender Identity: Looking into Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

Aparna

HoD, Languages & Haryanvi Cult, CCSHAU, Hisar

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani delves into diverse themes such as place of anomalous or so called freaks in society, patriarchal standpoint, male chauvinism, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse, homosexuality etc. In India women/girls have historically suffered both overt and covert discrimination which targets not just the female body, but also indulges in mental and psychological assaults. And the regrettable element is that the hurt is caused by a person, who is considered to be the protector. In '*Tara*', Dattani portrays the web of human relationships, through the social issues of gender discrimination resulting from long-established social beliefs. '*Tara*' mainly deals with the theme of gender bias, followed by patriarchal hegemony. Siamese twins Tara and Chandan must be separated to ensure their survival. The ill placed decision of their mother Bharati and grandfather to benefit the male child Chandan with the third leg which rightfully belonged to Tara brings to the fore the ills of patriarchy. The issues of caste system and social hierarchy are also voiced in the play. For Indian psyche mother is next to God, but in '*Tara*' the mother becomes the instrument of partisanship and unfairness and forces Tara to lead a life of incompleteness, physically as well as psychologically. Bharati remains guilt ridden, and therefore, she tries to recompense to Tara, in every possible way she can. Tara loves her mother the most. She even considers her mother her idol, but she gets the shock of her life when she comes to know the truth of her incompleteness from her father. By this time Bharti's guilt takes the better of her and before Tara could speak to her mother regarding this injustice, Bharati goes insane. The influence of patriarchy is evident in Bharti's character too. Besides being a mother, she is also an educated lady. Thus, the decision of favouring the boy child with the leg doesn't agree with her character. She doesn't come across as a woman having a strong personality and it appears that she has been coerced into giving consent for the ill-fated surgery. She is also the victim of patriarchal dominance of her father. Bharati's personal preference and her father's patriarchal dominance, ruin not only the lives of the twins but also that of Bharati because, she also suffers whole life as a result of this action. Sociologically, 'patriarchy' may be interpreted as a metaphor for unquestioned authority over women by all those powers that have the conventional social sanctions to perpetrate. Such transgression is not a momentary exploitation; it is often a protracted ploy to marginalize women/girl children. Plays like *Tara* can foster an environment of awareness, resistance and proactive modalities to counteract prevalent negative gender bias.

Keywords: patriarchy, hegemony, gender, caste system,

Mahesh Dattani is a well-known English playwright. In 1998, he became the first English-language playwright to win the Sahitya Akademi award for *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays*. His plays' bold ideas and distinctive style have piqued the interest of audiences and readers alike. Through his plays, he has

attempted to bring to light social concerns such as child sex abuse, incest, the struggle of transgender and females, and so on. As a thoughtful dramatist, he sheds light on the lives of society's outcasts and attempts to sensitize and educate the general public about their difficulties. He has established himself as one of the most popular dramatists in Indian English Literature due to his choice of themes.

In Mahesh Dattani there is a playwright who isn't afraid to work within a traditional dramatic structure to convey stories that are bold and powerful without being melodramatic. The power of Dattani's language and portrayal captivates the listener. Characters in Dattani's plays frequently doubt their identities and feel lonely in some way. His characters aren't stereotyped in the least. They are a well-balanced group of people who go above and beyond the audience's expectations. Dattani draws his characters in such a way that their inner tensions, repressions, and prior secrets are revealed. By doing so, he creates social tension, which in most cases leads to a classic dramatic confrontation involving not only the characters but also the audience, forcing them to adjust their expectations and attitudes. We have a dramatist in Dattani who combines a strong blend of Indian theatrical norms with the textual rigour of western models such as Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. He is a theatre practitioner who echoes Stanislavski's words to the hilt—*“Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art.”* (<https://actingmagazine.com/2019/01>)

His plays explore the complex dynamics of the modern Indian family in the city. His characters attempt to break the customary restraints of Indian culture—the cultural conceptions of gender—in order to untangle their own feelings and, in many cases, to uncover themselves and society as a whole. He tackles the topics that go unnoticed in Indian society. He drags the taboo topics from beneath the carpet and places them on stage. Dattani, in a sense, questions the established definitions of 'India' and 'Indian' in modern theatre. He says:

Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that's a great advantage and a great disadvantage as well, because...we're living in the present and there are so many challenges facing us—you just have to cross the road and you have an issue,...I think it is very important for our country to spawn new playwrights...who reflect honestly and purely our lives, because... that is our contribution to the world (*Collected Plays* 319).

In India, women/girl children have long faced overt and covert discrimination in both the public and private spheres. The inspiration for writing this paper arises primarily from the fact that plays such as *Tara* (1990) have the capacity to reach a broad audience, fostering an environment of awareness, resistance, and proactive strategies to combat negative gender bias. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, Dattani says, “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” (Subramanyam, Lakshmi[ed]., *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*, New Delhi, Shakti, 2002. 134)

Tara is a two-act play. Dan, who is now based in London, is a dramatist named Chandan. He wants to write his own story, a play. He reminisces about his boyhood as he scribbles. His childhood recollections are of his sister Tara, who is no longer with him. It's also Tara's story since it is his. Tara and Chandan are twins who are conjoined. They were born connected at the hip and had to be surgically separated. The twins have just three legs, and Tara's body supplies the blood flow for the third limb. Here is where the story of injustice and discrimination begins. Despite her good prospects, the girl is denied the leg because she is a girl child. The mother is influenced by the grandfather to favour the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara) by giving him two legs to make him flawless. Chandan had two legs only for two days, which should rightfully have belonged to Tara's had the operation been ethical. Discrimination starts at

birth. Chandan and Tara both experience the same agony, which he attempts to communicate through an autobiographical drama. Dattani's interest with gender issues leads to the creation of the concept of the twin half of one's self—quite literally embodied in one body—and the resulting separation. The dichotomy between the twin 'gendered' selves is recognized, Chandan says:

“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)

In his plays, Dattani has depicted the issues of city life in India in a significant way. He has a unique artistic mind that sets him apart from other playwrights. His plays have an impact on the minds and hearts of the audience. The focus with 'fringe' topics is a feature of Dattani's work—issues that are hidden and suppressed, or pushed to the margins, take centre stage—quite literally in his plays. With Dattani, weaving these issues in the stories that he presents before his audience becomes the only way to actually push these 'invisible' issues forward, to create at least an acknowledgement of their existence. (Chaudhuri 47)

Mahesh Dattani explores a spectrum of subjects, including the place of anomalies or "freaks" in society, patriarchal perspectives, male chauvinism, gender discrimination, sexual abuse of children, and homosexuality, among others. Gender identity is a dominant element in Mahesh Dattani's plays. One of his major concerns is how men and women are constituted in terms of gender roles. Women and girls in India have long been subjected to both overt and covert discrimination, which not only assaults the female body but also includes mental and psychological assaults. The unfortunate aspect is that the harm is perpetrated by someone who is supposed to be the guardian.

In '*Tara*', Dattani portrays the web of human relationships, through the social issues of gender discrimination resulting from long-established social beliefs. '*Tara*' mainly deals with the theme of gender bias, followed by patriarchal hegemony. Siamese twins Tara and Chandan must be separated to ensure their survival. The ill placed decision of their mother Bharati and grandfather to benefit the male child Chandan with the third leg which rightfully belonged to Tara brings to the fore the ills of patriarchy.

The present paper seeks to discuss and analyze how Dattani has represented the issue of marginalization of women in the play *Tara*. The play highlights societal discrimination towards girls. Playpen Performing Arts Group originally presented it as *Twinkle Tara* on October 23, 1990, at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bengaluru. The play opens with a sequence set in London, in which Chandan recalls his childhood memories with his sister Tara whilst also subtly exposing society's patriarchal outlook, which favours 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 gender dichotomy of man and woman. Man is considered to be superior to woman in our social framework. In *Tara* Dattani appears to question and challenge this notion, arguing that masculinity and femininity are aspects of an individual's identity that are not restricted to and by the physical self. . In Indian mythology, the concept of 'Ardhanarishwar', where both the genders reside

within the same identity, supports this viewpoint. Gender inequality and discrimination are thus unnatural and unethical. The conjoined twins Tara and Chandan represent two sides of an identity—feminine and masculine. It indicates that man and woman should be equal in the eyes of humanity. The unethical operation represents the split of feminine and masculine in the play. Preference towards Chandan's well being reflects a bias in favour of men and an unjustified elevated position for men over women. As Tara so aptly puts it:

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)

Tara, according to Dattani, is a play about the gendered self, and it appears that gender inequality leads to humanity's downfall. The Patel family's gender-biased decision has caused problems for both genders. Tara is captivating in that it uses an unusual 'freak' situation to expose the injustices meted out to the girl child in the traditional Indian household, a drama that makes a statement on a society that sees children who share the womb, differently. And, as is customary, the stereotype wears a friendly mask to hide the ugly reality. 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)

Stereotyped gender roles play a significant role in the social structuring of gender. Males and females are assigned different roles, which they are supposed to perform in their daily lives. The duties that are anticipated to be undertaken by men are considered to be more important from our society's point of view. Males are accorded a higher status than females because of the so called superiority of their roles. In Tara, Dattani raises this problem when Patel asks Chandan to help him with his business while expecting Tara to stay at home and hone her household skills. One of the major important causes of gender discrimination is the sex-based division of labour. 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 pre-decided and 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 impacts both males and females. It also places a strain on men, limiting their interests and abilities.

Women, ironically, play a vital part in sustaining discrimination against women in patriarchal societies. During surgery, Bharati, a woman, favours the male infant in the play. It demonstrates that in patriarchal structures, male-biased values are firmly internalised by female psyches as a result of social conditioning. As a result, a woman in patriarchy becomes a tool used against other women in a vicious circle. Patel exposes a secret about his surgery decision:

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 showering 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 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." (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 dismisses the idea that males are superior to females because nature and God have willed so, as a fallacy. This myth justifies women's subjugation to men. Dattani claims that male and female are equal in the eyes of God and Nature, but it is our patriarchal society that has produced artificial gender inequality. Dr. Thakkar represents scientific knowledge, which has also become a tool in patriarchs' hands for oppressing and subjugating women. Dattani demonstrates how a variety of social institutions contribute to the persistence of gender inequality and discrimination, making it prevalent and entrenched. He, on the other hand, views gender discrimination to be inhumane 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 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 experience social alienation as a result of this, but since Tara is a girl, she is doubly marginalised. Physical beauty receives greater appreciation and acceptance than intelligence or inner beauty in patriarchal society. Dattani exposes societal double standards by demonstrating how society discriminates against two physically handicapped people based on their 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 world 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)

For Indian psyche mother is next to God, but in ‘*Tara*’ the mother becomes the instrument of partisanship and unfairness and forces Tara to lead a life of incompleteness, physically as well as psychologically. Bharati remains guilt ridden, and therefore, she tries to recompense to Tara, in every possible way she can. Tara loves her mother the most. She even considers her mother her idol, but she gets the shock of her life when she comes to know the truth of her incompleteness from her father. By this time Bharti’s guilt takes the better of her and before Tara could speak to her mother regarding this injustice, Bharati goes insane.

The patriarchal structure is depicted in the play as multifaceted and firmly established in society. It has become entrenched in our collective psyche. Many factors contribute for preference of boy child over girl child. These are not merely economic factors, but also social and religious ones. The Patel family is financially and politically stable in this play. Tara does not put any financial strain on the family. In the world of *Tara*, patriarchy is pervasive, multi-layered, and firmly ingrained in social structure. The preference for boy offspring is not just related to economic considerations, as many people believe. Religious, societal, and other variables--all play a role in this decision. A family, as a social institution, is expected to provide love, care, and support to its members. In the play *Tara* the Patel family is financially and politically stable. Despite this, the family prefers Chandan during surgery, demonstrating the multifaceted character of patriarchy in the social structure.

Tara is intriguing in that it uses an unusual freak case to expose the injustices meted out to the girl child in the traditional Indian household, a play that makes a statement on a society that regards 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 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. (Chaudhari 38)

The influence of patriarchy is evident in Bharti’s character too. Besides being a mother, she is also an educated lady. Thus, the decision of favouring the boy child with the leg doesn’t agree with her character. She doesn’t come across as a woman having a strong personality and it appears that she has been coerced into giving consent for the ill-fated surgery. She is also the victim of patriarchal dominance of her father. Bharati’s personal preference and her father’s patriarchal dominance, ruin not only the lives of the twins but also that of Bharati because, she also suffers whole life as a result of this action. Sociologically, ‘patriarchy’ may be interpreted as a metaphor for unquestioned authority over women by all those powers that have the conventional social sanctions to perpetrate. Such transgression is not a momentary exploitation; it is often a protracted ploy to marginalize women/girl children. Plays like *Tara* can foster an environment of awareness, resistance and proactive modalities to counteract prevalent negative gender bias.

The issues of caste system and social hierarchy are also voiced in the play.

In his use of the theatrical space, he is always adventurous. He defies the proscenium, inventing incredible lighting effects to give the theatrical area he has at his disposal height, breadth, and depth. In the play, Dattani has cleverly utilised a multi-level set. The Patels' house is represented at the lowest level. There is a chair on the topmost level in which Dr. Thakkar remains seated throughout the play. His presence symbolises the immoral act of surgery that continues to plague and afflict the Patel family which actually symbolizes our society. Dr. Thakkar becomes a party to the partisan decision to give the leg to Chandan, despite the fact that the leg is medically better suited to Tara.

The play showcases Dattani's mastery in characterization. Because of his in-depth knowledge of society and human psychology, his characters appear to be real. This is one of the reasons why his plays have such a strong emotional pull for the audience and readers. "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 sum up, Dattani has expertly navigated the issues of gender, handicap, disability, family, and self-identity in the play. The play *Tara* has been a worldwide success and is one of his most well-known works. He realistically focuses on numerous themes relating to gender prejudice by using the uncommon subject of conjoined twins. Through *Tara* Dattani portrays a harsh truth of society without being didactic, and touches on a range of themes with sensitivity. *Tara* 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)

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