

GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most famous modern playwrights in Indian writing in English. Many of his plays deal with the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. Most probably his themes are on homo sexuality, gender discrimination, communalism and child sex abuse. Dattani is one of the playwrights who challenged the construction of Indian as they have been presented in the modern English theatre. This is a modest attempt to the gender based injustice and how the male given preference over the female in an Indian family. Tara deals with the emotional separation of two conjoined twins (at the hip) and the manipulation of their mother and grandfather to favor the boy child. This play also deals with the issues of class and community and traditional values. In Seven Steps around the Fire Uma is the protagonist of the play and wife of Suresh, the superintendent of police. Here Uma is a sociology student who prepares her thesis on gender studies. This proposed paper aims at the investigation of a hijra (Transgender) case to find out the real culprit who killed Kamla.

Key Words: *Gender Injustice, Homo Sexuality, Gender Discrimination, Communalism and Child Sexual Abuse*

Tara is the third work of Mahesh Dattani. It is one of the Dattani's best loved plays in the world wide 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 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's why he would prefer to say that this play is more about the 'gendered' self, about acknowledging the female side of one.

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 women playing second scam to man. It is about the courage and spirit of a handicapped girl-child, a Siamese twin born in a Gujarathi 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 society. 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 and based on gender and race. Dattani boldly expresses the exploitation of Indian women in his work as it is very much visible as the privileges are consciously or

unconsciously profounded to the sun in the Indian families. Mahesh Dattani himself mentioned in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramanyam: "I see Tara as a play about the separation of self and the resultant angst".(Tara 129)

Would women be ever consider equal to men, is a big question to be answered by every individual and the society at large. There is difference 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 bribes the dilemma of a Siamese twin. Considering the playwright, 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.

This play Tara reveals 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".

The fact that the injustice is perpetrated by the victim's own mother (as the 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 too 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.

Mr. Patel is always conscious of the insult that Bharathi had often heaped on him by using her father's wealth as a force of strength against him. It was the same strength that Bharathi had used in taking the unjust decision the separation of the Siamese twins through surgery. Societies in India have always had a male dominated perception. All decisions in 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 three members of the family, is also a powerful and an affluent politician. 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 of his conscience for the temptation to fulfill his ambition. Mr. 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 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 female arises.

Dattani portrays the dejected dilemma of isolated hijra community in *Sevan Steps around the Fire*. The play weaves murder mystery of a hijra named Kamla who is killed soon after her marriage with Subbu. Dattani maintains the suspense of who killed her till the end of the play. The mystery of Kamla's murder becomes complicated with the shift of suspense from one person to another. When the mystery is resolved, we confront a person whom we never suspect as a killer.

Dattani has appointed Uma Rao, a lecturer and sociology scholar at Bangalore University, to make investigation of this case. Uma is the daughter of vice-chancellor, wife of superintendent of police and daughter-in-law of commissioner of Police. She is doing her research in class gender based power implication. Her guide has suggested her to go through the life of hijras and observes them minutely. She has to win their trust so that they will feel free in speaking to her. Uma goes to her husband's office to meet Anarkali who is arrested for the murder of Kamla. Suresh informs Uma that the Police have arrested Anarkali on the basis of suspect only.

Though there is not enough evidence against her but police caught her on the basis of suspect because she had scratched the face of Kamla and threatened her. The first meeting of Uma and Anarkali is not fruitful but the second one brings several changes in the murder mystery of Kamla. Anarkali conveys Uma that Kamla had an affair with Salim and his wife is responsible for the killing of Kamla. Uma takes efforts to release her from jail. Anarkali makes Uma her sister and asks Uma to bail her out but Uma shows her helplessness that she can't do so. Anarkali satires on Uma's position and says, "may be you are more unhappy than I am"

Anarkali suggests Uma to borrow money from her father and give it to Champa for her bail. The murder mystery deepens with Uma's visit to Champa where she finds that not only Anarkali and Salim's wife had the reason to kill Kamla but Champa too has motive to arrange the murder Kamla because she is leaving the place with her lover and Anarkali is going to be benefited by that. Uma shifts our suspicion from Anarkali to Champa who could plot Kamla's murder for two reasons: firstly, Kamla is challenging her authority and secondly Champa wants to warn others that two might think about leaving the place she has to bear the consequences. Uma meets Salim there whom Champa is rebuking and asserting that all the belongings of

Kamla are now hers. But Salim is not after Kamla's jewellery rather he is anxiously searching for a photograph. Uma has a look at Kamla's box but does not find anything useful. She gathers all the information about salim from champa and leaves the place without giving her money because now Uma suspects Champa too. Ua is now curious to have a conversation with Salim's wife to understand the whole case. Salim is the bodyguard of minister so she asks Munuswamy to take her there because he must have visited that place several times with her husband and would be acknowledged with the staff. During their journey to minister's house Uma enquires Munusamy about the case of Kamla. She wants to know how the police found the body of Kamla. Munusamy gives her the details about how they got the body and the gold jewellery she was wearing.

This information creates suspense in the story: how could a hijra have so much gold jewellery? With Munusamy, there will be no problem for Uma even if she visits minister's house without permission because she does not want to inform Suresh and her father-in-law about this visit. She knows that they would not allow her to investigate the case like this. She reaches at the place of her minister with Munusamy and makes enquiry with Salim.

Dattani has decided to reveal the face of who is behind the killing of Kamla at the wedding occasion of Subbu because everyone will be there: common man, politicians, hijras, Uma and family, Salim, Mr. Sharma and Subbu. This is the appropriate place to unveil the mystery so that the truth will be before everyone how the low eunuchs are exploited by the powerful people of society. after the completion of wedding rituals, hijras arrive to bless the newly wedded couple as their routine work. Mr. Sharma doen not want their presence but at Uma's request he allows them to perform. Their music and dance built such an aura that Subbu becomes emotional and visualizes the image of Kamla at another level.

The performance of hijras becomes the source of revelation of truth where Subbu confesses his love for Kamla and accused his father for taking Kamla away from him. Mr Sharma knees down before his son's true love and commits his crime of plotting the conspiracy of Kamla's murder. The murder mystery is solved with his confession but he loses his son for forever. So here the invisible people are looked down upon by the patriarchal society as well as the wealthy people. The simple reason for Kamla's death is, she is a transgender, who is not allowed to any gender of the society this is what Dattani beautifully picturizes through this play.

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