

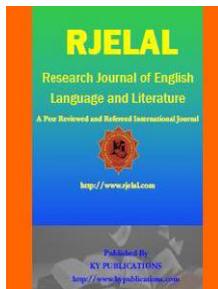


ISSUES OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE PLAY OF MAHESH DATTANI: *TARA*

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's *'Tara'* (1990) is a spellbinding play that questions a society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways. It is a poignant play about a boy and a girl who are joined together at the hip and have to be separated surgically, which will mean the death of either of the two. The fact that the injustice perpetuated by the victim's own mother whose preference is to the male child, makes the play more powerful suggesting that it is woman who continues the chain of injustice. *Tara* is merely not just the story of the protagonist of the play but it is the story of every girl child born in Indian family whether urban or rural. The situation becomes critical if the girl is physically challenged or mentally deformed. His plays not only highlight gender issues in a patriarchal society, but they also deal with gender biases and prejudices which influence the lives of girl-children even amongst the educated society. In this paper, therefore, an attempt is made to scrutinize Mahesh Dattani's drama to show how he is conscious of the social system prevailing in the contemporary India. The study is based on the hypothesis that Mahesh Dattani's drama persuasively depicts the gender discrimination and the real life problems in modern India.

Key words: Gender Discrimination, Indian Society, Patriarchy

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Mahesh Dattani is a name that has guided weakling Indian English Drama on the path of distinct identity. He is internationally acclaimed as the most outstanding playwright of Indian English drama in the twentieth century. He is the first Indian Playwrights in English to be awarded the *Sahitya Academy Award* In 1998 for his book of plays *Final Solutions and Other Plays*, for his remarkable contribution to world drama. Among his critically acclaimed plays are included : *Where There's a Will*(1988), *Dance Like a Man*(1989), *Tara*(1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen*(1991), *Final Solutions*(1992-93), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) and *Thirty Days in September*(2001). The

number of Radio Plays that have accrued into his account are: *Do the Needful* (1997), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998), *The Swami and Winston* (2000), *A Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* (2000), *Clearing the Rubble* (2000) and *Uma and the Fairy Queen* (2003). He also has three screen plays of high repute and recognition to his credit: *Mango Souffl* (2002), *Morning Raga* (2004) and *Ek Alag Mausam* (2005).

He has indeed added a new dimension to Indian drama in English. His plays are known for exploring contemporary issues of the modern urban society which are always drawn under the carpet like religious tension, discrimination, gender

identity, gender discrimination, and sexuality .He takes the family unit as the locus of most of his plays focusing on human relationships and personal choices representing contemporary people with their predicaments and complexities, joy and anguish which are the classic concerns of world drama. Dattani makes an abundant use of Indian mythology, rituals and traditions and contemporary problems, India is beset with and hence, all his plays address social issues, not the very obvious ones, but the deep-seated prejudices and problems that our society always hide. His characters reveal, belittling their families and neighbours, leaving each reader with a storm within as the consequence. And by revealing the complexity, he makes the world a richer place for all of us.

Dattani's writes about the real life situation of Indian society and his plays are about the marginalized sections of our society: minorities, women, gays, and hijras (eunuch). They are the weakest but integral part of our society and culture. Dattani has thus unfolded words of Beena Agrawal which are worth to be quoted here:-

"Theatre is not a mute and mechanical representation of social dynamics but it is a lively representation of the voices resounding in context of totality of human experiences that consciously or unconsciously affect the existing dynamics of human sensibility. Dattani, in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama by bringing it closer to the real life experiences, tried to articulate the voice of the oppressed sections of society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. They have been dragged in darkness, doomed to survive in perpetual silence bearing the oppressive burden of hegemony of the elitist class. Dattani within the framework of dramatic structure tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order."(34)

'Tara' (1990) is a play that raises questions to the society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways. It deals with the theme of gender discrimination and reveals a tremendous artistic amalgamation of Indian and Western cultures and concerns. Tara is a touchy play which shows the favoritism towards the male child in an upper middle class educated society. The play

centres on the emotional separation of the Siamese twins, Chandan and Tara Patel, who are born with three legs. The probability of the third leg's survival is greater with Tara as it is supplied by Tara's blood system. But their physical separation was manipulated by their father (Mr. Patel), mother (Bharati) and doctor who decide to fix the third leg on to the male baby's body to favour the boy [Chandan] over the girl [Tara]. The decision was influenced by the maternal grandfather of children, a politician, who favors to make male child physically fit and complete. It is our cultural heritage that boy is always superior to girl. This discrimination against the girl child by family members shows the mentality of the society. The leg that had survived only for two days with Chandan could have been accompanied Tara's forever. This operation to separate the twins at birth devastated Tara and leaves her crippled for life. It is tragic that the mother also supports in the act of attaching the third leg to the boy's body.

Gender Discrimination by Dr. Thakkar

Dr. Thakkar belied his godly profession and led himself to be bribed by Bharati's father into becoming an accomplice in the bizarre act of severing the leg. He should have upheld his profession by denouncing the decision at his inception whereas he in a way took Tara's life by severing the leg. His wise decision could have given Tara a safe, secured and complete life. For doing this malicious act, the doctor was bribed with a plot of land in Bangalore by Bharati's powerful and political father.

Gender Discrimination by Mother (Bharti)-

The fact that male self is being preferred in Indian society is obvious by the act that Bharti favors Chandan at the time of operation. It shows that a woman herself is the enemy of women. The mother prefers the male child and thus strengthens the chain of injustice. Later on she tries to shed her burden of guilt by showing maternal love and concern for her daughter. When Chandan enquires her if she has any plans for Tara, Bharati says,

"Yes, I plans for her happiness .I mean to give her all love and affection which I can give .Its what she deserves have can make up for lost "[CP p-349] 3

Bharati is quite much fearful about the future of her daughter. She determines to donate her kidney to give a new life to Tara which ultimately turns useless.

"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 world will accept you- but not her! Oh! The pair is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable and what about forty and fifty! Oh, God!"
[CP p-349]4

Gender Discrimination by maternal Grandfather-

Chandan and Tara's maternal grandfather was a wealthy politician and came very close to becoming the Chief Minister. Male domination reflected in the role of Bharati's father who donates all his property and wealth to the male child. This further strengthened gender discrimination by not leaving a single penny to Tara after his demise. Mr. Patel and Chandan are talking,

"PATEL. He [grandfather] left you a lot of money.

CHANDAN. And Tara?

PATEL. Nothing

CHANDAN. Why?

PATEL It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it. [CP p-360]10

Gender Discrimination by Father (Mr. Patel)

Mr. Patel, an emblem of male chauvinism, allows Chandan to enjoy greater preferences and Tara is left to enjoy the position of a subaltern. The fact that consciously or unconsciously all the privileges are offered to the son is obvious from Patel's planning for Chandan's education and future career. Even though Tara is more intelligent, he continuously favours Chandan when it comes to giving him higher education abroad.

"PATEL .You are turning them against the whole world.

BHARATI I am doing that.

PATEL. Yes! Look at the way you treat Tara .As if she is made of glass. You coddle her, you pet her, you spoil her, She's grown up feeling she doesn't need anyone but you.!

BHARATI. What you want me to do? Just tell me in plain simple words what you want me to do and i'll do it!

PATEL. Let go. Just let go. And let me handle them.

BHARATI. All right .You stay at home then! You stay at home and watch what they can do and what they can't .You remind them of what they can't be. It's easy for you to talk about their future and your plans. But tell them what they should do now .This day, this hour, this minute .Tell them! I want to hear!

PATEL. Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for his higher studies.

BHARATI. And Tara?

PATEL. When have you ever allowed me to make any plans for her?

[CP p-352]11

Later on Patel realises his mistake and guilty.

"Yes, call me a liar, a wife beater, a child abuser. It's what you want me to be! And you .You want them to believe you love them very much" [CP p-354]8

Again he tells Tara , " Tara , please believe me when I say that I love you very much and I have never in all my life loved you less or more than I have loved your brother. But your mother----" [CP-p-354]9

In a nutshell, Tara is more enthusiastic and full of spark of life with high aspirations which were not fulfilled owing to her handicapped state. Throughout the play she bears some kind of grudge against the society. She seems to have some kind of disliking with the outside world though her world consists of only her parents and her brother whom she was ever close to. The play explores the typical Indian mind set which has from time immemorial preferred a boy child to a girl child.

"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 .Woven into the play are issues of class and

community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values." CP [p-319]2

If she had been given moral support by her parents .She might have shone like a star as her name signifies. Tara is killed by social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. This makes her life a burden on this earth and consequently she loses interest in life.

"TARA. Oh! What a waste! A waste of money .What spends all the money to keep me alive? It cannot matter whether I live or die. There are thousands of poor sick people on the roads who could be given care and attention, and I think I know what I will make of myself. I will be a crier for those people . I ---- I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those. ----starving naked millions everywhere is talking about. May be 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 can do it , can't I ?I will be very happy if I could , because that is really what I want .That really --- [with emotion].Oh! , bullshit! I don't care .I don't care for anyone except mummy!

[CP- p-370]12

In the end, I can say that Mahesh Dattani has excellently revealed the issue of gender discrimination in this play (an inequality against the girl child). To look son and daughter with biased and discriminating eyes has been traditional and age old custom in India and Tara is a victim of this social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. In Indian society, woman is variously presented as a mother, wife, daughter and sister even goddess. But ironically in the patriarchal structure of an Indian family, Women and girls are trained to remain confined to kitchen and courtyard. Be it a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mistress all are dependent on man for financial and physical security. They were treated to secondary position in all walks of life. At every stage in the life –cycle, the female body is both the objects of desire and of control. Dattani gives the message that the final solutions comprise in the words like tolerance, generosity and respect for other human beings, which are the strength of Indian culture.

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