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Feminist Reading of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Feminism started as a reaction to patriarchy and yearned to find a place for women in a male-dominated world. Feminism and feminist ideologies have left their mark on every area of discipline and every branch of knowledge. One of the profoundest influences that it had was on literature. It dramatically influenced the way literary texts are read, seen, taught and evaluated and drama is also a genre where the impact of feminist ideologies could be felt. Drama is a comparatively difficult field of study as it presents temporal live performances. Although, drama is a problematic object of study, yet reading it from a women perspective can illuminate certain issues that only women as readers/audience can bring to the surface. Feminist literary criticism has argued that our understanding of literary paradigms, metaphors, and meaning in general is profoundly affected by the gender of both author and reader/audience and therefore women have always been either misrepresented or under represented by male authors. Theatre, therefore, can serve as an influential area for transforming the age-old stereotype representation of women and present her renewed and empowered image. It can be, then, well argued that reading/viewing/writing from a feminist perspective can challenge the outlook that all knowledge and research must be immune to personal subject input. This article attempts to analyze the representation of women characters in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara*.

Keywords: Feminism, feminist literary theory, gender, women, women's perspective and power.

Mahesh Dattani is one of India's most audacious and revolutionary playwrights in English today, who shot into fame with the winning of the Sahitya Akademi Award for his play *Final Solutions and other plays* in the year 1998. His entire work may be seen as a relentless assault on Indian patriarchy. Certain issues like sexuality, homosexual relationships and gender issues have always formed the nucleus of his plays. He deals with such issues that are inviolable and invisible and not much talked about in public. Through his plays these invisible issues have come out of their surreptitious domain and have seen the light of the day.

"Mahesh Dattani's Tara is not about a character by the same name. It is more about what remains unsaid. It is about what remains undebated", observes Bodhisattwa Khan. (Bodhisattwa Khan, 1)

The play *Tara* is generally known as an eye-opener to the urban middle class duplicity, patriarchal supremacy, female infanticide and gender inequity that prevail in the Indian society. But there are other issues as well which remain 'unsaid' and 'undebated'. Particularly the way the female characters have been represented to unfold the bizarre realities of their very lives. The article attempts to throw light on some of such issues which definitely needs to be said and debated.

Tara is a poignant play about a girl Tara and a boy Chandan, born as Siamese twins. The father, Mr. Patel is a well-to-do man and the mother Bharti, is portrayed as an over-conscious and over-concerned mother who showers all her love and attention to her daughter Tara. The

twins are born conjoined and must be separated surgically to survive, but which again means the death of either of the two. They had three legs at the time of birth; the major blood supply was from the girl's side. *"The problem begin when it was recognized that it has been an unequal, unfair operation, with the mother, Bharti, her father and the surgeon collaborating to afford the male with better chances: physically—the second leg"*. (Chaudhuri, 71) Despite of being aware of the fact that the third leg would better suit the girl child, the injustice was made in favor of the boy child. The climax of the play is when the revelation is made that the prejudice was made by none other but the mother herself.

The play has three female characters—Tara, her mother Bharti and their neighbor Roopa. The scene opens in London with Chandan, now a playwright, reminiscing about his childhood days spent with sister, Tara and the story moves through a series of flashback. It is however imperative to note that whatever the audiences/readers come to know about Tara, is through Chandan, her brother. Tara is the 'subject' of the story, but ironically enough, she gains her subjectivity through a male.

Dan: *"To tell you the truth, I had even forgotten I had a twin sister. Until I thought of her as subject matter for my next literary attempt.* (Erin Mee, 234)

Tara, according to many critics and scholars, is not the story of one particular girl, but of every girl born in Indian family who does suffer some kind of exploitation. (Laxmi Sharma). It is paradoxical that we are made aware of these abuses, exploitation and discrimination done against the girl child by the patriarchal society, through one of its own agent—a male. It is not the woman narrating her own reality but the man and therefore this one-sided reality can never be objective and is bound to be bias.

Feminists have argued that what is being defined as human knowledge is basically male knowledge and feminist epistemology looks into the location of men as the source of knowledge. (Lorraine Code, 139). Feminist epistemologists are concerned with the way in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge and the knowing subject. Knowledge has always been regarded the domain of the males and the females are considered to be not possessors but mere receptors of knowledge. Feminist epistemologies suggest that traditional theories of knowledge are male biased insofar as they fail to account for features of women's experience which are different from the characteristic experiences of males. The American feminist, Catherine MacKinnon, while writing about the sexist, biased and exclusionary nature of knowledge, observed that: *"men create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described...Power to create the world from one's point of view is power in the male form."* (Stevi Jackson, 248)

In the play *Tara*, it is seen that, the power/authority of knowledge construction is in the hands of the male characters. The knowledge about women's experiences is put forward through male perspectives and hence cannot be considered to be totally objective and authentic. Firstly, it is Tara's life and experiences that are brought forth by her brother Chandan as she is the 'subject matter' of his story. Secondly, the most crucial and perhaps the most important part of the play—the revelation of the unfair distribution of the legs, that made Tara tear into pieces and pushed her to death, is made by the father, Mr. Patel.

A further aspect, to which many feminists like MacKinnon draws attention, is the concern about 'objectivity'. Feminists have been decisive about claims as to the prospect of producing value-neutral accounts about the nature of the world. They have been skeptical about the possibilities of ever being able to produce completely objective understandings. The

supposed ‘objectivity’ of masculinist knowledge has been exposed as a charade, due to its partial and biased nature by many feminists.

This ‘biasness’ that feminists have been arguing against, operates in a twofold way in the play—both the authors claiming to narrate the story of Tara are male—Dattani and Dan. The following conversations between Tara and Dan are reflective of the ways in which the male justifies his ‘knowledge’ and conveniently dismisses or suppresses the female voice:

Tara: ...*Your daddy is blameless. Maybe I am stupid. I must be, complaining to the allied party!*

Chandan: *Maybe you should be the writer, with your wild imagination!*

Tara: *Chandan, I need your help.*

Chandan: *Don't expect me to take your side and quarrel on your behalf. I don't think I should encourage you....If Daddy wants to stop her from saying something to us, maybe it's not good for us to hear it.*

Tara: *And who decides what's good for us to hear and what wasn't?*

Chandan: *Whatever it is, if at all it exists, he will tell us himself when he thinks we are good and ready.* (Erin Mee, 276-277)

Lorraine Code, in her book *What can she know?: Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*, states that the possessor of knowledge i.e. the knower is the subject and the receptor of knowledge is the object. The subject has the ability to manipulate, control and predict the behavior of the object. The subject-object relation in epistemologies is a distanced and separated one. The subject is removed from, detached from, positions himself at a distance from the object, and knows the object as ‘other’ than himself. Therefore, such detached and distanced knowledge can never be the absolute. (Lorraine Code, 142). If this is considered, then in the play it is the women characters—Tara and Bharti who hold the object/other position. The knowledge about women’s experiences are exclusive to them and a male point of view on them cannot be regarded as real or objective and is ought to be influenced by the gender of the knower.

Since the creation of the universe man has always held the position of the subject, the knower and it is definitely a privileged position—a position of power. Feminists have always been interested in the power relation that exists in the society. One of the main aims of feminist literary criticism is to study and subvert that power imbalance which is responsible for the secondary status of women in the society. Power is never neutral, it is always one-sided. Iris Young conceptualized ‘power’ as a relation of domination—one that is unjust and oppressive to those over whom power is exercised. (Sneja Gunew, 60) Radical feminist Catherine MacKinnon, also views power as equivalent to domination. Her understanding of power is related to her understanding of gender differences. (Stevi Jackson, 248) According to her, power imbalance is the result of gender differences and it is simply the reified effect of domination. If gender difference is itself a function of domination, then the insinuation is that men are powerful and women are powerless by definition.

The play *Tara* can also be read/seen as a manifestation of the powerlessness of the female. Tara, although bears some kind of resistance, yet lacks the power to overcome the injustice done to her and ultimately wastes away. The death of Tara can be seen as a way to establish the fact that a girl does not have the power to survive in this society, more if she suffers from

some physical or mental deformity, it becomes impossible. Bharti on the other hand is represented as a pathetic prey of the patriarchal society who is almost driven into insanity and then, death. She, too, fails to come out of the psychological pressure that she feels due to the injustice done to her daughter by herself. Bharti has been feeling guilty for her partiality towards Chandan and her demented behavior, her demonstration of so much affection to Tara is just a convincing attempt. She, all throughout the play appears to be a tragic character that lacks authority and power.

It is interesting to note that Bharti had the power to go against the will of her husband (as we come to know from Mr. Patel) and convince the doctor to make the ‘unfair’ distribution, only in assistance with her father who was a wealthy and influential citizen. She had to repent life-long for the power that she exercised—the temporary power given to her by her father. Bharti acquires power only through her father and later is reduced to a pathetic prey of the vicious circle of injustice.

It will be worthy to point out that both the females show certain kind of power and authority at certain points of the play. But they are also made to repent for this use of their powers. In Bharti’s case, it is obviously the decision of the surgery which leads her to depression and ultimately death. For Tara, it is in the way she exhibits her power and conviction in defying her father, in blaming him for the condition of her mother, for not allowing her to visit Bharti in the hospital and not letting her mother share the ‘secret’ with her. But the revelation made by Mr. Patel clarifies that Tara was wrong in blaming her father, it was the mother who was responsible for everything, every injustice.

This presents a picture of women being always on the wrong side— they should either not be allowed to exercise their power, and even if they defy the norms and use it, it leads them to guilt and trauma, as is discernible from the play.

“I see Tara as a play about the male self and the female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst”, comments Erin Mee. (Laxmi Sharma)

If we consider the above mentioned comment by Erin Mee, then, we can also argue that the playwright too, confirms the fact that *“the male self is being preferred in all cultures”* and he also gives us reasons, in many ways as to why it should be so. As mentioned earlier, the subject, the self and the possessor of knowledge—all are the male self. Besides these, it is the male self that fights and survives and holds the centre stage.

Asha Kuthari Choudhuri makes an important observation in this context—

“With Dattani, it is never a situation that is cut-and-dried, absolving one or squarely laying the blame on the other. And that is why he would prefer to say that this play is more about the ‘gendered’ self, about acknowledging the female side of oneself. The tale is, after all, narrated by Chandan, the male self of the whole of which the ‘other’ is Tara.” (Chaudhari, 70)

Gender is something one is not born with; it is a cultural construct and is imposed by the society. Hence the explanation of ‘gendered’ self would mean falling again into the same trap that feminists since ages have been defying. Gender is the basis for all discriminations against the female and considering the claim of the ‘gendered’ self would be to acknowledging the fact that human beings should be categorized as female and male on the basis of their ‘gender’ rather than their biological ‘sex’. *“... gender is not innate”,* points Jill Dolan, rather

it is “dictated through enculturation, as gender divisions are placed at the service of the dominant culture’s ideology. Here, gender becomes a construct formed to support the structure of the dominant culture.” (Jill Dolan, 290)

Even if the ‘gendered’ categorization is considered, the ‘female self’ is still accorded the place of the ‘other’. Technically speaking, the major blood supply was from the female and it is she for whom the male self survives, yet the ‘female self’ is considered the ‘other’. The crux is that both are ‘self’ when together, but the moment they are separated, the female self becomes the ‘other’ and ultimately is too weak to survive.

Dan: *Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out. And separated.* (Erin Mee, 233)

The ‘self’ is the active, knowing subject of traditional epistemology and is always a male. Beauvoir argues that the ‘other’, who exists for the ‘self’ in an asymmetrical relationship, is female and feminized, occupying a secondary place in both concrete activity and subject consciousness. The ‘other’ is not an equal complement to the self/subject, but rather serves as a projection of everything the ‘self’ rejects. As ‘other’ women exist only in the way in which the ‘self’ chooses to think of himself. In other words, women exist only as they are conceived of by men.

The play can be read/seen as one of the ways through which Dattani wanted to reveal how the patriarchal society views and treats the female, but the point that Dattani misses out is that the female has the power to fight back and survive all odds. The death of both the female characters in the play can be read/seen as a representation of the females as misfit and failure.

Another interesting issue in the play is that of the space given to the female characters, especially to Tara and Bharti. In the first act Bharti is seen busy with the household works after finishing her morning puja. And Patel is busy “checking the contents of his briefcase and is ready to leave for office.” (Erin Mee, 234) All throughout the play, Bharti is seen within the house, especially in the kitchen, catering to the needs of her children. Interestingly, the play shows that it is not the patriarchal ideology that is not allowing the female to step out of her den, but she herself.

Patel: *Look at you. Do you ever go out? No. Have you made any friends? We’ve been here for two months and you haven’t even talked to anyone. You just sit here rotting.*

Bharti: *I don’t need anyone!* (Erin Mee, 258)

Again, Patel has no problem if his daughter Tara is sitting idle and ‘rotting’ in the house. The reasons for such differentiation or contradictions in the play are not comprehensible. Patel is presented as a self-made man, who separates from his family to marry Bharti and make his name on his own effort, without any help, whereas Bharti is a victim of her own guilt who needs someone to help her in coming out of the depression she is suffering from.

All the female characters remain confined within the four walls of their house and they seem to have no issues with it. Perhaps, it is taken for granted that the perfect place for women is in the house and they enjoy this position. And when Tara expresses her wish to do something in life, to have a career of her own, she chooses to ‘care’ and ‘sacrifice’, the qualities that are known as feminine, the qualities the dominant culture expects every woman to possess and are conventionally attributed to the female.

Tara: *It cannot matter whether I live or die. There are thousands of poor, sick people on the roads who can be given care and attention, and I think I know what I will make of myself. I will be a carer for those people. I ... 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.* (Erin Mee, 273)

This also emphasizes that a physically deformed woman is no less than ‘poor’, ‘sick’ and ‘starving’ human without any ‘purpose’ in life and it is difficult on her part to cope up with the harsh circumstances of life and survive.

An important aspect of the play is the centrality of the women characters in the play, and the contradictory marginalization of these women characters within the play itself. In the words of Angelie Multani,

“Tara is a play which is constructed around a central female character, but which effectively displaces that character from the centre, manipulating the reader/audience into viewing the action of the play as it affects Chandan, the male protagonist.” (Angelie Multani, 118)

Chandan sets out to write the story of Tara, his sister but ultimately ends up making it his own story. The play ends with the following lines:

Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy. (Erin Mee, 282)

At the end of the play, the story becomes Chandan’s story; he is the subject of his story, the story of his guilt at discovering the secret which ultimately took Tara’s life, the story of his distance from his sister, family and home, and the “*story of his search to tell that story—his artistic and creative frustrations.*” (Angelie Multani, 118)

This can also be seen/read as an emphasis on the fact that women can never be the ‘subject’. Here, Dattani fails to set himself apart from the mainstream and conventional working of the power hierarchy he opposes when that power operates against women.

Dattani’s plays are known for highlighting the cause and issues of the marginalized and *Tara* is no exception. Tara and Chandan are representative of the marginalized—they both are suffering from physical handicap but Chandan is a male and Tara has a double handicap—one is her physical deformity and second, she is a woman, a fact that is stressed all throughout the play. Dattani, it can be said, too walks into the trap of gender stereotyping in his portrayal of the female characters in the play. Even while focusing on the unfair treatment meted out to Tara simply on the basis of gender, Dattani himself resorts to gender stereotyping.

Bharti, from the inauguration of the play, is seen indulging into meaningless arguments with her husband on matters which seems to be trivial. Her portrayal is that of a nagging wife who does not leave a single opportunity to torture her husband mentally as reflects from the following conversation between the two—

Tara: *Where are Thatha’s brass tumblers?*

Bharti: *They have yet to be unpacked.*

Patel: *It’s getting late for me.*

Bharti: *Your father doesn't want us to use them. (Patel looks at her) He doesn't want us to use any of your grandfather's things.*

Patel: *What are you saying, Bharti?*

Bharti: *Now that we've moved out of his house, he doesn't—*

Patel: *Just a minute. It was you who didn't want to unpack them. You said so yourself. You said—*

Bharti: *Me? Why would I not want to use my own father's gifts to us?*

(Pause)

Patel: *(Quietly controlling himself.) Let me make this clear. I have no reason to tell you not to use your late father's—gifts. You're free to do as you please. In fact it was you who didn't want to unpack them, so why are you—(Erin Mee, 234)*

Dattani, may view this as a positive way for his women characters to assert themselves, as he expresses in the following comment—

[My] women protagonists fight, scheme and get a piece of the action albeit at great personal cost. These are seen as 'negative' qualities, sadly by some women too [...] but really we have yet to see feminism find expression in Indian society. (Chaudhuri, 70)

But the point is not about being 'positive' or 'negative', but that the playwright here seems to try to enhance the burden of guilt for Bharti, and as a result motivate the readers/audience to be in awe of his male protagonist and to take women as the one who continues the chain of injustice. This is evident almost all throughout the play. Bharti is presented as a hysteric character who is vulnerable and cannot maintain her ease and control on any issue, more so in times of crisis. An example is when Tara, caught in the middle of an argument between her parents, faints; Bharti is unable to handle the situation. It is the male—Patel who maintains his presence of mind and rationality and does the needful.

It is Dattani himself, who in an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam says that—

"It's only in times of crisis or when one is off centre that one's true nature is likely to be revealed." (Angelie Multani, 129)

Bharti in the time of 'crisis' is inactive and passive. This can be viewed as nothing but a demonstration, rather reaffirmation of the masculine outlook that men are gifted with intelligence and rationality, whereas women are passive and irrational. Moreover, Bharti herself appeals to Chandan to 'help' Tara in one of the occasions in the play.

Bharti seems to take it for granted, and so does Dattani that this is the way it is going to be—the pain is unavoidable for Tara, not because of her physical malformation but because of her 'gender', which makes her twice handicapped.

Tara herself constantly reaffirms her femaleness—"women have an instinct for these things", "we women mature fast", "women are more sensitive"—her lines are loaded with clichés about essential qualities of 'femininity'. And yet it is Tara who at one point of the play sees no difference between herself and her brother—

Tara: *It's all the same. You. Me. There's no difference. (Erin Mee,265)*

The 'sameness' is emphasized all throughout the play. The play resonates with the reaffirmation of the fact that Tara and Chandan are not different, they are identical, perhaps two sides of one coin. The playwright's use of metaphors like "*peas in a pot*", "*two lives one body*" can be read as an instrument to reiterate their identity as one. Yet, the 'forced' separation accords Dan the place of 'self' and Tara of the 'other'.

The gender discrimination that the play claims to criticize is proved to subsist in many occasions of the play. One instance is when Tara confesses that it is she who is more demanding, what her brother is not as if a woman does not have the need or right to demand anything. As Karen Horney argues against Freud's concept of 'gender' as a product of psycho-sexual maturation, and instead points out that it is the role of a person's environment that determines her/his growth. Women's feeling of inferiority, opined Horney, originates not in the recognition of their 'castration', rather in the recognition of their social subordination. She argues that it is the patriarchal society that creates women as feminine and then convinces them that femininity—a defensive adoption to male domination—characterize their true selves. (Rosemarie Tong, 143) Clara Thompson, another psychoanalytic feminist, shared her views with Horney. She explains female passivity as the product of asymmetrical male-female relationship in which constant regard to male authority causes women to have weaker egos than men. Female and male identities do not emerge from unchanging biological aspects rather from the ever-changing social ideas about what it means to be female and male. She even believed that women's inferiority and guilt are grounded in culture and the cultural use of biology, not in biology itself. (Rosemarie Tong, 146)

Tara also seems to presume that she should not be demanding and feels guilty for asking for 'more'. She too falls into the trap of gender construction that the society decides for its members.

When Bharti is in the hospital, it is the father who takes up the role of a mother—caring, concerned and nurturing, whereas the female are never, at any point of the play, seen to possess any of the so-called 'masculine' qualities. It emphasizes the fact that men can, if necessity arises, play the part of a woman, but a woman can never play the role of a man. The difference exists and always will.

Tara: *My, oh my! You sound just like Mummy! You men can imitate us so well if you want to. Pity we can't return the compliment.* (Erin Mee, 262)

The third female character in the play is Tara's neighbor, Roopa. According to Angelie Multani, Roopa is the most challenging character in the play. She is spiteful and silly, she is gossipy, and back bites and is completely insensitive to Tara and Chandan's deformity. She is the most ordinary character in the play. In the words of Multani, "*perhaps she represents 'ordinary' mainstream society in which case, it is alarming that this society is represented through a female character who seems to embody every cliché and negative stereotype that women have ever been accused of possessing.*" (Angelie Multani, 123) But these qualities cannot be actually called 'negative', in the sense that at least Roopa, even if 'negative', is able to acquire what she wants—revenge from Tara by placing a poster on the wall saying, "*WE DON'T WANT FREAKS.*" (Erin Mee, 280) She is no doubt a stereotype character, but she is at least the owner of her own will, unlike the other female characters.

The significance of 'female body' in the society and the andocentric world views on it are emphasized in many instances of the play. Tara's continuous efforts to assert herself as 'healthy', 'strong' and 'beautiful', Bharti's pain in reminding everyone of Tara's deformity and her over-caring attitude towards Tara's health and Roopa's disapproval of Tara as 'freak

and one-legged’, stresses the certainty that a woman must have a ‘proper,’ sexually attractive’ body if she is to survive in this world, because this is all she has. Woman looks at herself because her cultural value is bound up in her looks. This concentration of images of femininity, according to Beauvoir, is however potentially destructive. “*It limits the female subject to the status of object; and it makes ideal images that are not often congruent with reality; into powerful ideological tools for the control of women who have been devalued, if they do not have the ‘good’ looks*” or body. (Ruth Robbins, 51)

Tara and Roopa use sexual roles and male point of view to objectify each other’s bodies, who see self worth in physical attributes.

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!* (Erin Mee, 272)

Sexuality is another attribute in the play that is inaccessible for Tara, in fact completely ruled out for her because she is handicapped. Chandan, on the other hand is still sexually alive. Despite the fact that both of them are incompetent for reproducing, Chandan’s handicap does not in fact, within the text, render him unfit as a sexual subject, unlike Tara.

Dattani’s representation of the female characters in the play, thus, somehow shows that it is always the women who are on the wrong side. The first half of the play gives the impression that it is the patriarchal society who reigns and dominates. But gradually the burden of guilt falls on the women in the play. It is Roopa who reveals that it is the Patel’s who drown their daughters in the milk, but towards the end of the play it is revealed that it is actually the mother who is the manipulator. Or when we see Tara and Roopa’s insensitivity towards each other—all these are reaffirmation of the fact that it is a wrong impression or conception that patriarchy is responsible for all the injustice and discriminations towards women, it is in reality the women themselves who are to be blamed.

But it must be remembered that after all, whatever is presented is from a male point of view and the main women characters remain marginalized and displaced from their own stories. The narration of the story, the power of the voice and the center is all throughout occupied by the male protagonists “*on behalf of and instead of the women they claim to represent.*” (Angelie Multani, 127)

Women, in the play emerge as figures of sufferings. Chandan or Mr. Patel enjoy greater preference and Tara and Bharti are left to enjoy the position of the subaltern. Even if they, at certain points of the play, try to assert their ‘*self*’, they fail to do so. Bharti remains the victim of her own guilt and Tara is presented as a victim of her mother’s culpability. In fact Bharti is more of a tragic character who is unable to fight back. Dattani perhaps chose to illuminate the oppression of women or dominance of patriarchy, but he ends up in representing women as victims of their own fault.

It will be relevant to conclude with the lines of Virginia Woolf: “*the obsession of men to define women in their texts does not lie in their concern for women, but in the reaffirmation of these men’s own power.*” (Duco van Oostrum, 10)

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