

THIRST FOR WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN MAHESH DATTANI'S TARA

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most leading contemporary playwrights in Indian writing in English. Dattani creates a real world Indian society, infamous for bringing atrocities against its female members and also introduce a dream world at the end of the play when Tara and Dan are seen hugging each other in some other place. A perfect combination of the real world and the dream world in Tara helps the dramatist pave a new way for projecting his views on gender discrimination. A patriarchal society is perfectly presented in Tara where the important family decisions are taken by its male members. In a patriarchal society, a woman's identity is defined by others in term of her relationship with man. Patel, the representative of patriarchal authority in the play, clearly differentiates the role of his son from that of his daughter. Certain gendered roles are accepted in the society as natural and hardly does anyone bother to go beyond those accepted norms. This proposed paper aims at how women are dominated and looked down upon by the patriarchal society.

The accepted norms created by the patriarchal society some years back, and still the norms rule women as they are subordinate to men. And the accepted norms says that women have to do all the odd jobs at home such as sewing, cooking etc. and the man must come out of home to be engaged in other works. Tara taunts this age old concept Roopa enters the room and asks if she disturbs them.

Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. (CP 328)

Here the obvious reference to the Stone Age and Tara wants to say that man still follows the norms of the Stone Age when women were usually staying inside the caves rearing children and the men remained busy in hunting outside. Though the world has advanced in so many ways, people still cling to the myths of active male and the passive female this is one of the basics and they long for thirst and emancipation from the patriarchal society.

Though Tara is no less intelligent than Chandan, Patel thinks only about Chandan's career, when Chandan says that he will not go to college without Tara and that if Tara has to lose one year for kidney transplant, he too will loose one year, Patel is really unhappy. He repeatedly says that he has some future plans for Chandan, but he hardly shows any interests in Tara's future, here dattani portrays and imports the patriarchal society where as nobody in the families of Indian society will bother about the welfare of the girls as Dattani reflects through Tara's character in *Tara*. Though both of them are crippled , Tara's position is precarious. In Bharathi's comment on Tara, her helpless condition becomes clear. Bharathi says to Chandan, the world will tolerate you. The world will accept you- but not her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or

twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty. So mother alone can understand the sufferings of her daughter then what about her father! (349) and in each and every instinct of life there will be a conflict between man and woman. So definitely there will a clause between them and it is never going to end. Bharathi's father, who gave all his money to Chandan after his death, did not bother to think about his crippled grand daughter who badly needed some financial help for survival. What Bharathi does not utter is that despite her intelligence and optimism, Tara has been rejected by the male community because of her physical deformity.

In Tennessee William's *Glass Menagerie*, set in America in 1930s, one hears almost a similar anguished voice of a mother for her crippled daughter. The mother wants her daughter Laura to be smart and graceful forgetting her physical defects so that she may marry a gentleman and get settled. She tells her daughter, "why, you are not crippled, you just have a little defect hardly noticeable, even! When people have slight disadvantages like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it- develop charm and vivacity that is all you have to do!" (247) The mother's concern for her crippled daughter remains the same in any patriarchal society, be it America of the 30s or India of the 90s. The girls are viewed as consumer goods and defective goods are rejected altogether.

If Tara were like any crippled girl (like Laura in *Glass Menagerie*), her story would be a pathetic one, drawing sympathy from others. But Tara's case is tragic as it is revealed to her that there was a conspiracy behind her deformity and that her mother whom she has loved most and who has so long expressed her concern for her daughter, contributed to that conspiracy. It is indeed a tragic revelation that the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, possessed three legs and that the third leg, which was naturally related to Tara's organs, was transplanted on Chanda's body at the time of operation but his body could not accept the leg, which had a better chance of survival with Tara. Tara was denied the chance of having both natural legs only because she was a girl and her guardians wanted to give the boy a chance instead, at the cost of being unethical. The preference for the male child is so common in the society that the surgeon could be easily managed to do the wrong to the girl child. The conspiracy was the matter plan of Bharathi's father, who being rich and influential in the society, badly needed an heir and as he was without son, his grandson was the next preference and he tried his best to see his heir standing on two natural legs. The surgeon was bribed for doing the unethical job and since the medical science has not yet been able to have a total control over nature, the operation was unsuccessful and both the twins had to depend on artificial leg. Surprisingly, Bharathi agreed to the proposal of her father and Patel too, did not protest. Bharathi was tortured by a sense of sin child should come forward to sacrifice her leg for her brother willingly as sacrifice is in the very nature of women. In the book *The Myth Women's Masochism* Paula Kaplan discusses how the myth that "women enjoy their sufferings" becomes "responsible for profound and far reaching emotional and physical harm to girls."

Dattani is thus concerned not only with the issue of gender discrimination and women's thirst for identity in the society but also with the contribution of the female to the injustice towards women. Though the women are no ore treated as objects of exchange in a modern educated society and apparently, there are equal opportunities for both the male and female of every sector, the advance of modern science has shown novel ways of depriving women of their right and the women themselves are often involved in crimes against women.

In an interview when dattani was asked why the gender issue came up in his play as most important over class, Caste, religion and science, he replied that gender discrimination is the most visible form of discrimination in India. He feels that this is an artificial difference. Biologically, there are polarity. Hence he draws our attention towards the fact that Tara is not to treated as a girl who is physically handicapped, but as one who has been born with the gender she has. Besides Tara's case dattani also introduces other case, Dattani also introduces other cases of gender discrimination as well as thirt for identity in the play.

Chandan: what would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl?
Who would you choose?

Roopa: A boy definitely!

Chandan: definitely?

Roopa: Yes. It is bad enough studying in all -girls' school. I would definitely want a boy friend.

Chandan: No, no. I didn't mean that!

Roopa: Then what did you mean?

Chandan: I meant a son and a daughter.

Roopa: oh, boy child and girl child. Say that!

Chandan: What would you choice be?

Roopa: I would be happy with either one.

Chandan: That's not the point. In the film, I mean. The Nazis will only allow her to keep one child. The other one would be taken away to a conception campor something. (364)

The issue of gender discrimination is thus introduced as casual discussion between a boy and girl and such discussion supports the main theme of the play that there can actually be no discrimination other than the biological one.

The gender crisis gives rise to identity crisis, particularly among the women folk. With all her strength of character despite her physical deformity, Tara badly needs moral support for her parents and brother. When she feels that she is denied moral support, she loses interest in life. She suffers from an identity crisis and searches for a positive role in life:

I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those ...starving naked millions everyone is talking about. Maybe 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 will be very happy if I could do it ... I will be very happy if I could, because that is really what I want.(370)

Tara possess potential which Chandan does not possess. Tara is intelligent, energetic and without fear. When Chandan says that he will not join college without Tara, she is not at all sentimental but tells the truth on his face that he cannot do very much on his own and is therefore afraid. Chandan admits with an anger that everyone is supposed to have her strength. Tara tells her, “you are afraid. Afraid of meeting new people. People who don’t know you. Who won’t know how clever you are”(361) When such a girl fails to do anything positive and it is learned that she was denied her right to stand on her own feet only because she was a girl, Dattani succeeds in showing how her potential was sacrificed on the altar of gender.

But Dattani’s purpose is not only a presentation of the tragedy of gender discrimination in Indian society. He believes that a perfect human being must have both the masculine qualities and the feminine qualities. The concept of the Siamese twins, one girl and one boy joined together, acts as their symbol of such a union. In an interview Dattani explains how the theme of the Siamese twins was adopted by him for projecting his views: “*Tara* is about a boy and 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.” Tara and Chandan were joined together by nature and it is the interference of the society that caused the separation in such a way that becomes fatal for Tara. The following extract may throw light on Dattani’s views:

Tara: You. Me. There is no difference.

Chandan: No difference between you and me?

Tara: No! why should there be?

Chandan: That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. (CP 361)

Thus, though it is Tara’s tragedy, Chandan calls it his tragedy. And Dattani wants to say that it is a tragedy for both. To quote Dattani, again “it [the cultural difference between man and woman] is an artificial difference... biologically there are polarities between the genders which is meant to seek the union of one another, but the cultural polarities are artificial, and actually the boundaries hinder the the natural unions of male and female whether its body-to-body or within oneself.”

Dattani has dealt with so many characters to reflect the social issues like gender discrimination and thirst for women’s identity in an effective way. His theme focus on invisible issues: gay sex, lesbian and transgender in his plays in order to project them to the audience to recognize and treat them as they are equal to male and female in the society.

Works Cited

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