

Quest For Voice and Identity in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most leading contemporary playwrights in Indian writing in English. Dattani creates a real world Indian society, known for bringing injustices against its female members and also introduce a dream world at the end of the play when Tara and Dan are seen embracing each other in some other place. A perfect combination of the real world and the dream world in Tara helps the playwright to pave a new way for dramatizing his views on gender prejudice. A patriarchal society is suitably presented in Tara where the important family decisions are made by its men. In a patriarchal society, a woman's identity is defined by others in term of her relationship with man. Patel, the clear example of patriarchal authority in the play, clearly distinguishes the role of his son from that of his daughter. Certain gendered roles are accepted in the society as natural and hardly does anyone bother to transcend those established norms. This paper tries to show how women are subjugated, isolated and looked down upon by the male dominated society.

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Abstract

The established norms were created by the patriarchal society some years back to subjugate to women. And these accepted norms demand that women have to do all the menial household jobs at home such as sewing, cooking etc. and the man must come out of home to be engaged in other works. Tara takes exception to this antiquated concept. Her emergence as new women is reflected in her ability to take decision and assert her identity. Chandan is Tara's twin brother. They are siamese twins conjoined at their hip. They are separated by an operation. He loves and cares about Tara. He recognizes her identity and potential. He represents the new generation of male in our society. Even after their unjustified and manipulated division which is done against the law of nature, they are emotionally united.

Though Tara is no less intelligent than Chandan, Patel is only concerned about Chandan's career, when Chandan puts his foot down and says that he will not go to college without Tara and that if Tara has to lose one year for kidney transplant, he too will lose one year, Patel feels profoundly unhappy. He constantly says that he has some great future plans for Chandan, but he never shows any concern for Tara's future. Here Dattani depicts show the male dominated society never bothers about the welfare of the girls and Dattani reflects this through Tara's character. Though both of them are crippled, Tara's position is precarious. In Bharathi's comment on Tara, her hapless condition becomes clear. Bharathi says to 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. So mother alone can understand the sufferings of her daughter then what about her father! (349) and in each and every instinct of life there will be a conflict between man and woman. So definitely there will a gap between them and it is never going to be bridged. Bharathi's father, who gave all his money to Chandan after his death, did not think for a moment about his handicapped granddaughter who badly needed some financial assistance for survival. Thus Tara has been neglected and excluded by the male community because of her physical deformity.

In Tennessee William's *Glass Menagerie*, set in America in 1930s, one comes to hear almost a similar anguished voice of a mother for her crippled daughter. The mother desires her daughter Laura to be smart and graceful forgetting her physical deformity so that she may marry a gentleman and get settled. She tells her daughter, "why, you

are not crippled, you just have a little defect hardly noticeable, even! When people have slight disadvantages like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it- develop charm and vivacity that is all you have to do!" (247) The mother's solicitude for her handicapped daughter remains the same in any male dominated society, be it America of the 30s or India of the 90s. Normally, the girls are regarded as consumer goods and defective goods and are discarded altogether.

If Tara were like any other crippled girl (like Laura in *Glass Menagerie*), her story would be a pathetic one, drawing sympathy from others. But Tara's case is tragic as it is disclosed to her that there was a conspiracy behind her deformity and that her mother whom she has loved most and who has so long articulated her solicitude for her daughter, contributed to that conspiracy. It is indeed a tragic revelation that the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, possessed three legs and that the third leg, which was naturally related to Tara's organs, was transplanted on Chanda's body at the time of operation but his body could not accept the leg, which had a better chance of survival with Tara. Tara was denied the chance of having both natural legs only because she was a girl and her guardians wanted to give the boy a chance instead, at the cost of being unethical. The preference for the male child is so rampant in the society that the surgeon could be easily persuaded to do the wrong to the girl child. The conspiracy was the matter plan of Bharathi's father, who being rich and influential in the society, and wanted an heir and as he was without son, his grandson was the next preference and he tried his best to see his heir standing on two natural legs. The surgeon was bribed for doing the unethical job and since the medical science has not yet been able to have a total control over nature, the operation was unsuccessful and both the twins had to depend on artificial leg. Surprisingly, Bharathi agreed to the proposal of her father and Patel did not protest either. Bharathi was tormented by her conscience for what she had done child to sacrifice her daughter's leg for her brother. In the book *The Myth Women's Masochism* Paula Caplan discusses how the myth that "women enjoy their sufferings" becomes "responsible for profound and far reaching emotional and physical harm to girls" (Caplan 1). Dattani is thus does not focus only on the issue of gender prejudice and women's quest for identity in the society but also with the contribution of the female to the injustice towards women. In an interview when Dattani was asked why the gender issue came up in his play as most crucial over class, Caste, religion and science, he replied that gender discrimination is the most visible form of discrimination in India. He feels that this is an artificial difference. Hence he draws our attention towards the fact that Tara is not to be treated as a girl who is physically handicapped, but as one who has been

born with the gender she has. Besides Tara's case, Dattani also introduces other cases of gender discrimination as well as third gender identity in the play.

Chandan: What would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl?

Who would you choose?

Roopa: A boy definitely!

Chandan: definitely?

Roopa: Yes. It is bad enough studying in all-girls' school. I would definitely

Chandan: want a boy friend.

Chandan: No, no. I didn't mean that!

Roopa: Then what did you mean?

Chandan: I meant a son and a daughter.

Roopa: oh, boy child and girl child. Say that!

Chandan: What would your choice be?

Roopa: I would be happy with either one.

Chandan: That's not the point. In the film, I mean. The Nazis will only allow her to keep

one child. The other one would be taken away to a conception camp or something (364).

The issue of gender discrimination is thus presented as casual discussion between a boy and girl and such discussion substantiate the main theme of the play that there can actually be no discrimination other than the biological one. The gender crisis causes to identity crisis, particularly among the women folk. With all her strength of character despite her physical deformity, Tara badly needs moral support from her parents and brother. When she feels that she is denied moral support, she loses interest in life. She suffers from an identity crisis and quests for a positive role in life:

I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those ... starving naked millions everyone is talking about. Maybe I can start an institution that will ... do all that.

Or I

could join Mother Teresa and sacrifice myself to a great cause. That may give purpose

to my ... existence. I can do it ... I will be very happy if I could do it ... I will be very happy

if I could, because that is really what I want. (370)

Tara has potential which Chandan does not have. Tara is intelligent, energetic and dauntless. When Chandan says that he will not join college without Tara, she is not at all emotional but tells the truth to his face that he cannot manage very much on his own and is therefore afraid. Chandan confesses with an anger that everyone is supposed to have her strength. Tara tells her, “you are afraid. Afraid of meeting new people. People who don’t know you. Who won’t know how clever you are” (361) When such a girl fails to do anything positive and it is learned that she was denied her right to stand on her own feet only because she was a girl, Dattani succeeds in highlighting how her potential was sacrificed on the altar of gender. But Dattani’s motive is not only to dramatize the tragedy of gender discrimination in Indian society but also he believes that a perfect human being must have both the masculine qualities and the feminine qualities. The concept of the Siamese twins, one girl and one boy joined together, serves as the symbol of such a union.

In an interview Dattani explains how the issue of the Siamese twins was adopted by him for highlighting his views: “Tara is about a boy and 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 crucial for their survival and the play deals with their emotional separation.” Tara and Chandan were joined together by nature and it is the interference of the society that caused the separation in such a way that becomes fatal for Tara. The following extract may throw light on Dattani’s views:

Tara: You. Me. There is no difference.

Chandan: No difference between you and me?

Tara: No! why should there be?

Chandan: That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. (361)

Thus, though it is Tara’s tragedy, Chandan calls it his tragedy. And Dattani wants to say that it is a tragedy for both. To quote Dattani, again “it [the cultural difference between man and woman] is an artificial difference... biologically there are polarities between the genders which is meant to seek the union of one another, but the cultural polarities are artificial, and actually the boundaries hinder the the natural unions of male and female whether its body -to-body or within oneself.”

The different characters of the play deal with the different kinds of problems of their own life. Dattani encompasses so many characters to reflect the social issues

like gender discrimination and quest for women's identity in an effective way. His themes revolve around the invisible issues: gay sex, lesbian and transgender in his plays in order to project them to the audience to acknowledge and treat them humanely as they are equal to male and female in the society.

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