

Mahesh Dattani: A True Champion of the Marginalised with reference to the Play *Tara*

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Abstract: *The present paper proposes to depict the reality of the society of modern times in a socio-realistic play 'Tara' by Mahesh Dattani. The main thrust of the paper is to throw light on the pathos of the girl child which is expressed by her actions and behaviour. Mahesh Dattani is a well-known playwright who is known for his bold attacks on the cruel and inhuman attitude of the society towards the weak and marginalized categories. Dattani does not hesitate to unveil the naked truths of the society. He is a voice to the many unvoiced. The paper examines how a society can be so inhuman as to encourage a conspiracy against the other sex just because it is still not accepted as equal by the majority of men. Dattani also gives voice to the unspoken suppressed feelings of the suffering sex and to delineate it, he delves into the psyche of the voiceless sex as well. The paper aims at highlighting the social ills that prevail in the society as a result of which the tagged inferior sex has been a sufferer of the brutal social norms. Dattani makes a very bold attempt of putting the entire vista of maltreatment and oppression of female child in the public domain for rigorous discourse. In fact, the whole play is itself an attack on the oppression against the discriminated sex.*

Index Terms: Gender Discrimination, Subjugation, Exploitation, Male Domination

Mahesh Dattani belongs to a group of distinct dramatists in Indian Drama in English. He breaks the stereotyping of classes. It is a general belief in India that the people who belong to the upper class are liberal minded while the villagers or the marginalised are communal and bigoted. Dattani's plays attack this very notion. He presents the other side of the society in the cities. The so-called urban people hide their real selves behind various masks. His plays generally focus on the urban class and its problems. The plays of Mahesh Dattani represent different dimensions of marginalisation and the political motive behind exercising subjugation and oppression. His plays, in addition to dealing with the financially weaker sections in the Indian society, also portray the sad plight of women in the male dominant world. To Dattani the inspiration of representing the oppression and suppression of the marginalised and excluded comes from his faith in the creative art, especially the drama, that puts forth the real picture before the world which otherwise is never captured by the "fair" society.

The present paper proposes to explore the play 'Tara' by Mahesh Dattani 'in the light of subjugation and suppression of the marginalised section of the society. The play was first performed as Twinkle Tara at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23rd October 1990; it was directed by Dattani himself. Later Alyque Padamsee handled the directorship. On 9th November 1991, the play was staged as *Tara* at Sophia Bhabha Hall in Mumbai.

The play 'Tara' depicts the piteous condition of a girl in her own house where she is reduced to merely a voiceless person. She cannot complain against the injustice done to her as it was her own family that discriminated against her. The saddest part has been that even the mother, who herself is a woman, is complicit with the decision of sacrificing the life of her daughter just in order to make the boy enjoy all the privileges including the physical health. The surgical separation, as pointed out by the Doctor, could lead to the death of either of the twins but the family insisted on separating the twins with a conspicuous preference for the male infant to be saved. Moreover, the revelation by the doctor that the third leg that the twins had could go well with the girl child 'Tara' shook the house. This was the time when the intense urge for the boy came into light. Of course, the decision was taken in favour of the male child 'Chandan'. The incidents in the play oscillate between past and present events. The locale in the play has been the home itself, as is usually seen in almost all the plays of Dattani.

Dattani's play 'Tara' (1990) is a great example of brutal hypocrisy and gender biased urban class. It is a very touching two-act play in which Dattani reveals the criminal conspiracy within the house just to have a fit and fine boy child by harming the individuality and physicality of the girl child of the same parents. Dattani honestly does his job of depicting the pathos of the girl in real life. Dattani himself says, "I know that I have a lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too, and they seem to be doing rather well at having their say". (Preface) In fact, Dattani aims at unveiling the social ills prevailing in the society with the intention of reforming the society. 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 the self and the resultant angst". (134, Subramanyam)

'Tara' is a story of two conjoined twins Chandan and Tara. Chandan is a boy while Tara is a girl. The surgical separation of the twins is performed in a way that intentionally favours the boy. Tara is disadvantaged in every respect and is unable to survive eventually passing away very early. Chandan is racked by the disadvantaged life of his sister and in order to go far from the repressing memories moves to England to start his life afresh. He even changes his name to a westernized nickname "Dan". The play delineates the struggle of a traditional household to conform to the modern western ideas and utterly failing in doing so. Women in the Indian context have been assigned very lower status both historically and culturally. Nature may have made both men and women equal in importance but in due course of time, men usurped the power on account of their superiority in physical strength. Women were denigrated and confined to the four walls. If the purpose had been the distribution of work only, it would have been fine but it was not so. Women were relegated and exploited. They were expropriated of all the privileges and benefits.

Mahesh Dattani follows the split scenes and employs flashback theatrical technique. There are three levels in the play, i.e. house of the Patels, bedsitter of the older Chandan in a suburb of London and Dr. Thakkar's seat in his cabin. Dan is the moniker name of Chandan. He has started living in London. It's he who provides action to the play through his memory. He has changed his name so that he can get rid of his past and burden of injustice done to his own sister 'Tara'. The play begins with Dan's disturbed mental condition. He says:

"In poetry, even the most turbulent emotions can be recollected when one is half asleep. But in drama! Ah! Even tranquility has to be recalled with emotion - like touching a bare live wire. Try distancing yourself from that experience and writing about it! A mere description will be hopelessly inadequate. And for me... I have to relive that charge over and over again". (323, Dattani)

The play deals with reality through the characters of Patel, Bharti, Tara, Chandan, and Dr. Thakkar.

All the characters web a realistic story with more focus on delineating position of women in the Indian society. Actually, the ancient and traditional norms have deep roots in the minds of the people. It really poses a challenge for them to break the strong shackles of unwanted rules and regulations. Bharti, Tara's mother took the decision of preferring the third leg to be with the boy Chandan. Her cultural conditioning led her to make this decision. The patriarchal society has always preferred the male sex over the female one. But the guilt of injustice never let Bharti live in peace. She was always worried for Tara. Her conscience often pricked her for her misdeed. She shows her concern towards Tara. Though her care could not pay for her, yet she kept on trying just to console her conscience. She says:

"In one month she will lose a kilo! If I don't force her to eat, how will she gain weight? She will keep getting thinner till she's shriveled and only...skin and bones! It's bad enough that she...they..." (326, Dattani)

Mahesh Dattani has bluntly highlighted the fake propaganda of modern Indian society. Despite the socialist boasting of equality, the ground reality is the other way round. *Tara*, which is a modern play, has worked on the superficial attitudes of the people. Every individual lives with two-faced notions. The play is all about the role of women that has been merely reduced to voiceless members within the four walls of the house. Bharti was responsible for Tara's condition, but at the same time, she proves that she does not have any say in important decisions as well. Bharti's father convinced her to do so. Her perception of seeing the things depended upon a male. She acted as the decision maker. In fact, she was not. Tara was bearing the pain of injustice and could not even ask why it was done. Dattani portrays the reality in its perfect manner. The Indian society still has not come up to shed the old fears and ideologies. Tara is not given any opportunity that she should have been. She gets birth and dies after a course of time. Her destiny was in the hands of the cruel gender biased people. Bharti is trying hard to get rid of her guilt by giving Tara her kidney but does not succeed.

The play is also about the revelation of the male-chauvinism. The male characters, be it Patel, or grandfather, or Dr. Thakkar, all proved their preference towards giving more advantages to the boy child. Bharti's father was a very influential person. He bribed Dr. Thakkar to do what they wanted him to do. The voice of justice remained calm and quiet for some time. Bharti could prevent the situation but did not do so. She was under the patriarchal pressure. Her voice was depressed. Later, when she tries to show more concern for Tara, it was just to satisfy her own guilt. The females have a voice that they don't use at the right time. It may be the impact of the old tradition or the blind faith in the so-called superior sex. The society plays safe as well. The voices of the females are suppressed. When Bharti tries to serve Tara more, she is criticized by Patel. The supporters of patriarchal system don't let any stone unturned to have their influence on the weaker section. Let's have a look at the conversation between Bharti and Patel.

Bharti: Tara, finish your milk.

Patel: Why would you serve her so much if she does not want to ...?

Bharti: But she must put on some weight.

Patel: She is fine. (326, Dattani)

Mahesh Dattani knows how to project the truth in a better way. He webs the story so as to raise emotions and concerns towards the societal injustices. The play is all about the tyranny of societal norms that are

deep in the minds of the people. Erin Mee states, “Mahesh Dattani frequently takes as his subjects the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender, and repressed desire.” (319, Mee)

Mahesh Dattani usually plays with words. His usage of vocabulary acts as a tool to express the severity of the described situation. In the play, there are numerous instances where the girl ‘Tara’ has felt very low and cheated. But as the society has some set norms for the females to follow, so Tara never argues boldly. She often expresses her sorrow by just a few touching sentences. She says:

“Oh, what a waste! A waste of money. Why spend all the money to keep me alive? It cannot matter whether I live or die.”(370, Dattani)

As the story develops, she states:

“Selfish? Yes. I am. I have the right to be selfish, like everyone else”. (371, Dattani)

Tara has grown up seeing the biased attitude of the people around. Even her grandfather did not treat her equally with Chandan. He gave all his property to Chandan. Patel and Chandan talk about this.

Patel: He 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. (360, Dattani)

The play strongly exposes the gender discrimination. No doubt, the character of Tara is the most sympathetic one. The facts are the other way round. The girl in the play doesn’t need any one’s compassion but the society needs. The society as a whole can be held responsible for the incidents that took place in Tara and Chandan’s lives. In the 20th century, many realistic writers like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Rabindranath Tagore, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, and many more depicted the social ills of the society. The problems changed their faces in the different works but the ground reality was pathetic. The free India is still in chains of traditions.

Mahesh Dattani’s works represent the plagued society and his characters provide voice to the voiceless. The voiceless section of the society is an inspiration to Dattani’s works. He does the same in Tara. His characters try to teach a great lesson to the society. ‘Tara’ who was the victim of the discriminated sex, showed her agony and pain in a civilized but rebellious manner. Chandan is also a voice to the poor voiceless class of the society. He discussed the futility of discrimination at various points. His conversation raises relevant questions regarding the prejudice against ‘Tara’. The Indian society is shown in a very bad shape. It sets a number of principles for females but nothing is properly defined for males. This becomes a weapon against the discriminated sex. Babu, in his article on ‘Gender Based Injustice’, feels the same. He says:

“In the whole play Dattani spreads a bitter truth of child abuse that prevails in the Indian societies. Every girl child born in an Indian family suffers some kind of exploitation”. (7, Dattani)

Tara has been written in a therapeutic manner. Mahesh Dattani has used the technique of self-realization in the play. The characters are made aware of their faults naturally. The whole play is a voice to the marginalized people. Dattani always introduces a problem in his works. His characters elaborate the prevailing problem along with the intention of betterment. Dattani’s characters in the play are the victims of the societal injustice. The burden of traditional legacy has mostly led to the inequity. The diseased mentality of the defenders of

some faith give rise to the voiceless class. *Tara* has bluntly come up with a serious issue. The theme of the play matches the title. The unheard sex gets a ray of hope through the incidents that took place in the play. The playwright has excellently delivered the message. The society hardly allows the discriminated sex to put forth its point of view. But the play has become a voice to all the voiceless sufferers.

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