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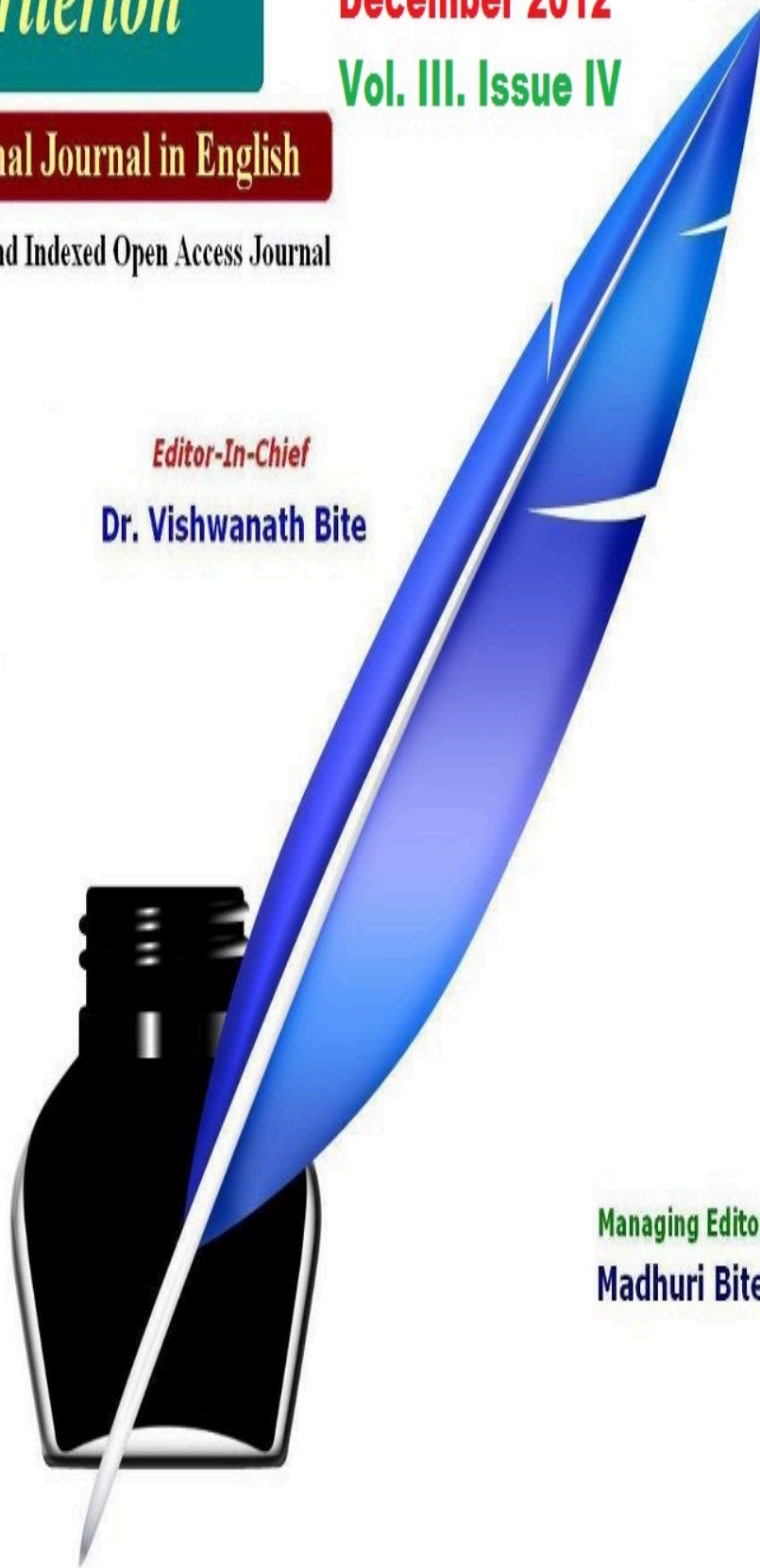
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Gender Conflict and Social Consciousness: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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[**Abstract:** Mahesh Dattani is an Indian writer and actor. His well known plays are- *Final Solution*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *Tara*. He has received Sahitya Akademi Award. His plays are about the marginalized section of our society- women, gays, hijras (eunuch). The question of gender discrimination and homosexuality finds full expression in his plays. They discuss not only gender issues and the freedom set to women in a patriarchal society but also with gender biases and prejudices which manipulate the lives of girl-children even among middle class educated society. Dattani has an exceptional sensibility for the suffering in society created by gender conflict. He is not confined to socio-religious myths only but also moves to investigate the psychic response that has caused victimization for human beings. Dattani's *Tara* is such a play based on gender conflict. Here, the dramatist presents the agony, dilemma, torment of a girl child in a male dominated Indian society. In Indian culture women are regarded as Goddess but despite this they are not given proper consideration. Dattani's *Tara* is the best example to show this contradiction. At the very outset this discrimination is noticed. The present paper proposes to discuss Dattani's *Tara* in the light of gender conflict and the role of society in creating such conflict.]

Gender issues have attracted greater attention in Indian literature written in English or any other regional languages in the present era. In defining the role of man-woman relationship, i. e., family and society at personal, social, political, and economic levels, the writers may or may not have been influenced by Western, European, feminist, lesbian or gay theories, but the fact is that man-woman relationship has been reassessed from a gender perspective to uncover the ideological implications. Gender is purely social/cultural construct while sex is biological. It is not possible to alter the biological phenomenon but social or cultural construct can be changed with a little effort. The question of gender in relation to male and female roles, and their interconnection with narrative and space have been widened. Gender is linked with class, culture, caste and identity.

Women have been looked down all over the world for centuries in patriarchal society. They were not given proper consideration either in family or outside of the family. They were totally neglected in gaining education. Here, we are reminded of Virginia Woolf's seminal essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that was extended in a book later on. In this essay, Woolf thoroughly examines the obstacles women writers face in the process of creation. To her, freedom to women can never be possible unless they will be allowed to be economically independent. Woolf argues about the discrimination meted to women in all fields- education, marriage, and motherhood. Raman Seldon rightly opines about Woolf in his book *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*:-

In *A Room of One's Own*, she argues that women's writing should explore female experience in its own right and not from a comparative assessment of women's experience in relation to men's. The essay therefore forms an early statement and exploration of the possibility of a distinctive tradition of women's writing (128).

Gender issues have become the focal point to a large extent in recent writers. However, many of these writers have denied to be branded as feminist writer despite the fact that one can easily notice if not explicitly then at least implicitly, the feminist instances in their writings. These writers have expressed their resentment to notice the discriminatory patriarchal social order and have successfully drawn our attention to the various issues related to the miserable plight of women. The marginalized status of women in the society is on account of patriarchal social and cultural system on the one hand and the discriminatory attitude towards women on the other. Mahesh Dattani is one such writer who has unveiled the hypocrisy of patriarchal order and has brought to our notice the discrimination and injustice done to women in our society.

Dattani is one of the highly acclaimed playwrights in the Indian dramaturgy writing in English. He has added a new dimension to the Indian drama in English. He is the first Indian playwright to be awarded prestigious *Sahitya Academi Award* for his significant contribution in the realm of drama. His plays- *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Night Queen* (1996), and *Thirty Days in September* (2001) are about the marginalized section of the society- women, gays, eunuch (*hijras*). Issues like religious tension, gender conflict, sexuality, the plight of the gays and eunuchs, family disruption, human love, and the dreadful disease (HIV positive) has been dealt by Dattani with great care. Bijay Kumar Das appropriately states in his book *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*:-

Dattani concentrates on contemporary society and reality in the fast changing world. He is a playwright on contemporary urban India and his plays are topical dramas. The questions he addresses in his plays are those of gender, sex, religion, communal tension, feminine identity, same-sex marriage, and above all, gay and lesbian relationship. Hence, his plays appear to be revolting, sometimes, outrageous (4).

Dattani has an exceptional sensibility for the affliction in society created by gender conflict. He moves to investigate the psychic response that has caused victimization for human beings besides dealing with socio-religious myths responsible for the marginalized condition of the people. His plays discuss not only gender issues and the freedom set to women in a patriarchal society but also with gender biases and prejudices which exploits the lives of girl-child even among middle class educated society. Dattani's *Tara* is such a play based on gender conflict and the basic causes of this gender conflict is society itself. The modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced in its thought and action is in reality nothing but propaganda. The propagandas of equality between male and female, equal opportunities to women in all fields are belied. These aspects have also been touched by Dattani in the play *Tara*.

Here, the writer presents a peculiar reality of the woman playing second fiddle to man. The characters suffer from repressed desires because of unreasonable bondages of traditions and very often are victims of the cultural construct of the gender. The writer delves deep into the mind of such characters laying stress on their fractured psyche especially when they are living in an equally fragment social set-up. The play *Tara* questions the issues of gender bias and is a poignant dramatic utterance of the trauma of two 'Siamese twins'- a boy and a girl. The boy and the girl are consistently of the same sex and they are surgically separated at birth. The surgery was essential for the survival but the way in which it was done is really deplorable. The operation has separated these two figures emotionally from each other. The play, thus, deals with the conflicts of twins who were conjoined at birth, but later separated both surgically and emotionally. Additionally, it is centered not only on twins and their life but also reveals the

domestic tragedy involving grandfather, parents and children. The plot of the play hinges around four major figures- the Siamese twins named Chandan and Tara, and their parents Patel and Bharati. The central protagonist of the play is Tara, a girl of fifteen, Chandan's twin sister and the daughter of Patel and Bharati. The birth and brought up of twins and marginalization of a girl child of the conjoined twins has been disclosed in the play.

The play is placed around familial relationship where each individual has to follow certain norms and burden of social values. If anyone discards or breaks up these social set up, it brings misery and helplessness in their lives. In *Tara* after the marriage of Mr. Patel and Bharati, Mr. Patel was left with no other option than to leave his parental home only because this relationship was not approved by Mr. Patel's parents. He feels diffident out of his parental home. His separation from the parents and afterward the birth of the 'Siamese twins', makes Mr. Patel's life totally isolated. Patel decides for the surgery of the kids to separate them. Because of this surgery everyone is affected. Tara becomes cripple, Bharati goes insane, and Mr. Patel becomes violent and aggressive.

The elements of social consciousness gradually emerged from the play and make it even more realistic and convincing. Society ordains the rules and regulations forcing that a girl child's life must be patterned in certain way simply on account of her being a girl child and thus the dynamics of the society for the boy and girl seem to be at variance. Women are forced to adhere to the patriarchal ideology and to accept male superiority over female. Consequently, the socio-cultural forces are responsible for the inferiority of girl child. All these factors taken together create the social system in which the girl child will have to live or die. The same case happens in the life of Tara.

The play opens with Chandan changed into Dan for the sake of absolving himself from the guilt of killing his sister although he is not at all responsible for his sister's death. He is chained from the guilt of killing his own sister and bear the brunt of his grandfather's and mother's callousness. He blames himself for his sister's untimely death. It is because of such guilt-orientation that he goes to London, transforms his name from Chandan to Dan and lives a self-condemned life. Chandan is the narrator of the play and it is not easy for him to forget Tara who is lying deep inside him. His sense of agony is so profound that he seeks forgiveness to Tara for making her painful tale the tragedy of his own life. He confesses:-

Like the amazing Dr. Thakkar, I must take something from Tara-and give it to 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 (379).

Chandan ruminates over the heart-rending lot of Tara, and objectifies that "she deserves something better. She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. Maybe God never wanted us to be separated. Destiny desires strange things (330)."

Tara and Chandan are 'Siamese twins', as mentioned above, and that they are "conjoined from the chest down." The scanning report suggests that "a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl" (378), thus the 'fateful leg' would have been a complete success with the body of Tara. The life of Tara would have been saved besides having a complete human existence if the third leg would have been attached to her. However, the leg was attached to Chandan, though it lasted only for two days. The planning of separation in such a way was operated by their mother Bharati and maternal grandfather. They decide to favour the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara) simply because they wanted to ascertain the survival of a healthy and promising son. Dr. Thakkar was instructed to "risk giving both legs to the boy (378)." Tara was left crippled for remaining life because of this gender based discrimination.

Tara is such a heart-touching play that when it was included in the syllabus for a class on Indian performance at New York University, students were so much galvanized by the play that many of them wrote their final papers on it. The famous theatre director, Erin Mee, has cited in “A Note on the Play”, published in Dattani’s *Collected Plays*, that one of his students made such a nice explanation about the play: “Dattani focuses on the family as a microcosm of society in order to dramatize the ways we are socialized to accept certain gendered roles and to give preference to what is ‘male’ (320).” Another student pointed a competently new observation stating-“Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara’s story. Dan writes Tara’s story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole (320).”

To understand the logic behind the existing discriminatory outlook in society is not very difficult. The mind-set of the people is that only and only son can carry the name in future. No one bothers whether girls are killed at birth or abandoned in future. People generally think that girls are other’s property, therefore, no necessity to take too much care of them. Roopa, a girl from Patel’s neighborhood says “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 (349).”

It is sad to say that in the present social mind-set girls or female child are undesirable as well as disliked. The prevailing socio-cultural system poses several kinds of limitations, confinement, compulsions and coercion to the female child. They are not permitted either to act freely or to think freely. Tara is also the victim of such socio-cultural system. She faces prolonged suffering, humiliations and subsequently death. In the presence of the ugliest girls in the world, Tara feels humiliated and mortified because of being one-legged. Prema and Nalini reacted in an idiosyncratic, strange and rude manner, when they saw Tara’s Jaipur leg. Tara narrates this particular incident in these words.

. . . The ugliest girls in the whole world. Prema and Nalini. They live in the building opposite. They had a friend with them. Equally ugly. They were all running across the street, laughing their ugly heads off over something. When they saw me get off the car, they stopped. They stopped running and they stopped laughing. And they waited, watching me get off and walk across the footpath towards them. Embarrassing me, making me go slower than I would. When I reached them, they grinned. Nalini whispered something to her ugly friend. I knew what was coming. Might as well play along, I thought. I smiled and introduced myself. We exchanged names. Nalini and Prema. The other one just tittered. I smile to her as well. Then I showed it to them. The duckling couldn’t believe her eyes. She stared at my leg. She felt it and knocked on it. Silly as well as ugly, I thought (335).

Tara’s temperament is over sensitive. She easily grasps what hurts the people. To hear from someone that Tara is one-legged, it shocks her very much. Tara is offended from Roopa’s words and behaviour. Therefore, she draws her attention to realize the seriousness of her own complications.

TARA. So how does it feel having one tit smaller than the other?

Roopa is stunned. She rises, her mouth open.

Don’t worry-it’s not very noticeable, except from a certain angle. Then it’s very noticeable.

ROOPA. How dare you! You one-legged thing!

TARA. I'd sooner be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than be an imbecile like you. An imbecile with uneven tits.

...

TARA (*shouts after her*). Get lost! And please ask Nalini and Prema to come here. I have something to say to them- about you! Oh, wait till they hear this! They will love it. They are going to look at your tits the same way they looked at my leg! Let me see how you can face them ogling at you! You won't be able to come out of your house, you horrible creature! You are ugly and I don't want ugly people in my house! So get lost! (369).

Mr. Patel always worries for a bright and happy future of his son. On the other hand he is least worried for the future of Tara. Finding that Chandan is helping his mother in knitting, he is exasperated and sickened. The problems of gender discrimination come on surface while going through such dialogues.

PATEL. What are you two doing?

CHANDAN. Mummy's knitting and I'm helping her sort out 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 daman thing alone! . . . I can't see you rotting at home! (351).

Patel plans to send Chandan abroad for higher studies but what about Tara? Does Tara need not have higher education? Who has the time to think about her? Comparing Chandan and Tara, one finds that Tara is full of potentialities but Chandan is deprived of such potentialities. Tara is more intelligent, sharp and witty than Chandan, and she would have performed well if given the opportunities in life. Despite this Mr. Patel favours his son not his daughter.

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

BHARATI. And Tara?

PATEL. When you have ever allowed me to make any plans for her?

BHARATI. I'm stopping you from making plans for my daughter?

PATEL. Don't lie, Bharati! You don't want me to, and you know it. You have told me so a dozen times. (352).

Tara is extremely shocked when she comes to know that she is 'completely sterile'. She resentfully regrets over it and says "Oh, what a waste! A waste of money. Why spend all the money to keep me alive? It cannot matter whether I live or die . . . (370)." Despite this, Tara is not restrained by the injustices done to her by her parents but she presents herself as an endowed lady to face all the hurdles. She shows sympathy towards the downtrodden. Her attitude is rather positive and she feels resolved to serve the starving millions, as it is evident from her own assertion: "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 can do it, can't I? I will be very happy if I could, because that is really what I want . . . (370)."

Tara experiences the conspicuous gender discrimination in her own family. She is not only deprived of the leg which ought to have been attached to her body but also she has not been granted a single penny by her maternal grandfather who has left a huge amount for Chandan. Chandan and Tara's maternal grandfather was wealthy man. He was a politician and was in a position to become the chief minister. His will is a testament of the kind of treatment that is meted out to girls in Indian society.

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 (360).

A sense of hatred develops in Tara for her father because he was not as congenial to her as he was to Chandan. His cruelty is so much that he does not allow Tara to see her mother all alone in the hospital. Nurses in the hospital were strictly directed that Tara must not be allowed to meet her mother all alone at any rate.

TARA. The hospital staff. At the reception, they asked me who I wanted to see. I told them. They asked me to wait. One of the nurses passing by recognized me. She drew the receptionist aside and spoke to her in a low voice. She thought I couldn't hear what she was saying. But I heard! She told her that she had received strict instructions from our father that I shouldn't on any account be allowed to see mummy on my own (373).

Experiencing that she will not be allowed to meet her mother all alone, she boldly revolts against her father and expresses her longing to meet her mother without seeking his permission.

TARA. We will go without your permission.

PATEL. You will not!

TARA. Chandan, will you come with me?

PATEL. Chandan, you can't!

TARA. Chandan?

PATEL. No! Don't go!

TARA. Will you come with me or do I have to go alone?

Pause.

CHANDAN. We'll both go (376).

Tara is agonized to see that why even Chandan has become so indifferent towards his mother and to Tara herself. She frankly says "you don't care about me, you don't care about mummy. You don't even want to see her. As far as you are concerned, she is already dead! (375)."

For the problem of gender conflict women themselves are to a large extent responsible and this idea finds expression in the play when we come to know that Bharati along with her father had taken serious decision of the attachment of fateful 'leg' to her son Chandan. It is really shocking that why Bharati who has given birth to both the children looks at Tara with a different and unusual eyes. Why the children of the same womb are regarded differently? Asha Kuthari Chandhari opines:-

That the injustice is perpetuated by Tara's own mother who professes to belong to the more 'liberal' community, rather than the father, who actually belongs to the more rigidly patriarchal social milieu, gives immense power to the play. It suggests that it is the women who continue to be willing instruments in the vicious cycle. Dattani, however, counters one woman with another: Tara herself-

spirited, tough, a survivor with a sense of humour and delightful repartee-fighting against prejudices the society has against the crippled, and the female (38).

Shortly after the surgical operation she realizes her mistake by denying the legitimate claim of Tara. She was stricken throughout her life because of this guilt. She tries to compensate her guilt as it becomes clear with her own speech.

Yes, I plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It is what she . . . deserves. Love can make up for a lot (349).

...

Tara! My beautiful baby! You are my most beautiful baby! I love you very much (355).

Bharati's sense of repentance is so great that she is willing to donate her kidney to Tara so that Tara may survive for a few more years and she may have the satisfaction of doing something for her. It may be argued that Bharati is desirous to donate something from her own body in order to purge off the sin committed by her in the past. She acclaims that "everything will be all right. Now that I am giving you a part of me. Everything will be all right (355)." In addition she goes on to say "after the operation, we will all be happy together. And I will make up for . . . your father, and I will make up for all the things God hasn't given you (355)."

Bharati is fully aware about the discrimination meted to women because she herself has experiences such discriminations. Therefore, she is worried about Tara's future. She contemplates about the situations Tara is going to face in near future. Chandan as a male will enjoy so lots of privileges in comparison to Tara.

BHARATI. . . . Yes, 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! Oh God! (349).

BHARATI. It's time Tara decided what she wants to be. Women have to do that as well these days. She must have a career (348).

Bharati is interested in providing a happy and healthy atmosphere for the proper development of Tara's personality. She goes to the extent of bringing her inquisitive and garrulous neighbour, Roopa to be her daughter's friend. She expresses her feelings to Roopa about Tara in these words.

Tara is a very nice girl . . . she can be very good company and she has her talents. She can be very witty and of course she is intelligent. I have seen to it that she . . . more than makes up in some ways for what she . . . doesn't have (340).

Bharati feels so much attached to Tara that while lying in the hospital she is speaking to Tara as if she is talking to an infant in her arms. She utters "Tara! My beautiful little girl. Look at her smile! Smile, Tara. Smile again for me! Oh! See how her eyes twinkle. You are my most beautiful baby! (378)."

Although Bharati worries about the future of Tara, she herself was responsible as mentioned earlier in taking the decision to provide the leg to the boy. When Tara comes to know this stark reality she utters-"And she called me her star (379)." Asha Kuthari Chaudhery makes a poignant remark at this juncture "this is why the play generates a death-like response from Tara when she learns the truth: She was discriminated against, because of her gender, but not by her father- it was Bharati's decision that deprived her of what she wanted more than anything else in the world-a second leg (72)". Bijay Kumar Das opines "it is an irony of life that a woman (to be precise, a mother) should work against a daughter to favour a son. Feminism which seeks to bring gender equality to society unwittingly discriminates against women (49)."

In the patriarchal society, it is husband who dictates the terms and conditions to his wife. Husbands think that whatever they are doing is just and right while women's actions are totally neglected. Bharati's husband is so cruel, vindictive, arrogant and revengeful that he does not permit his wife to donate her kidney to Tara. When Bharati insists on it, Patel bluntly refuses and stoutly asserts: "you will have to obey me (344)." Bharati is not allowed to take any major decision in the family by Patel. If the secret of the separation of Tara and Chandan is to be disclosed, it should be done through him and not through her. Mr. Patel says "If at all they must know, it will be from me. Not from you (345)." Patel goes on giving so much of psychological torture to his wife that it eventually results in her mental breakdown. Whereas Bharati constantly suffers from her sense of guilt, Patel is bent upon rubbing her nose in.

For balanced and healthy growth of women's personality, it is essential to provide them proper space and atmosphere. It is pathetic to say that there are certain social elements which are creating hindrances in the proper growth of women. Dattani has referred Dr. Thakkar such an important social factor. Strictly speaking, Dr. Thakkar is no more than a culprit. Doctors are regarded as the true messengers of God who saves humanity from different kinds of disease and sufferings. Even if common people or ignorant people or half learned people try to move in the wrong directions, doctors are not supposed to support such people at least on the ethical grounds. In the present scenario, female feticide has become so common that we are killing the foetus in the uterus after detecting the gender of the child. Dr. Thakkar, who is presumed to abide by the ethical norms of his profession, becomes an accomplice in the bizarre act of serving the leg from Tara under the enticement of Tara's influential maternal grandfather who had guaranteed adequate help to Dr. Thakkar in establishing a magnificent nursing home at Baangalore. To quote Asha Kuthari Chaudhari:-

The doctor's role in the play, however, aloof, is also suspect, as he too, becomes party to the partisan decision in agree in to give the leg to Chandan despite the contraindications. It is only later that we learn that he had his own, mercenary reason to go along with the decision. The social stereotypes sweep away even scientific considerations for the doctor make a parody of his god-like comments on his medical feats that seem to reduce human beings into guinea pigs (38-39).

Now, the question is who is responsible for the agony, suffering and eventually the death of Tara-Is it Dr. Thakkar, her mother Bharati, her grandfather, or her father. The dramatist does not blame anyone for the tragic death of Tara. He has left for the reader/audience to get conclusion in his or her own way. It may conjectured that it is only and only socio-cultural construct of the collective human psyche that is more and more responsible for taking away Tara's life than any other factor in the existing society. The psyche or mindset of the human being can be changed as it is purely cultural construct to ensure a balanced and healthy growth of women in our society. Moreover, Dattani is also biased to some extent in picturing the story of Tara. Why does he not allow Tara to speak her own agony? Why he has selected Chandan as the narrator of the story? If he would have allowed Tara to speak herself, the play would have been more appealing than it is.

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