

## Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattant's Play Tara

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### Abstract:

*Mahesh Dattani is one of the most distinguished playwrights of Indian English drama. The main themes of Dattani's work encompass issues not conventionally associated with mainstream or entertaining theatre. He focuses on problems of the everyday of learning to live with individual demons as well as those which are fastered by 'society' - communalism, personal prejudice, class female infanticide, domestic abuse, homosexuality, discrimination on grounds of gender. One of the most obvious and most commented aspects of Dattani's plays is the questioning of dominant gender roles.*

*This paper is a modest attempt to study the gender-based injustice and how the male child is given preference over the female child in an Indian family. The play deals with the emotional separation of two conjoined twins and the manipulation of their mother and grandfather to support boy child over the girl child. 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. Dattani also throws light on insensitive attitude of society towards the differently abled persons.*

**Keywords :** Gender, Discrimination, Injustice, Patriarchal, Guilt, Homo Sexuality and Marginalization.

### Introduction:

**M**ahesh Dattani is one of the most distinguished playwrights of Indian English drama. He is a versatile writer that covers the areas of writer, director, actor, dancer and teacher all welded into one. Dattani was born on 2 August 1958, in a Gujarati family, settled in Bangalore, Karnataka. He was educated like so many others of a similar class and background in an English medium school, and grew up comfortably at ease with several identities- Gujarati, English speaking, Bangalorean. He is perhaps the one of the very few, and certainly, one of the most commercially successful Indian English playwrights.

The main themes of Dattani's work encompass issues not conventionally associated with mainstream or entertaining theatre. He focuses on problems of the everyday of learning to live with individual demons as well as those which are fastered by 'society' - communalism, personal prejudice, class female infanticide, domestic abuse, homosexuality, discrimination on grounds of gender. One of the most obvious and most commented aspects of Dattani's plays is the questioning of dominant gender roles.

Tara is the third and best dramatic work of Dattani. The play addresses the question of gender in many ways. One can not deny that the primary theme that one sees is the way we Indians discriminate between male and female children, we are a country with long history of female feticide, and an equally long history of material discrimination against girl children, and women in general. The play Tara presents how Indian Society deals with the people who come different, including those who are differently abled.

The play was first performed as Twinkle Tara at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on Oct 23, 1990 by Dattani's Playpen Performing Arts Group. The play starts with a scene set in London. Chandan brother of Tara recalls the memories of his childhood 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 eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to Landon, 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)

The play takes a serious look at the status of the girl child who is unwanted and discriminated against a male child obsessed society like ours. The structure of the play is characteristic moving fluidly between past and present, slowly unravelling a "secret" buried in the past, which must be faced before it destroys the future. In this play Dattani very powerfully deals with gender issues.

In the play there is apparently a dark family secret about the surgical separation of the "conjoined twins", each of them with one leg and the other an artificial limb, the famed Jaipur foot - which the mother Bharati wants to disclose but the father stops her from doing so because he wants to disclose it himself to the twins at an opportune moment and which has turned Bharati into a nervous wreck. She lavishes all her care and attention on Tara, while Mr. Patel, who is equally worried about his severely diabetic daughter, concentrates on Chandan, a happy-go-lucky sixteen year old who, instead of going to the physiotherapy lessons with Tara spends all his time listening to music. Mr. Patel wants Chandan to accompany him to the office while Bharati is worried more about a career for Tara.

Tara is to go for a kidney transplant soon and, out of a sense of guilt or concern, Bharati forces on donating one of her kidney's to Tara. She is indirectly showing how she is taking the care of her daughter and is ready to do anything. But Mr. Patel did not like the idea and even slaps her. Bharati blames Mr. Patel being partial to the son while neglecting his beautiful daughter. Mr. Patel disagrees with Bharati's argument and tells her that he loves both his children equally and accuses her of turning them against him, there is a bitter argument between them.

Dattani explores the rigid mindset of a conservative father (Patel) who wants to impose his conventional ideas, the male child and the girl child, while the mother claiming to hail from a liberal community mixes up the boy-girl stereotypical roles to

give an advantage to the girl. Mother's extra concern for the girl child, is revealed at the end of the play through a subversive disclosure by the father. He admonishes his wife for following Chandan, the male child to knit wool which is against norm.

PATEL: Can't you even look after the children?

CHANDAN: Look, daddy, it's.....

PATEL : What did you do the whole day, huh? Watch video?

BHARATI: I can't think of things for them to do all the time!

PATEL : But you can think of turning him into a sissy teaching him to knit! (Collected Plays 351)

Patel forces Chandan to come with him to the office but Chandan sadly protested.

PATEL: You will come with me to the office until your college starts

CHANDAN: I don't want to go to the college! (Fighting his tears). Not without Tara! (Collected Plays 351)

Above conversation clearly shows father's rigidity of patriarchal conservatism, as he wants to continue the male child's activities.

The second and the last Act of Tara brings things to a climax by exposing the role of the parents in the separation of the conjoined twins. The operation made headlines at that time when reported in the medical journals. Dr. Thakkar, "the amazing doctor", did difficult task. But we can think about dark reality how things were manipulated by Bharati and her rich father in favour of Chandan because he was a boy over Tara who happened to be a girl. Even Tara's mother supported this bad act, means one female is against one female child. This is very pathetic scene. The twins were born with three legs. Bharati and her father wanted Chandan to have two legs; leaving Tara with one because she was a girl. But this exercise is not successful, both Tara and Chandan limped.

In patriarchal society, paradoxically, woman play a significant role in perpetuating discrimination against women. Bharati supported male child during surgery, it shows patriarchal structure, the values biased towards male and one woman have to support all. So, in patriarchy, a woman becomes a tool against another woman. One woman is enemy of others. Mr. Patel is restless

by thinking a lot about surgery and finally he reveals secret about decision regarding major 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 slightly 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 some 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 --- Maybe if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn't right and that even the doctor would realize it. was unethical! 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 ---- (Collected Plays 378)

Surgery is completely failure. Tara's mother is unhappy, sad, nervous, over serious, because she spoiled the life of her daughter by supporting her own father. Bharati wants to come out of this guilt, so she stretches herself beyond anything to make her life a little happier. Her discussion with her son Chandan, she tells '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). Bharati is mentally disturb and she is too much serious about her own mistakes.

Family atmosphere is not normal, both husband and wife quarrels, that creates tension in the family. Bharati blames her husband everytime and forces him whatever that happened, Mr. Patel is responsible for that. She is trying to prove that she loves Tara more than he does. Mr. Patel remarks, "You know she loves you. You are sure of that. Don't make her choose between us, for God's sake! You are running her life because you are sick. I want to help you Bharati, please allow me to help you"(Collected Plays 353).

Bharati imposes her sense of guilt on Roopa too when she bribes her to be her daughter's "best friend" and companion. In the play there is

interesting conversation between Bharati and Roopa. As an Indian mother Bharati is ready to do anything for the happiness of troubled Tara: "You can watch whatever you want! Just be my Tara's friend" (Collected Plays 341). Bharati insists on Roopa being Tara's "best friend", Roopa says that she already has two "best friends" in Prema and Nalini. She however promises to think it over. She only agrees to visit the Patel's and be Tara's friend after Bharati promises to allow her to watch any number of movies on then video, gives her good coffee and bribes her with magazines, perfumes and lipsticks. This shows how one mother takes efforts for her daughter. She shows an extra concern for Tara's need of company because she is a weakling compared to Chandan: "Chandan is all right- he has his writing, but she --- He is different, he is sort of self-contained, but Tara--- (Collected Plays 340)

The suffering and guilt of Bharati shows how women suffer in patriarchal system and values. Dattani pointed out the approach of society towards physically challenged people. Both Tara and Chandan are marginalized because they suffer from this. Even gender plays very dominant role in it. 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 grew 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)

Above dialogue clearly shows Bharati's fear about her daughter's future, because she is girl. Society can accept Chandan in this condition, but not Tara. Chandan who accepts the guilt and escapes to London to forget his trauma and anguish over the injustice done to this twin sister.

Tara, clever but sad girl who has not been given enough opportunities like her brother Chandan, finally dies. Tara dies in a shock when she comes to know the reality that is her mother Bharati who is involved in this dirty act of separation. The play enlightens us that no matter how much a girl outshines a boy, she will remain in the background and can never be given on advantageous position. In being a man's world and the reins being in their

hands, it is very difficult for a woman to fight the stranglehold of men. Tara thus points a picture of the helplessness of women in our society.

What Simone de Beauvoir has written in her magnum opus. The Second Sex is sort of all time social reality even today. It is that sex is biologically formed and gender is socially constructed.

Tara is neither Chandan's tragedy, nor is it Tara's. It shows the mindset of the Indian society which is heavily loaded against the girl child in which Dattani juggles with husband-wife relationship, son-in-law and father-in-law relationship, parents and children relationship with focus on father-daughter, mother-daughter and brother-sister relationship in the context of an educated urban family with the gender crisis giving rise to identity crisis in the case of Tara, the protagonist.

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