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## A critical analysis of the gendered self in Mahesh Dattani's Tara

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### Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a well-known figure in Indian theatre and literature, is acclaimed for his sharp storytelling, thought-provoking concepts, and captivating narratives. India's current theatre scene has been greatly influenced by Dattani. He is renowned for his capacity to examine the nuances of societal issues, cultural conundrums, and interpersonal connections. His style is quite unique as he often mixes poignant drama with comedy to keep his audience engaged. Dattani is a multi-talented artist who has gained recognition not only as a dramatist but also as a writer, director, and actor. The focus of this essay is Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990). Mahesh Dattani's play, *Tara* (1990) explores the intricacies of relationships, identity, and society expectations. This is an intriguing tale of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, who underwent unequal surgical separation in which preference to receive the vital organs was given to the male twin. Tara, who had been treated unfairly since the beginning of her life, could not survive aftermath of surgery and eventually dies. Due to Tara's untimely death, Chandan flees to London in order to start over and move on from his past. But he cannot shake the ghosts of his past and eventually begins to express these unresolved and confused feelings in his play, *Twinkle Tara*. With the motif of 'a play within a play', this important work of Indian English theatre explores complex issues of gender, identity, disability, and social norms. This paper dives deep into the aforementioned themes of the play.

**Keywords:** Gender, identity, society, patriarchy, disability, discrimination

### Introductions

BHARATI. [...] Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you - but not her! [...]

CHANDAN. Mummy, Tara is my sister. Everything will be fine. (Dattani 308)

Written and performed in 1990, *Tara* is a play by Dattani that explores the social structure of contemporary middle-class Indian culture, with a particular emphasis on the mistreatment of women and girls due to their gender. A young woman named Tara is the protagonist of the play. Dattani raises an important point regarding the unequal treatment of girls in Indian society by the delineating the struggles of Tara's character. The playwright showcases and challenges the harm caused by people fitting into stereotypical gender stereotypes. According to Dattani, "Tara is a play about gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of one self in a world that always favors male" (Dattani 319).

The story of the play revolves around the surgical separation of Tara and Chandan, two conjoined twins. Given that one twin had to give up one leg and the twins were born with three legs, the procedure was difficult. Even though Bharati, the twins' mother and her wealthy father, knew Tara had a greater chance of maintaining both legs, they decided that Chandan would receive the pair. Tara's tragedy is ultimately caused by the denial of her right to a healthy life due to her gender. Following this very taxing event, Chandan relocates to London and assumes the guise of a writer and renames himself as Dan. It is revealed in the play that Dan is writing a play, *Twinkle Tara* and finding it difficult to lead a normal life after Tara's passing, following a string of unsuccessful attempts to pursue a career in writing. Since Tara's premiere in 1990, Dattani's utilization of the cutting-edge 'Expressionism' technique has astounded audiences. Dattani reveals the cultural problem faced by modern urban India through the use of expressionistic techniques. One of the remarkable features of this play is that it is mediated through the memory of the character of Dan. In this context, *Tara* (1990) is remarkably similar to Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). The play has a multi-level set and is divided into two acts.

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The multi-level setting of the stage helps to showcase the various timelines of the play in an efficient manner. This severely jumbled time sequence depicts Dan's distressed mental state, giving the readers a glimpse of his troubled past. In addition to portraying Tara's gendered issues and Dan's fractured psyche as a result of patriarchal conventions, Dattani's play also brilliantly captures misogyny, social determinism, and hypocritical parenting in a methodical and admirably exposed manner.

### **The Gendered Body in a Patriarchal Society**

In the play, Tara is portrayed as a self-assured young woman who is conscious of the intricacies of her life. Though, she is very close to Chandan but she doesn't rely on him in any way. Instead expresses her own identity quite enthusiastically. She exudes strength and energy. Tara is quite critical of her father and the way he treats her mother, even though she loves her mother. She is perceptive enough to see her father's preference for Chandan. Given her personality, Tara stands out as the more resolute and strong of the two twins (Nagpal 31). Sadly, though, she is never given the opportunity to fully take charge of her life. She succumbs to the conventional, gendered social conventions despite her strong will.

The play's social deterministic components eventually come to light through Patel family, giving it a more realistic and captivating quality that allows people to see how patriarchal society truly works. The dynamics of society for boys and girls appear to be in opposition to one another as a result of society taking on the role of the 'enforcer' and imposing certain patterns on a girl child's existence just because she is a girl. Women are conditioned to absorb patriarchal ideologies and acknowledge men's supremacy over them. In fact, the traditional definition of the femininity has been associated with the attributes like passivity, irrationality, and compliance. In the play, Tara also becomes a victim of this blatant gender discrimination and patriarchal norms, not only in terms of the surgical separation but also throughout her existence.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her famous essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects" (1792) points out that how it suits patriarchal society to insist on a type of training for women which does not strengthen their mind enough to let them form opinions. Since their reasoning is not allowed to develop, they never question the way their life has developed. Therefore, instead of cultivating their identity around which they would shape their life, they end up adjusting their own behaviour to the situation they find themselves in. And since their identity is not their own, they blindly tend to follow authority that is, the norms set by so called males of the society. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir rightly points out, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which described as feminine" (Abrams 122).

Dattani skillfully exposes how marginalized girls are even in modern Indian society and how this traditional thinking as identified by Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir still exists. The playwright, in his narrative, puts forth a significant point and shows discrimination against female children starts as soon as they are born. It does not matter whether the family is educated or not, the discrimination persists. In addition to exposing the facade of the educated and cultivated lot,

Dattani showcases Tara's grandfather's influence and his behaviour of bribing Dr. Thakkar for an unethical procedure to illustrate the unequal societal system that ignores a girl child. The act of removing a limb and a crucial organ from Tara, in order to benefit Chandan was unethical and inhumane in nature. As a result, Tara perishes and her brother Chandan thrives, not only in terms of health but life in general.

### **Social Standards versus Education**

The grandfather and the mother, Bharati, who are the representatives of traditional societal norms, favour the male above the female. The 'male' is the ideal descendant or model of social and cultural offspring. Similar to this, a woman is never viewed as the ideal heir or successor to property when it comes to distribution of ownership. Not Tara, but Chandan will inherit his grandfather's possessions: PATEL. [...] 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. (Dattani 316)

This clarifies Dattani's choice to name the work after the female infant, whose identity is otherwise undervalued just by virtue of being a female child, thus reversing the dialectical pair of male and female.

Sadly, despite being educated, it is engrained in our psyche that the female counterparts cannot be intelligent. The men are scared by the women's intelligence and finds it difficult to accept. For example, Tara's triumph in the card game is viewed as complete dishonesty, and Chandan feels embarrassed to acknowledge her win. Despite her card cheating, which he attributes to cunning rather than commercial skill, he regards her as a good businesswoman. Tara is offended by the comment since it is untrue. In the text, Dattani showcases:

PATEL. Chandan.

CHANDAN (dealing the cards). Ya.

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.) (Dattani 287)

In fact, Patel, the father of the twins, disregards the opportunities for her future and the necessity to include her in any significant endeavour:

PATEL. Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for his higher studies.

BHARATI. And Tara? (Dattani 309)

She is pushed to fit the stereotype of a typical 'Indian woman,' who is injudicious and only be capable of taking care of home. But for Tara, this is not even a possibility because of her disability. Tara had no clue that she was constantly under the control of stereotypical culture.

The play's most gruesome scene occurs when the protagonist's family, who are educated, make a decision that unashamedly discriminates against their daughter. Tara has all the characteristics of a typical young girl, she is vivacious, chirpy, and intelligent. She might have shone like a star, as her name suggests, if her parents had provided her the moral support. Her life was deemed to be a burden to the society and her parents. She completely lost interest in life as a result of this. She also refuses to fill out college applications and attend physical therapy:

PATEL (to Chandan). You filled up your forms?

CHANDAN. Tara?

TARA. Of course not. There's no point in my going to college if I have to drop out halfway through or stay away for days not knowing when. No!

PATEL. I understand. (Goes to Tara.) But we have a problem here. Chandan refuses to join college without you.

TARA. Look, I'm not going to go to college for his sake. So tell him not to not go to college for my sake. (Dattani 316)

Despite her resilient attitude, Tara could not fight against the shackles of conventional patriarchal norms.

Interestingly, it appears that Bharati, who desired a well-equipped male child, is likewise viewed as a victim of social conditioning. She is consistently perceived as both radical and conventional. However, she was never truly radical since she was unable to break free from antiquated societal norms. Bharati is Mrs. Alving of Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881). She essentially ends her child's life, even though, like her, she wanted to protect it. Tara, like Oswald in *Ghosts* (1881), is a symbol of a dismal future. Similar to Ibsen, Dattani aimed to illustrate how society functions as a powerful force that terrorizes people. Dattani has demonstrated in his plays the profound falseness of society, which compels people to lead lives that stifle their individuality. The way society functions is similar to a web, from which no one can escape. One falls farther and deeper into this trap.

### The trope of Disability

The play delves into the deeply embedded societal attitudes and stereotypes surrounding not only just gender but also disability. In fact, Chandan and Tara both face prejudice and mockery because of their disabilities. Despite their apparent intelligence, the twins are viewed as "abnormal" and "freaks" by others in their immediate vicinity.

Dattani illustrates how Tara and Chandan, who are both disabled, received disparate treatment both within and outside of their families. It is Tara who experiences

discrimination on two fronts. First, she experienced double standards of gender discrimination from her grandfather and mother within the family, and second, she was humiliated by people who were seen as able/capable in her community. However, Chandan only experiences social shame despite having a disability as well.

Dattani depicts the horrifying reality of persons who are disabled or have various disabilities. He illustrates how disabled persons are frequently reduced to 'objects of gaze'. He helps the reader realize that stigma and fear surrounding disabilities persist even in the modern era. In Tara's case, her gender also poses a limitation in addition to her physical impairment. Tara, who is disabled, is further crippled by the fact that Chandan is chosen over her by her mother and grandfather as his abled-body would have carried forward family name. It is interesting to note, it is not only grandfather and Bharti who are to be blamed for Tara's condition but it is also Patel's fault. While Bharti is the one who obsesses over Tara's well-being after the surgical separation, Patel is the one who ignores her throughout the play because he is fixated on Chandan's education and career.

In this context, Tara's condition can be compared to the 'Lady' of "The Lady of Shallot" (1832). In fact, the play has a direct reference to the poem, "The Lady of the Shalott" (1832):

ROOPA. What a nice title! The Mirror Cracked. Very dramatic.

TARA. Imagine not being able to have children because somebody gave her German measles when she was pregnant.

ROOPA. How does the poem go?

CHANDAN. 'The curse has come upon me! Cried the Lady of Shallot.'

ROOPA. I feel sorry for the Lady of Shallot. Locked up. Not being able to see the world, you know. Just sitting and weaving a tapestry or something. And having a cracked mirror. T

ARA. The mirror cracks later.

ROOPA. But still. Seven years' bad luck and all that. (Dattani 303)

Alfred Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shallot" (1832) describes a woman who is imprisoned in a structure consisting of ivory towers. It parallels Tara's suffering, who is imprisoned by her disability caused by gender discrimination and the limitations of patriarchal traditions. Similar to how "The Lady of Shallot" (1832) perceives her approaching death in the mirror, Tara also senses her demise there, as reflected in the faces of her closest family members. The only way out of their situation/curse for Tara and the Lady of Shallot is through death.

### Conclusion

Tara (1990) by Mahesh Dattani is a potent examination of the relationship between gender identity, social conditioning, patriarchal norms, and disability. The play emphasizes the difficulties experienced by the female gender who struggle with disabilities and are subjected to society's strict rules of gendered roles. The play shows the way a female child is sacrificed in order to save a male-child. The idea of complete female child and incomplete male child is so shocking, that the family is ready to

sacrifice the female child. And this futile decision is seen with so much of casual attitude that no one pays heed to the injustice done to female child. This play shows and proves that society control our minds. It imposes rules on individuals, and one is not radical enough to break these clichés. But this doesn't mean that one should shun the society to become radical. Man is a social animal, therefore, he cannot live alone. One should believe in the existence of society but reform is required urgently.

Dattani uses his plays to inform people about the problems in society, so that change can come about. Like his other plays, Tara (1990) poses pertinent questions and pushes us to reconsider how we perceive gender, disability, and social standards.

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