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GENDER-BASED INJUSTICE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *TARA*

BABU G

Saveetha Engineering College, Saveetha Nagar, Thandalam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most famous modern Indian – English playwrights. He always deals with the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. In many of his plays, he deals with various issues like homo sexuality, gender discrimination, communalism and child sexual abuse. Dattani is one of the play wrights who challenged the construction of India and Indian as they have been presented in the modern English theatre. This paper is a modest attempt to study the gender-based injustice and how the male given preference over the female in an Indian family. The play deals with the emotional separation of two conjoined twins (at the hip) and the manipulation of their mother and grandfather to favour the boy child over the girl child. This play also deals with the issues of class and community and traditional values.

KEYWORDS: Gender-Based Injustice, Dattani, Homo Sexuality, Gender Discrimination, Communalism and Child Sexual Abuse

INTRODUCTION

Tara is the third dramatic work of Mahesh Dattani. It is one of the Dattani's best loved plays in the world over, *Tara* addresses the question of gender in many ways, though not necessarily through banal stereotypes of 'bias against the girl child', although that is the generally accepted interpretation of the play in India. With Dattani, it is never a situation that is cut-and-dried, absolving one or squarely laying the blame on the other. And that is why he would prefer to say that this play is more about the 'gendered' self, about acknowledging the female side of oneself.

GENDER-BASED INJUSTICE IN *TARA*

The play *Tara* is narrated by Chandan, the male half of the whole of which the 'other' is Tara. Mahesh Dattani has presented the bizarre reality of the woman playing second scam to man. It is about the courage and spirit of a handicapped girl-child, a Siamese twin born in a Gujarati family. She (Tara) could have survived but for her mother's decision to give the extra leg to her twin brother, Chandan. Tara's mother had allowed a leg to be amputated from her conjoined twin even though there was a great probability of the survival of the girl.

In the whole play Dattani spreads a bitter truth of child abuse prevails in the Indian societies. Every girl child born in an Indian family suffers some kind of exploitation. Dattani's *Tara* is a typical woman character and she has been widely acclaimed and differently interpreted based on gender and race. Dattani boldly express the exploitation of Indian women in his work as it is very much visible as the privileges are consciously or unconsciously propounded to the son in the Indian families. Mahesh Dattani himself mentioned in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramanyam: "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 self and the resultant angst". (*Tara* 129)

Would women be ever considered equal to men, is a big question to be answered by every individual and the society at large. There is differentiation between a male and a female child. All propaganda about equality of male and female as well as the claims about providing equal opportunities to women in all the fields are feigned.

Dattani has unveiled all the proscribed subjects from under the hat and putting them on the stage for the public to review; Dattani's *Tara* probes the dilemma of a Siamese twin. Considering the playwright's foresight, critics have observed that playwrights, who have had the guts to address such poignant issues threadbare and also brought them to lime-light, should be encouraged.

The play *Tara* revolves around Chandan and Tara Patel, a critical operation to separate the twins at birth, which leaves Tara crippled for life. The play explores and exposes the typical Indian mind set which has from time immemorial preferred a boy child to a girl child. Discrimination, sexism, hypocrisy and age-old myths are all examined; what emerges is a work that stimulates and disturbs. Erin Mee calls Dattani "a young playwright who can create a new generation in the Indian English Drama which deals with the invisible social issues".

Mee in her note on *Tara* observes that Dattani's preoccupation in the play are "the invisible Indian social issues". She adds:

Woven into the play are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values" The play dealing with the feelings of Siamese twins is also "about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours [sic] what is 'male'. (56-57)

Yadav, another critic of plays written by Indians in English points out that *Tara* is about a boy and a girl (not of the same sex) for such twins are "invariably of the same sex". Dattani "takes a medical liberty" and concentrates more in the "emotional separation" of the twins than their surgical separation (Dadiya and Surendran 11)

Mahesh Dattani himself had once told Sachidanante Mohanty in an interview that:

Tara is about a boy and a girl, Siamese twins, I have taken medical liberty over here because Siamese twins are invariably of the same sex and they are surgically separated at birth. It was important for their survival and the play deals with their emotional separation. The play *Tara* is also a metaphor for the conjoined and separated male-female entities and the male given preference over the female.(134)

The playwright begins with *Tara* to look at his own art, and at the sometime contenance with his negotiate questions of gender, self identification and the family relationship. This was an unlikely subject, even though a 'freaky' one, and yet the play went on to become one of Dattani's best loved works. In the surface 'unreality' of its subject, Dattani's exploration of his milieu was skillfully worked out, as were his meta-theatrical objectives of the artist-dramatist-writer looking in his own art. *Tara* is an engrossing play that questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb in two not just different but opposing too.

The fact that the injustice is perpetrated by the victim's own Mother (as most of the rural Indian women does) whose preference to the male child makes the play more poignant and suggests indirectly that it is women, not men who continue the chain of injustice to women right from the moment of their birth.

Tara is not just the story of the protagonist of the play. It is about the story of a girl child born in an Indian family. The situation gets aggravated and turns worse if the girl is physically or mentally challenged. It is a better example of child-abuse that is prevalent in a section of the Indian society.

Every girl child born in an Indian family does suffer some kind of exploitation and is very much aware of it as the privileges that are denied to them are consciously or unconsciously provided to the son.

The play *Tara*, according to Dattani, (introduction to the play) had been inspired by Tennessee William's play *The Glass Menagerie*, which is based on Tennessee William's real-life story. Tennessee William's father belonged to a middle class family like Tara's father Patel. Tennessee William's mother belonged to an affluent family of the bureaucrats like Mrs. Bharati Patel. Just like the Williams, the Patel also very often quarreled over the place of woman in a family.

The play *Tara* opens in London with Chandan, now a playwright, recollecting his past, particularly, the childhood days he had spent happily with his sister Tara. As Mee states: "Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole". Dan says: "I have my memories... But now I want them to come back. To masticate my memories in Mind and spit out the result to the world in anger". (*Tara* 37).

The privileged brother Chandan wants to record his anguish over his sister's childhood in a drama. One tends to feel that in *Tara* she bears some kind of hatred against the society throughout the play. There is a kind of aversion with the outside world for Tara's little world consisted of only a few persons: her parents and her brother with whom she was very close. Her affection towards her brother and the internal anguish is expressed in her conversation with Chandan. She says: "May be we still are. Like we've always been, inseparable. The way we started life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... and separated" (*Tara* 325.)

Tara explores as well as exposes the typical Indian mindset, which has, down the ages, all the time preferred a boy child to a girl child. The play depicts the triumph and the failure of an Indian family, comprising the father (Patel), the mother (Bharati), and their children (Tara and Chandan), coping with the trauma of disability. This is expressly stated by Dattani himself in his interview to Lakshmi Subramanyan:

I focus on cultural emphasis on masculinity and how all the characters are at conflict with that. The parents, the grandfather the neighbor – they are all in that sense in tension with their own sensibilities, as opposed to cultural sensibilities they may have knowingly or unknowingly subscribed to. (129)

The decision taken by Mrs. Patel's leaves Tara crippled for life and it is noticed that Mrs. Patel's guilt gets revealed repeatedly throughout the play. She tries to compensate for this unfortunate decision (about their daughter) through her excessive concern for her. Her sense of regret is so deep that she agrees to donate her kidney to her daughter so that she may survive a few more years. While conversing 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 live. It's what she... deserves. Love can make up for a lot". (*Tara* 349)

As the play progresses, another interesting character, Roopa, gets introduced. She is an impertinent and extremely talkative neighbor of Patel's family. It is largely she who brings the strain of humour to the play. For example, she comments on how dissimilar the twins look:

ROOPA: Funny, you don't resemble each other.

CHANDAN: Not all to twins are peas pods... Two peas in a pod
that's something we aren't (*Tara* 336-337)

This description makes Roopa burst into laughter, much to the surprise of the twins. Roopa tells them that the imagery of two 'peas in a pod' is extremely hilarious. Bharati's unnecessary bullying of Roopa into friendship with Tara and even trying to bribe her into spending more time with Tara is disgusting and demeaning.

The interesting conversation between Bharati and her neighbor Roopa shows that Bharati is just ready to do anything for the sake of her unlucky child's (Tara's) happiness: "you can watch whatever you want! Just be my Tara's friend". Bharati's internal turmoil is so intense that it often comes out in the open in her relationship with her husband. She is always complaining about something or the other. Her father's wealth is always a bone of contention between Mrs. Patel and her husband. Mrs. Patel is often seen complaining to her children about their father and especially about his attitude towards their grandfather. "Your father doesn't want us to use them. He doesn't want us to use any of your grandfather's things [like tumblers and plates]" (*Tara* 325)

Mr. Patel is always conscious of the insult that Bharati had often heaped on him by using her father's wealth as a force of strength against him. It was the same strength that Bharati had used in taking the unjust decision on the separation of the Siamese twins through surgery. Societies in India have always had a male dominated perception. All decisions in a family are taken only by the senior male member of the family. Even if there is a female member who is elder to the male, she is not given as much authority as the male. Mr. Patel's father-in-law, the eldest among the three members of the family, is also a powerful and an affluent politician. He was the person who decided about the operation in which the conjoined leg was to be given to Chandan in place of Tara. He had even bribed the doctor with the sanction of a piece of land in Bangalore. Dr. Thakkar fell from his high status in the society without giving a second thought, along with his team, while deciding the nature of operation. Instead of taking a sound medical decision of leaving the leg with Tara, he had sold out his conscience for the temptation to fulfill his ambition. Mr. and Mrs. Patel were warned by the surgeon that in almost all the cases of such kind, one of the twins always died by the age of four. In spite of this fact, they cause injustice to the innocent girl-child Tara.

Tara is neither Chandan's tragedy nor is it really of Tara's. The tragic events depicted in the play are the kinds experienced in everybody's life. It is Dattani's world where the playwright picks up various characters from the society; they are all puppets in the hand of their creative artist.

Dattani makes the society a backdrop and displays to us the fiery issues of today. In his play *Tara* Dattani becomes a juggler and juggles with the following relationship: husband and wife relationship, doctor and patient, son-in-law and father-in-law, parents and children, brother and sister. Among these various relationships the special focus in *Tara* is on father-daughter, mother-daughter and grandfather-granddaughter relationship.

It would be relevant to recall here that Dattani wrote his plays to be seen and heard and not as literature to be read alone. Hence, *Tara* has a two-fold purpose:

- To expose the modern education urban family's adherence to the conventional attitude to favoring anything that is masculine.

- To expose the corruption prevalent in the bureau, the critic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession.

Mr. Patel's conversation with his children, brings out the playwright's purpose:

A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl... The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive... On the girl. Your grand-father and your mother had private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come... I couldn't believe what she told me-that they would risk giving both legs to the boy... The doctor had agreed... It was 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 grand-father's political influence had been used... Chandan had two legs for two days. It didn't take them very long to realize what a great mistake they have made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead fish which could have might have-been Tara (*Tara* 378)

This long speech by Mr. Patel gives the essence of the play. The play centers around the theme of physical separation manipulated by the mother and the grand-father to favor the boy over the girl resulting in the emotional separation between the two conjoined twins.

Tara, the unlucky-girl who has not been given enough opportunities like her brother, finally dies. Chandan attempts to repress the guilt he feels over Tara's death. His sense of trauma and anguish is so intense that at the end of the play, Dan apologizes to Tara thus:

"Forgive me, Tara, Forgive me,
For making it my tragedy" (*Tara* 380)

Chandan explores his psyche as well as Tara's after his sister's death.

Tara dies in a shock when she learns that it is her mother Bharati [whom Tara trusts more] who is involved in the conspiracy of her unfair separation from Chandan. Though Chandan physically survives this trauma, he can never lead a peaceful life. He migrates to the suburbs of London, changes his name and attempts to create a new identity. He also tries to write his auto biographical play, though a futile attempt:

DAN: Give me a moment and the pain will subside. Then I can function again. [*pause, more controlled now*] Yes. The material is there. But the craft is yet to come. Like the amazing Dr. Thakkar, I must take something from Tara and give it myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world, in anger. [*Slowly, as if in a trance, picks up the typed sheets and starts tearing them as he speaks*]. My progress so far, I must admit, has been zero (*Tara* 379)

CONCLUSIONS

Tara effectively serves its dramatic purpose---to bring out the sincerity and inclination of a girl to prove her mettle in the world of male supremacy. The name Tara rightfully suggests a star; the child was a bright and a shining star that was a source of happiness for her family. Dan couldn't have a complete life but for Tara. Tara has been limned as a female character with potential while her brother was not enterprising at all. The father of the two, however, was bent upon

securing the future of the boy. Her potentiality was sacrificed on the altar of gender. Identity crisis becomes a chain with which a female is shackled when the question of choice between male and a female arises.

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