



Physical Deformity as a Source of Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Tara, a play in three acts, is perhaps the most famous play of Mahesh Dattani. Just as his other plays portray many of the prevalent issues of modern society, *Tara* also stands as a replica in reflecting a contemporary social issue, gender discrimination. Discrimination through gender is a common phenomenon in Indian society even after independence and social reforms. *Tara* throws light on marginalising a girl child emotionally by her family just because of her gender. The play is completely woven around an urban, educated high middle class family. It was enacted for the first time with the title "Twinkle Tara" on 23 October 1990 by Playpen theatre group in Bangalore.

The play has many sentimental incidents leading to a tragic end. Tara, a young girl, is the central character in this play who gets discriminated by her own family and witnesses many painful experiences till the end of her life. Chandan, Tara's brother, is one of the major characters in this play, who changes his name as Dan and writes the story of his sister after her death. Dan is full of guilt for Tara's death and regrets it by writing her story. The characterisation of Tara reflects the conditions of many Indian girls who lead a life of compromise at every stage for having been born a girl. Tara is a peace loving and calm going defender of her family and never raises her voice for her comforts but mildly bears injustice. In the words of Sushma Seth, "Tara is the story of conjoined twins separated at birth, by a surgical procedure intended to favour the boy over the girl. Told through boy's reflections on his childhood memories, Tara's story is also a reflection of the feminine struggle for expression both physically and emotionally in a patriarchal Indian society" (43)

Tara and Chandan are conjoined twins born to Patel and Bharati. Dan's interview with Dr. Umakant Thakkar, an expert in various cases of Siamese twins and a surgeon, reveals that the bodies of Tara and Chandan got separated through a major surgery at the age of three months. Patel's family proceeds for the surgery to separate the twins of three legs so that both the children can lead a comfortable life. After having all medical check-ups, it is revealed that the major part of blood to the third leg is circulated by the body of female child and it is also found that the third leg has more probability of survival with Tara's body. But "patriarchal hegemony," a typical thinking of most Indian families, is clearly visible here. Bharati and her father give priority to provide Chandan rather than Tara though there are more risk factors involved for Tara. Tara's grandfather bribes the doctor; they manipulate them to favour Chandan over Tara. This ultimately leads Tara to sacrifice her leg for her brother just because of her gender and lessens her survival chances for a long period. The bad intentions of Bharati and her father do not remain for many days as Chandan also has to suffer amputation due to their wrong decisions. G J V Prasad opines that "This is thus a play about the injustices done in the name of construction of gender identities – this hierarchisation and demarcation of roles does as much harm to men as to women. Dan carries as much harm of the unfair burden this imposes as Tara" (141).

Throughout the play Tara is shown as a lovable daughter of her family especially of her mother though it is quite different in reality. She is a neglected child of Patel's family where care is taken as one takes for their pet but importance is not given. She is always ill treated by her father and even some times Chandan shows his male ego. He is the only character in this play who shows his concern for Tara and motivates her to join college and have her own professional career. He denies joining college in Mumbai without her company and always cares for her medical treatment. Patel showers endless affection on Chandan and wants him to be successful in his professional career but neglects his daughter. Just like his father, Chandan, though he loves his sister, also shows his male egocentric attitude by mentioning the card game incident to his sister. This clearly seen in Patel's conversation with his children:

PATEL. I was just thinking . . . It may be a good idea for you to come to the office with me.

CHANDAN. What for?

PATEL. Just to get a feel of it.

CHANDAN. You can take Tara. She'll make a great business woman.

TARA. How do you know?

CHANDAN. Because you always cheat at cards!

TARA. Just because I win doesn't mean I cheat, okay!

PATEL. Chandan, I think I must insist that you come.

CHANDAN. We'll both come with you.

PATEL. No! (328)

Patel stands as an apt symbol of male chauvinism; he is shown as aggressive while conversing with his wife and restricts her from doing the deeds of her choice. He gets his ego satisfied by dominating her and expresses his unhappiness when he finds her proud of her father's wealth. His patriarchal hierarchy can be seen in the following conversation:

PATEL. When have expenses ever bothered you? Your father's wealth has always been your strength against me. Don't talk about expenses to me!

BHARATI. Why won't you let me do it?

PATEL. Because . . . need I tell you? Because I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it. (344)

Tara's life is totally turned pathetic due to the decision taken by her mother and maternal grandfather.

Bharati's father is a rich man with much political influence. Because of Indian archetypal belief of male superiority both the father and daughter prefer to provide limb to Chandan instead of Tara. This is the major event that leads to the tragic end of innocent Tara. The surgery is crucial for the lives of both conjoined twins and though is successful, it eventually makes Chandan also lose his leg due to the wrong decision taken by Bharati and her father. This adverse result makes Bharati feel remorse throughout the play and she starts to pay over attention to Tara. Both Tara and Chandan are unaware of the mistake of their family till the final part of the play. Dattani through family's priority shown towards men critically interprets contemporary traditional thoughts even in educated middle-class families, where people strongly believe that it is men who are the real inheritors of the family and women are only their subordinates. Dattani makes it clear through the observation of Tara that "men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (328).

Tara is in no way supported by her family. It is Chandan who gives her mental strength, encourages her in studies, and in her fitness efforts. Tara's grandfather leaves huge wealth for Chandan but not for Tara, who is also his legitimate heir and no one of the play has any concern for the inequality meted out to Tara. The following conversation is an evidence for the typical traditional attitude deeply rooted in people:

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)

Tara always stands in defence of her family, especially for her brother when he is blamed by Roopa, a tricky girl, of making an attempt to seduce her. She wisely calms down the issue and gives a punching counter to Roopa so that she will never repeat such silly intrigues. The attitude of Tara is very strong; she maintains mental stability even when her physical deformity is mocked at by Prema and Nalini. It is repeated for one more time when Roopa also calls her a one-legged thing:

TARA. So how does it feel having one tit smaller than the other? Don't worry ----- it's not very noticeable, except from a certain angle. Then it's very noticeable.

ROOPA. How dare you! You one-legged thing!

TARA. I'd sooner be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than be an imbecile like you. An imbecile with uneven tits. (369)

Dattani, through the words of Tara, makes highly critical remarks against the established beliefs of contemporary society in the form of gender discrimination. Both Chandan and Tara, being Siamese twins, have a strong bond with each other and it is reflected in the words of Tara: "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" (325). Though Chandan also is born with physical deformity, Tara suffers a lot not only due to her physical deformity but also for being a girl child. She avoids her studies and neglects her health. She is shown as a caring daughter for her mother: even though her mother does not come to meet her even after her kidney operation, she enquires about her and is worried about her health.

Tara knows her parents as more loving and caring but at the closing of the play she gradually unveils the secrets of her past. When her father prevents her to meet Bharati in the hospital when both Tara and Chandan try to visit their mother in the hospital secretly, her anxiety to know about her mother's health gradually drives Tara to suspect her father of hiding a secret but he reveals the truth that their mother and grandfather's conspiracy is responsible behind that mishap,. Bharati, though shown as a caring and lovable mother of her children at the surface level, in reality she is negative in nature. She plays a villainous role against her own daughter by neglecting her and manipulating things governed by patriarchal hegemony.

Repenting her misdeeds, Bharati shows some sympathy for her daughter. But when she really wants to correct her mistake by donating her kidney to Tara, Patel stops her and blames her as solely responsible for Tara's

condition. She pleads with Roopa to be her friend and companion so that she does not feel lonely. When Bharati falls sick, she wants to reveal it to her daughter but Patel does not let her meet Tara.

After Tara's death due to her worsening health, Chandan settles in London and decides to write her story by changing his name as Dan. He laments the tragedy of his sister and voices his wish to reunite with his sister who is twinkling in the cosmos. The title of the play has its significance because it indicates her as a celestial being who keeps on shining in the sky by fulfilling others' wishes even till the end. As Beena Agarwal says, "The pathetic confession of Dan by the end of the play 'forgive me Tara, forgive me, for making it my tragedy'(CP 380) is the manifestation of Dattani's own anguish at the exploitation of an innocent girl" (93).

Through this play Dattani tries to realistically present contemporary society which in one way or the other shows discrimination in the name of gender even after many social reforms. The play gives an eye-opening message to the public to encourage gender equality and to provide every possible step for the empowerment of women. Though Tara and Chandan are physically deformed, the play highlights the torment a child undergoes when it belongs to the feminine gender. Due to the indifferences shown by society, Tara develops hatred towards society and confines herself to home. After her kidney transplantation she refuses to go to college and insists on her brother going to college without her. She is shown tired of struggling with the indifference shown by her family as well society due to her physical deformity and feminine gender.

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