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Predominance of Male Chauvinism and Corrosive Social Taboos: A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani is one of those noted Indian English playwrights who probes into multifarious themes such as patriarchal attitude, gender discrimination, male chauvinism, child sexual abuse and homosexuality etc. He struck a discordant note against injustice and tyranny meted out to the female sex in modern Indian society. In his famous play '*Tara*', we find a nice portrayal of the stigma of gender discrimination resulting from male chauvinism, patriarchy and a stringent adherence to corrosive social taboos. Tara and Chandan are born conjoined, Siamese twins who must be separated to ensure their survival. Their mother Bharati and grandfather's vested and preferential decision to benefit the male child Chandan with the third leg which legitimately belonged to Tara brings into prominence the buffets of hegemonic patriarchy. Opportunism, materialism and grafting prevailing in a highly altruistic vocation such as medical profession has been minutely observed by Dattani in the instance of Dr. Thakkar who commits a grievous crimes by letting his palm greased by money and estate. The inveterate rigour of caste system and social hierarchy has also been brought to the fore in the play.

Keywords: patriarchy, hegemony, gender, female, caste system, Tara.

Modern Indian society, with its rich heritage of glorious past and out-topping civilization, claims to be a variegated amalgamation of multifarious religions, customs, traditions, faiths, norms etc. Being consuetudinally copious is commendable but being tied to age-old redundant customs and needless perverted traditions are the things that require drastic alteration. Even in the twenty first century, when India has ushered into an era of material progress and technical development, the stigma of gender discrimination and hegemonic patriarchy are exercised with full obeisance by the men. Gender bias rampant in the society like an epidemic seeks to subvert the status of the women and their judicious rights guaranteed by the Indian constitution as the fundamental one. The very foundation of social fabric has been shattered owing to the societal norms and self-imposed male dominion over female. The spiritual barrenness, dilution of ethics, asocial practices and moral sterility seem to be some of the prominent reasons for such deplorable state. Male takes such excessive pride in his sinewy strength and physical sturdiness that he deems the woman as virtually effete and invalid. Among the social ills, gender discrimination with a favoured propensity towards male jingoism simply augments the alarming toll of spiritual hiatus. The

word 'taboo' designates the notion of forbidding or prohibition by the society to discuss some topic or practice. In India, talking about sex, homosexuality, and gender equality are generally considered taboos. "While sex (a person's identification as male or female) is determined by anatomy, gender (masculinity or femininity in personality traits and behaviour) can be largely independent of anatomy, and is a social construction that is diverse, variable and dependant on historical circumstances" (M.H Abrams 146).

In India, a plethora of playwrights gave vent to these burning issues and sought to bring about the radical change in the society such as Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Mahasweta Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, Nissim Ezekiel etc. through taking recourse to defense of these values by vehemently critiquing these societal ills. Mahesh Dattani, a playwright of versatile calibre, wrote important plays such as *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions*, *Tara* etc. and became the first playwright in English to be conferred the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Final Solution and Other Plays*. Dattani has reverberantly delineated a variety of themes such as patriarchal attitudes, gender discrimination, male chauvinism, child sexual abuse and homosexuality etc.

In Mahesh Dattani's famous play '*Tara*,' we find a nice rendering of such slurring opprobrium of gender discrimination and unctuous tenacity towards specious blind customs. Tara and Chandan are born as conjoined Siamese twins, haplessly striving to survive. Their separation was indispensable for the survival of the children in that precarious situation. Tara, the female child who has better claim over the third leg, is unnaturally and coercingly deprived of it in favour of the male child, Chandan by underhand practice of unscrupulous Dr Thakkar with unanimous consent of Bharati, their mother and their grandfather, a politician. Mr Patel, although not a complicit in the decision, later shakes a nod of assent showing manifest testimony of male chauvinism. Expressing his introspective views regarding Tara, Mahesh Dattani told Sachidananda in an interview: Tara is about a boy and a girl, Siamese twins I have taken medical liberty over here because Siamese twins are invariably of the same sex and they are surgically separated at birth. It was important for their survival and the play deals with their emotional separation. The play *Tara* is also a metaphor for the conjoined and separated male-female entities and the male given preference over the female. (134)

This priapic jingoism resonates all through the play. The first instance of it is seen in the case of inter- caste marriage between Mr. Patel, a Gujarati and Bharati, a Carnatic. Patel married Bharati by going against the consent of his parents. The irrational and sophistic attitude of marriage in the society that confines us to wed in our own clan is demurred by the author in the play.

The entire play is in Dan's nostalgic memories. Patel, Dan's father, is the general manager in the biggest pharmaceutical company in India, Indo- Swede Pharmacia. He is a Gujarati, where as Bharati, Patel's wife, is the daughter of powerful MLA who might have become the CM of Karnataka had he not died. She is a Carnatic. So, this is an inter-caste marriage. Patel had to forsake his

parents in order to marry Bharati because they did not approve of the match. (Joshi-pura 162).

Although the kinship bond between Chandan and Tara was very cogent, the plague of customs, traditions, and aberrant values persistently consternate their life. After medical check up, it was disclosed that the third leg of their body in which the blood is supplying from their body coalesces their many organs. As per the decree of nature, the third leg must be given to Tara but adhering to nefarious and iniquitous social practices, the third leg is amputated from the body and imparted to Chandan. As Mr. Patel expresses: “The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have- might have –been Tara” (Tara 378).

The predilection towards patriarchal notion is reinforced with the marginalisation of the girl child Tara by the hegemonic decision of Mr Patel all through the play. From the very inception of the play, this notion is given rise and intermittently renovated in the wretched predicament of Tara playing second fiddle to Chandan. The excruciating impact of such heinous crime was that Bharati could not redeem herself from this guilt. She was perpetually under the grip of solemn penitence and expiation. This grievous crime was done due to the fact that in Indian society, especially Hindus, the female child are viewed as a burden on parents and male child is favoured. While the male child is thought to be the bread winner, the female child is supposed to look after the household activities, thus denying her identity as an equal counterpart:

Hindu society in many parts of India has been rapidly changing. It is being Westernized, modernized, globalized. Women are coming out fast from their homes to earn independently their bread like men. Yet the socio- economic conditions of India have not yet been altogether altered. Still, men appear to be better placed than women. It is even more so in rural areas. Man has to struggle for the existence of the family. Women are just a subordinate helper in looking after home and hearth (Joshi-pura 166).

Mulling over the situation profoundly, we formulate an opinion that social set up had contributed largely to originate unethical, asocial, illogical practices and the instance of Patel family was a token of this typicality. Tara, though a girl of inborn genius and knack, became the oblation of marginalization due to her identity as a girl. She is under the constant clench of identity crisis succumbing gradually to the grinding teeth of illogical, specious and distorted social customs that mandate preferential treatment on the part of Patel, Bharati and Dr. Takkar. Favouritism towards the selected sex, that is, to Chandan and discrimination and suppression of identity of Tara to destabilize and subvert the substantially well- established norm set by the Almighty God. A spurt of maltreatment and ostensibly excruciating situation is created when Mr. Patel takes a jibe at Chandan when he helps his mother in knitting:

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?

.....

Patel . Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!

Bharati. (frantically). Go! Chandan, just go!

Patel (to Bharati). How dare you do this to him? (*Tara* 351).

The antipathy shown towards Tara by her parents is resuscitated in a host of examples viz. the denial for Tara by Mr Patel to include her in the business. Patel shows reluctance to permit her in the office work. Bharati gives a vent to this idea before Chandan:

Bharati. I wish your father would pay more attention to Tara.

.....

Bharati. He is more worried about your career than hers (*Tara* 348).

Chandan refutes strikingly the opinions of his father. He says that Tara has also the grit, mettle and aplomb to be a great business woman.

Chandan. "She'll make a great business woman" (*Tara* 328).

Although Bharati, later on, tries to shower all her love and affection towards her, coddling and hugging her and donating her own kidney to Tara, a manifest sign of her expiation and reconciliation to altered situation. She confesses her guilt to her son and says: "I plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It's what she... deserves. Love can make up for a lot". (*Tara* 349) When Tara comes to be acquainted with the fact that it was her mother's decision to sever the third leg from her part, she was heartbroken and flabbergasted. Although she later reinstates her lost sense of elan and zeal by making up her mind to devote her whole life to serve, feed; clothe the semi-clad multitudes of homeless people. Tara, a feisty, bubbly girl, if given proper opportunities to show her grit and calibre, she might have proved smarter than her brother but she was subjected to the callous victimization, subjugation and subversion by the partial treatment of her mother initially, if not consummately and the later unsound favouritism coupled with biased penchant by her father Mr. Patel.

The play is an ardent scrutiny into a multiplicity of themes which form an intricate web probing apathetic human suffering as well as existentialist overtones in similarity with works of Kafka, Camus etc. but the rendering of frustration, humiliation, ignominy and suppression with especial reference to the female sex as evident in the case of Tara constitute the prime motif. These illogical and incongruous societal knaveries against women are acutely documented by Dattani in its entirety with an intention of amelioration and reform.

The play *Tara* gives us a glimpse into the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced into thought and action. It speaks about male chauvinism prevalent in the present form and brings about the stark reality of the woman playing fiddle to man. It is a comment on the predicament of women in the past, reflects the status of women in the present and dramatize the complexities of social setup. The play is an exhortation to the society to shed the age old prejudices against women and have a progressive outlook. It is contextual and relevant in the light of the increasing incidents of feticide, infanticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. It is not just the story of protagonist of the play, but it is the story of every girl child born in India family whether urban or rural” (Sattar and Ali 187-88).

The play is also a disparaging indictment on the corrupt mercenary leanings in medical profession. Dr. Thakkar’s materialistic attitude shows the perfidy and depravity prevalent in a philanthropic profession like medicine. His temptation by the offer of the large sum of money including three acres of prime land in the heart of the city from the state using the political influence of Chandan’s grandfather led him to sell his honesty and his accountability. The prevalence of corruption, grafting, bribery etc. has been manifestly delineated by Dattani. Dr Thakkar provides a quick riposte to the question of Patel family by presenting the development in medical science and its ability to perform the complex operation as that of the conjoined children in conformity with the western medicine. Dr. Thakkar ought not to have conducted such an unethical act which raises question on the veritability of creation by God. Dr. Thakkar overturned the natural law in two ways- first his palm was greased by large sum of money and he received it and second, he severed the conjoined part of the body which was by nature joined together.

Dattani has also deftly incorporated the base, menial and quirky practice of ethnic rivalry and smudgy stigma of caste system which has been abolished by statutory laws in the Indian constitution with special reference to the Article seventeen in the fundamental rights of citizens. Despite the strict punitive provisions taken by Indian constitution, this underhand practice of caste system and unethical customs are increasing at a mushroom rate. Although the origin of caste system finds its presence as old as the pre-Vedic period when the social strata was basically divided into four hierarchal groups namely Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, it gained stiffness and severity gradually giving rise to class consciousness and prejudice between different groups. In *Tara*, the caste system finds nice rendering in the case of inter-caste marriage between Mr. Patel and Bharati. Since Bharati belongs to a different caste, Mr. Patel’s family didn’t acquiesce to it, consequently Mr. Patel had to forsake his native home and settle at another place to be tied into nuptial knot with Bharati. The society represents an attitude of unsound and immoral trammel which poses a menace for the existential survival of a couple who have willing agreement to marry each other. The feeling of social detachment, lack of camaraderie, sense of unbelongingness coupled with societal restrictions and blind customs create a pervasiveness of emotional estrangement in Mr. Patel and Bharati. They are not only destitute of parental support but also became a cynosure of a

variety of mishaps and entanglements such as the birth of conjoined twins in their subsequent hardships.

Being a vulnerable victim to such heinous, atrocious and male chauvinistic biases, Tara succumbs to death ultimately. Tara, being treated as a 'subaltern,' resists the buffets of male hegemonic patriarchy all through the play with full grit and fortitude. Chandan, full of remorse and expiation leaves them and retires into London changing his name to Dan. He endeavours to retribute for the sins committed by their parents and her sister's death by forsaking the property and will given by them. In the present play, Dattani has endeavoured to raise a note of dissent against exhaustive customs, redundant totems, societal malpractices, infanticide, social hierarchy and caste system. Dattani has also struck a discordant note against the asocial and sophistic practices rampant in the medical profession as well which is generally considered as an altruistic and philanthropic profession. Gender discrimination and male dominance have also been dexterously observed through nice vignette of the character of Tara who should be meted out an equal treatment and should be imparted the rightful requirements that she was becoming of as a girl. Thus the play is the prime example of male chauvinism, exhausted taboos and prohibited acts of infanticide.

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