

Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani is a remarkable playwright who won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays, *Final Solutions and other Plays*, thus, becoming the first English language playwright to win the award. *Tara* centres on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). *Tara* has two-fold purpose, first to expose modern educated urban family's adherence to the conventional attitude of favouring anything that is masculine. The second purpose is to expose the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession. Through this play Mahesh Dattani makes the readers think that gender discrimination has taken a new form where the son is preferred over the daughter in terms of education and providing opportunities.

Key Words: Masculine, Corruption, Prejudice, Ethical deterioration, Female infanticide,
Gender discrimination

Mahesh Dattani is a director, playwright, actor, dancer, teacher and writer – all rolled into one. Dattani is also an accomplished screenplay writer and film director whose efforts in *Mango Souffle* and *Morning Raga* have been highly appreciated. He entered his second movie *Morning Raga* at the Oscars in 2005 even though it wasn't India's official entry. In 1986, he wrote his first full-length play, *Where There's A Will*, and from 1995 he has been working full-time in theatre. In 1998, he set up his own theatre studio dedicated to training and showcasing new talents in acting, directing and stage writing- the first in the country to focus on new works specifically. In 1998, Dattani won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his book of plays, *Final Solutions and other Plays*, thus, becoming the first English language playwright to win the award. Among his plays, *Tara* occupies the highest place. It was first performed as *Twinkle Tara* at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on October 23, 1990 by Dattani's Playpen Performing Arts Group, and was subsequently performed as *Tara* at

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Sophia Bhabha Hall by Theatre Group, Bombay on November 9, 1991, which was directed by
Alyque Padamsee.

In *Tara*, a mother is forced to choose her son's welfare over her daughter's and this wreaks havoc in the lives of the whole family. *Tara* centres on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). Tara, a feisty girl who isn't given the opportunities given to her brother (although she may be smarter) 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. His sense of trauma and anguish is so intense that, at the end of the play, Chandan apologises to Tara in the most moving of all the lines: "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me, for making it my tragedy." (60)

The play is not so much about the twins being conjoined but more so about people and personalities. Every character has goodness to them and yet each one shows spark of hate, greed, anger, bitterness, and remorse: The loving mother who is trying to reverse an ill-chosen decision by overcompensating Tara with attention; the father who is regretting his failure to intervene in the past by showing unwarranted intervention in all subsequent decision-making; the doctor who performs the miraculous surgery but only after succumbing to his greed at getting the plot of land; Chandan who is trying to come to terms with his own guilt by enshrining Tara's memory in a play; Tara who lashes out at her peers calling them names because she is unable to mask her anger and resentment at not being able to conform and fit in.

Tara has two-fold purpose, first to expose modern educated urban family's adherence to the conventional attitude of favouring anything that is masculine. The second purpose is to expose the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession. The entire plot of the play reveals how the physical separation manipulated by the mother and the grandfather to favour the boy over the girl results in an emotional separation between the twins.

Gender Discrimination

Discrimination based on gender (or sex) is a common civil rights violation that takes many forms; including sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and unequal pay for women who do the same jobs as men. Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of marital status on the basis of equality of men

and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

The play is set in the twenty-first century where gender conflicts still continue to pervade in the lives of the Indian families. The Gender conflicts and differences begin at home. The patriarchal society plays an important invisible role for gender conflicts to begin at home. The words of Tara - "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (8) show that the women have to look after the household activities and the men have to go out for earning their livelihood. It shows how the women are treated in the male- dominated society.

During the course of the play, Chandan and Tara grew up into adults. Patel wanted his son to accompany him to his office and learn business. But Chandan wanted to take his sister also. Patel was not for it because of the traditional Indian bias against the female child. It hurt Tara's feelings. According to Patel, men are meant for business or any other job, whereas women are meant for household chores. They have to look after their families and spend their time within their house. It is shown in the following dialogue among Patel, Chandan and Tara.

PATEL: I was just thinking ... It may be a good idea for you to come to the office with me. (Glances surreptitiously towards the kitchen.)

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 (crossly, throwing her cards at Chandan): Just because I win doesn't mean I cheat, okay!

PATEL (firmly): Chandan, I think I must insist that you come.

CHANDAN: We'll both come with you.

PATEL: No! (*Tara looks at Patel, slightly hurt.*(Softens.))

Yes. You may both come-if you want to (8)

This conversation highlights the mentality of Patel on women, and also how the interest and freedom of women are restricted by the man-made rules and regulations against women.

In this play, Dattani describes the practise of female infanticide, which is prevailing in most of the remote areas of India, through the character of Roopa. Roopa was the neighbour of Patel family. When she talked to Tara, she quoted an old saying that Patels drown their female children in milk. Bharati did not want Roopa to tell its unpleasant meaning and so she urged Roopa to go home. Roopa went out without revealing its meaning. Tara accompanied her to the street and asked her about 'drowning in milk'. Roopa explained Patels' custom of choking girl babies to death by forcing them to drink excessive milk, to avoid facing the problems, which they are going to experience when they become adults like dowry and so on. Tara felt it was an absurd practice.

ROOPA: Decoction-yes, of course! How silly of me. A concoction is something you have when you get hit on the head. Anyway, I'm glad I can have coffee here. My mother only gives me milk. (To Tara) You would have had plenty of milk being a Patel and all that. (Laughs as if she has made a joke.)

TARA (to Chandan): Did you get that?

...

ROOPA: You mean you don't know about Patels?

...

CHANDAN: Unless you tell us what it is, how will we know whether we know?

ROOPA: It's probably not true. It's just an old saying. Prema told me when she came to know you were Patels. It's about milk.

...

ROOPA: They drown them in milk.

...

TARA: They drown what in milk? (27)

...

ROOPA: Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies- you know dowry and things like that- so they used to drown them in milk.

Pause

TARA: In milk?

ROOPA: So when people asked about how the baby died, they could say that she choked why drinking her milk. (29)

The above conversation among Tara, Bharati, and Roopa shows that the evil practice of female infanticide exists in our Indian society. Through this play Mahesh Dattani makes the readers think that even now there exists discrimination between men and women in the society and it has taken a new form where the son is preferred over the daughter in terms of education and providing opportunities. So a girl child's future takes a back seat and in this play the same happens and Tara is dead at the end. The male child preference has always been a dominant part of the society.

In *Tara*, Patel is portrayed as a man having patriarchal notions. When Chandan noticed a mistake in the sweater which his mother was knitting for Tara, he helped her to correct it. At that time, Patel entered the house and scolded his children for wasting the whole day watching movies. He got angry with his wife for allowing Chandan to help her in knitting. He accused her of not bringing up the children properly. Chandan asked his father not to be unfair to his mother. The following conversation shows the mind of Patel:

PATEL: What are you two doing?

CHANDAN: Mummy's knitting and I'm helping her sort out her mistake.

PATEL: Let Tara do it.

CHANDAN: It's okay.

PATEL: Give it to her.

CHANDAN: Why?

BHARATI: It's all right, I'll manage. Leave it.

CHANDAN: I will just roll all this and...

PATEL: Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!

BHARATI (frantically): Go! Chandan, just go!

PATEL (to Bharati): How dare you do this to him?

CHANDAN: Wait a minute, daddy, she never asked me to do any...

PATEL: Can't you even look after the children?

...

PATEL: But you can think of turning him into a sissy- teaching him to knit!

(31)

The above conversation shows that even in knitting a sweater, Patel shows his patriarchal notion.

When Chandan refused to join college without Tara, his father insisted that he should get college education in India and then university education in England. He must have an honourable job, though his maternal grandfather had left a lot of money for him. Chandan asked about Tara's share. Patel replied that she would have no money. Of course she could have a share in their grandfather's huge house in Bangalore. Tara, being a girl child, is not given any property by her grandfather.

PATEL: You two are old enough to sort this out amongst yourselves. I won't interfere. But this is certain, Chandan has to join. I have plans for him. Your Praful uncle will help him get into a good university in England. I know he can get a scholarship on his own if he tries. But Praful will take care of the ... special requirements for him. With a solid education you just can't fail. Not to say that Chandan will have to work for a living. Your grandfather has left all his wealth to you. Since your mother was his only child, you and Tara inherit their home in Bangalore.

CHANDAN: That huge house. It gave me the creeps, I remember.

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. (40)

The above conversation shows that there is no equal right and equal share in properties for female like that of male.

There was a major problem- the twins had a common leg. It belongs to the girl, biologically. But Bharati and her father wanted the boy to have it. The doctor said it was unethical and dangerous as the leg had blood supply from the girl's body. But Bharati's father overruled the doctor. He was a wealthy industrialist and a powerful MLA. The doctor was a greedy man. He wanted to build a large nursing home in Bangalore. Bharati's father used his political influence and enabled the doctor to get three acres of prime land at the centre of Bangalore. So Dr. Thakkar fulfilled his wish. He performed the operation at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital, Bombay and separated the twins. The boy Chandan got two legs and the girl Tara one. After two days, the common leg began to rot and had to be amputated. If it had been in Tara's body she would have lived a normal life with two legs. But her grandfather's favour to the boy and prejudice against the girl child ruined Tara's life. This was the secret of Tara's tragedy.

PATEL: A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive...on the girl. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr.Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. That same evening, your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. Except- I couldn't believe what she told me- that they would risk giving both legs to the boy... May be if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn't right and that even the doctor would realise it was unethical! The doctor had agreed, I was told. It was only 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 grandfather's political influence had been used. A few days later, the surgery was done. As planned by them, Chandan had two legs-for two days. It didn't take them very long to realise what a grave mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have- might have-been Tara. Because of the unusual nature of the operation, it was easy to pass it off as a natural rejection. I- was meaning to tell you both when you were older, but ... (57-58).

Mahesh Dattani is a remarkable playwright of the contemporary Indian English Literature. One of Mahesh Dattani's most popular works, *Tara* is also one of the first Indian plays in English to highlight the dangers of gender discrimination, and the insidious ways in which it operates in our society. Human relationships and the family unit have been at the

heart of his dramatic representation. Mahesh Dattani has used the theme “Gender discrimination” in his play *Tara*, which is the crucial issue in the patriarchal Indian society. He used this theme courageously which the other writers hesitate to do so.

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