

Culture and Gender Identity in Mahesh Dattani's 'Tara'

Dr. Kalpana Pandey*

*Assistant Professor (English) Atal Bihari Vajpayee Nagar Nigam Degree College, Lucknow (U.P.) INDIA

Abstract - Gender inequality is a common malice all over the world. Millions of women throughout the world live in conditions of abject deprivation and suffer attacks on their fundamental human rights. However, they have been ignored for centuries and treated as 'second sex'. Throughout the history and in almost all societies, inequalities of men and women are part and parcel of an accepted male dominated culture. Women often have to face discrimination, injustice and dishonor. Besides this, they are denied their most basic and fundamental right, i.e. "right to life". The negligence of the girl child and discrimination goes hand to hand. The patriarchal and hypocritical nature of modern male dominated society has been understood, analyzed and exposed by the famous modern Indian dramatist Mahesh Dattani. Almost all his plays ring the note of some burning topics of this modern world. Dattani's well known play "Tara" is centered round the theme of gender discrimination, injustice and clash of attitude which is gaining ground everywhere in this modern age. "Tara" is not just the story of the protagonist of the play Tara, but it is the story of every girl born in Indian family whether urban or rural. "Tara" shows a typical woman character persecuted by male domination. It is a riveting play that questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways. Through this play, Dattani mocks at such type of thoughts that prevail in our society.

In this paper an effort has been done to bring up this particular view of thought to make a fertile insight towards the study of women as subaltern. It also seeks to bring out from the closet the hidden faces of outdated male system and its effect on the females of the male dominated families.

Keywords: Malice, abject deprivation, fundamental, hypocritical, gender discrimination, injustice, subaltern.

Introduction - Mahesh Dattani is one such Indian playwright who took the burden to upgrade the society with new themes and almost all the plays of Mahesh Dattani ring the note of some burning topics of this modern world. His plays artfully touch some of the most serious concerns of our society today and focused on several major problems prevalent around us. In many of his plays, he handles various issues like- sexuality, gender discrimination, religious bigotry, communalism and child sexual abuse etc. Dattani is the first Indian playwright to be honoured with the most prestigious award the Sahitya Akademy in 1998. His plays provided fascinating insights and took pains to emphasize the present genre through novel aspects. Like G. B. Shaw, he strongly believes in exposing the various ills and maladies of the society. Dattani seems to be belonged to the literary concept 'art for the sake of life'.

In some of his plays like "Tara" and "Where There's Will" Dattani has presented a very realistic portrayal of the deserted and the marginalized women who have to bear the brunt of patriarchy or male domination. His well-known play "Tara" is centered round the theme of gender discrimination, injustice and clash of attitude which is

gaining ground everywhere in this modern age. In terms of Gender injustice, the term 'gender' refers to economic, social, political and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female. Women play a vital role equally in creation as well as development of their families in particular and society in general. Whether in today's time women have been given more rights as compared to men, since the condition of women is miserable, because there exists a wide gulf between theory and practice.

Discussion: "Tara" shows a typical woman character persecuted by male domination. This play reflects the predicament of woman, her pathetic plight, her traumatic experience and above all her step motherly treatment by a male dominated family. It also exposes the existing patriarchal stereotypes of the Indian mindset, which has always preferred a boy child to a girl child. The play also shows the hypocritical nature of modern male dominated society which never feels any qualm of conscience in making a difference between the girl and boy child sharing the same woman. "Tara" is a riveting play that questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same

womb in two different ways. Dattani mocks at such type of thoughts that prevail in our society.

"Tara" is not just the story of the protagonist of the play Tara, but it is the story of every girl child born in Indian family whether urban or rural. Every girl child in an Indian family does suffer some kind of exploitation and if there is a boy child in the family then the exploitation is very much visible as the privileges are consciously or unconsciously provided to the son. Dattani's play "Tara" is a poignant play about a boy and a girl who is joined together at the haunch and has to be separated surgically, an operation which will mean the death of the one of the two. Here the injustice perpetrated by the victim's own mother whose preference is to the male child makes the play more powerful suggesting that it is woman who continue the chain of injustice.

Dattani's play "Tara" deals with the cultural constructions of gender that always gives preference to the male over the female. Tara and Chandan are conjoined twins whose physical separation is manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the boy over the girl. The twins had three legs between them. The tests showed that the girl provided a major part of the blood supply to the third leg. Chances were that it would survive on the girl, but the mother had a private meeting with the doctor and bribed him to agree to give both the legs to the boy. The doctor's wise decision could have given Tara a safe, secured and complete life, but his decision has made Tara crippled for life. His cruelty not only thwarts Tara's dreams but fills her life with dejection and depression. Her depression made her wish for death than unnecessarily spend money on herself.

The play "Tara" brings forth the bizarre reality of the woman playing second fiddle to man. Dattani is known widely for picking up scintillating social problems in which this is perennial and glaring. The preference for the beneficence of the male child while staking the life of the female child is pathetic and takes to culmination the feeling of rejection felt by women in our society. Discrimination against the girl child is handed boldly by Dattani in his play, "Tara". The play deals with the courage and strong will of a handicapped Siamese twin who could have survived but for her mother's unwise and preferential decision to give the extra leg to her twin brother Chandan; eventually Tara dies. The whole effort went in vain because the leg very soon became a lump of dead flesh on Chandan and has to be amputated. To think that it would have been part of Tara! The mother, however, becomes a psychological case. Her guilt eats her up from within and she does not live long. It is Chandan who lives with the shame of it all.

Chandan escapes to London, changes his name to Dan, and tries to repress the guilt by living in a strange land. Chandan remembers about his childhood days spent with his sister Tara. Dattani says, "Tara, a feisty girl who isn't given the opportunities given to her brother 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." Through the poor soul (Chandan) had nothing to do with his sister's untimely death but he bears the brunt of cruelty of his grandfather and mother. He feels somehow responsible for his sister's death and decides to atone for it. Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara's story. Dan writes her story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole. He says, "I have my memories, but now I want them to come back. To masticate my memories in my mind and spit out the result to the world in anger."

Chandan wants to turn his anguish into drama on his sister's childhood. Throughout the play we can feel in Tara that she bears some kind of grudge against the society. Chandan was more complacent with his handicapped life while Tara craved every moment for a complete and normal life. The humiliation meted out to her by Rupa and her friends when she was forced to show her handicapped leg to them. Tara seems to have some kind of aversion with the outside world and her world consisted of only her parents and her brother whom she was very close to. Tara's attachment to her brother and the internal anguish is expressed in her conversation with her brother Chandan, when she says: "...Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started life. Two lives in one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out...and separated" (325).

The viciousness of the grandfather and his mother not only takes away the life of the girl but also ruins the life of the boy who was very much attached to his sister Tara. "Tara" gives us a glimpse into the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced in its thought and action, but in reality, it seems to be very conservative. It is revealed in the play that a decision taken by the mother left Tara crippled for life. Having proved wrong in her decision, Bharati tries to shed her burden of guilt by showing maternal love and concern for her daughter and to assert her moral superiority over her husband Patel. Bharati uses her love for Tara as a weapon against Patel as well as an expression of her desire to compensate to Tara. Tara is also taken up by her mother's concern and love because she was unaware of the fact that her loving mother was responsible in destroying her dreams. Bharati imposes her sense of regret on Rupa too when she bribes her to be her daughter's companion. The conversation between Bharati and Rupa shows that Bharati is ready to do anything for the sake of Tara's happiness: "You can watch whatever you want! Just be my Tara's friend" (341).

Bharati's sense of regret is so deep that she agrees to donate her kidney to her daughter so that she may survive for a few more years. In a conversation with her son, she

tells him: "I plan to give 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" (349). Mrs. Patel's internal turmoil is so strong that it often comes out in her relationship with her husband where she is perpetually complaining about something or the other. The affluence of Mrs. Patel's father has always been a bone of contention between Mr. and Mrs. Patel. Bharati's father, a powerful and rich politician, determined about the operation in which the leg was to be given to Chandan instead of Tara. Bharati's father showed his indulgence for male grandchild by leaving his property after his demise to Chandan and not a single penny to Tara. He has been a consistent upholder of values pertaining to males. Patel's attitude has also been negative because he remained a mute observer of the whole affair. He continuously favours Chandan to give him higher education abroad. Tara is discouraged openly, notwithstanding her feelings in the matter, even though she is more intelligent, sharp and witty. It is only when Chandan refuses to go to college without her, Patel thinks of sending Tara too. But Tara refuses to fill the forms for college.

Tara being a girl has been taken for granted by Patel and all his expectations and dreams rested on Chandan whereas Chandan has been shown a boy of a different mentality. When he finally comes to know about the injustice done towards Tara by their parents and grandfather, he is filled with self-guilt and takes up the burden solely on his own shoulders. His sense of trauma and anguish is so intense that at the end of the play, Chandan apologizes to Tara in the most moving of all the lines: "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me, for making it my tragedy" (380).

Tara was enthusiastic and full of zest and spark of life. She had high aspirations which she could not accomplish because of her handicapped state. If she had been given moral support by her parents, she might have shone like a 'star' as her name justifies. She could have been a source of cheerfulness and happiness of the family but her potentiality was sacrificed on the altar of gender. Rupa's joke about how the Gujarati is used to drown their infant daughters in the milk comes out to be true in the end. Tara is sacrificed because she was a girl and had no right to have a better life than her brother. Tara (star) does not twinkle on the Indian sky because she is not allowed to shine.

Tara is killed by the socio-cultural system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. Like men, women also need space to breathe freely and flourish. Mahesh Dattani has tried to show this by bringing in Dr. Thakkar as a social element in the play. He belied his godly profession and led himself to be bribed by Bharati's father.

Conclusion: The play presents a mirror to the Indian society to see its true face. The tragic events depicted in the play are the tragic actions belonging to everyday life. The play also enlightens that no matter how much a girl outshines a boy, she will remain in the background and can never be given high pedestal. The idea of a complete girl child and an incomplete male-child is so shocking that sacrifice of the girl-child is acceptable than a handicapped male-child. And it is very pathetic to read that Bharati, being an educated mother, showed such discrimination towards the female-child. If she had not shown indulgence for the male-child and had done justice with her female child then both the children would have happily flourished and established themselves in the world. The whole set-up of the play presents Dattani's world where he picked up various characters from the society and displays the fiery issues of today. In the play "Tara", Dattani raises only the questions related to gender and social stratification, and hierarchy and sexuality and also presents the prevalent gender biases in the society. But Dattani does not provide any solution to these problems: he only removes the veil and exposes it in its most bitter form in his famous play "Tara".

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