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## Gender Issues in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* and *Dance like a Man*

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### Abstract:

The Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani shows the pathetic situation of women as well as men in a realistic way and he clearly reveals under the burden of gender bias and discrimination his characters spoiled their lives. The present paper explores the sentimental issues of gender in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) and *Dance Like a Man* (1989). The play *Tara* is centered around Tara who has undergone through many panic phases of life. She is killed due to unacceptable prejudices and deprived from all the natural things. Mahesh Dattani has effectively delineated the women characters and their status with reference to Tara and Ratna. Woman, as the individual 'self' is victimized and marginalized by the dominant group in our society. They are deprived from the basic human rights. It delves deep in external and internal manifestations of human beings and isolated characters. The social conventions and norms have confined the growth and development of female and male characters. The individual is challenged to fulfill the dream against the rigid social conventions. The culturally constructed roles and common assumptions about male and female roles are taken for consideration. In the play *Dance Like a Man*, Jairaj is dragged in the evil world in which man and woman are judged on the basis of their professions. Some typical house works and professions are attached to women. Conversely men are not supposed to do such works. In the case of Jairaj, he has a strong passion to get mastery in the world of dance. But in Indian society "dance" is only associated with women. If a man wants to dance he is humiliated and he cannot dance.

**Keywords:** Gender, subordination, patriarchy, injustice, discrimination, bias and prejudices.

### Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani, a leading modern Indian playwright and multi-faceted personality has a number of plays to his credit. Being a film director and scriptwriter, he has become a very successful playwright by writing his first play *Where There's a Will* in 1998. He has directly written in English language. Therefore his plays brought worldwide fame and acclaim. Besides, his all plays deal with the realities, hypocrisies, the heart touching, burning issues of society and universal truths of human beings. He has started to write his own plays for his own theater company 'Playpen'. He is the first Indian Playwright who received the 'Sahitya Akademi' award for *Final Solution and Other Plays* in 1998. Like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Asif Currimbhoy,

Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Satish Alekar, he exposes the Indian society and its attitude towards marginalized group. Major important plays of Mahesh Dattani are *Where There's a Will*, *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, *Do the Needful*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Nights in Mumbai*. He deals with various themes in his plays such as family tensions, tradition verses modernity, communal riots, gender discrimination, homosexuality, gay and the problems of eunuchs and their problems.

In Indian social institutions, there are some gender specific tasks such as only women do housework-cook, clean and take care for children and follow the appropriate codes of conduct for women. Therefore it clearly shows that consciously the works are divided between women and men. This leads to the rise of inferiority and superiority. In the family men and women held different roles and the family is shaped by gender. Gender is referred to those social, cultural and psychological features linked to males and females through particular social contexts. The concept 'gender' is emerged through a socially constructed process. Needless to say that patriarchal system, male-dominated social structures are universal, inevitable and inescapable fact of history. This is associated with the power, gender and privilege. Biologically the statuses of male and female are often stereotyped. Women are stereotyped as emotional and sentimental because of uncontrollable raging hormones. Anthropology, Biology and Psychology explain gender-related behavior and attitudes with various layers. Biologically there are polarities between the genders which is meant to seek the union of another, but the cultural and social polarities are artificial, and really these limitations hinder the natural unions of female and male whether its body-to-body or within oneself. As Lindsey aptly remarks, "As gender issues have become more mainstreamed in scientific research and media reports, confusion associated with the terms sex and gender has decreased" (Lindsey, 2011:4).

Gender construction is built on the basis of inequality, injustice and subordination of women. It reveals the underlying violence and coercion that enable hierarchical and unequal society. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* explores the term 'Patriarchy' and finds it the cause of women's oppression. "Sex is determined biologically, but gender is a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity" (Kate Millett, 1990). Additionally it would be a remarkable attempt to reveal the patriarchy is deep rooted in Indian attitude and behaviour. In this regard Lindsey effectively captures the essence of gender issues, "Patriarchy, by definition, exhibits androcentrism-male centered norms operating throughout all social institutions that become the standard to which all persons adhere" (Lindsey, 2011:3).

The play *Tara* was first performed as *Twinkle Tara* at Chidian Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23rd October 1990 by Playpen Performing Art Group. The play reveals the realistic Indian society which is deeply rooted in false notions of rigid social conventional rules. It has various layers of different themes but one cannot escape without paying the attention to gender issues. The next play *Dance Like a Man* was first performed at Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bangalore on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1989 as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre festival. It focuses on the issues of

gender and the prejudice of society and the code of culture. Both the plays deal with gender issues.

According to Carden, one of the members of national organization for women rightly says: "I want to have part in creating a new society... I want women to have something to say in their own lives... I have never reached my potential because of social conditions. I'm not going to get the reward, I have been crippled... I want to see the kind of system that facilitates the use of potential". It clearly unfolds that there is no basic difference between man and women except some certain biological distinctions. Everyone has potential to get success. But because of cultural and social constructions, Jairaj and Ratna are not able to enjoy the profession of "Dance" equally. Amritlal, the father of Jairaj, represents male chauvinism and reveals that woman's identity is associated with the world of dance. Conversely, he thinks that dance makes man "womanly" in the male dominated world. Therefore the career of Jairaj is destroyed by his father due to some evil prejudices and bias practices. The social conventions of gender binary are spoiling the joy of life both for male and female in the play *Dance Like a Man*. The social conditions have blocked the potential contribution work of Jairaj. He is deeply marked by the discrimination. His experiences as a dancer are not pleasant, so he is quite disappointed. Finally his career as a dancer comes to an end. Amritlal does not like Guruji's long hair and the way of walking. The dresses, way of walking and talking, morality is considered on account of gender bias. He is biased against the art of dance and thinks that 'dance' is a feminine art. There are some appropriate codes of conduct for women and men and if the individual breaks the limit that one does not get honour and respect from the society. Patriarchy, power and money have governed the discrimination against gender on the basis of caste, class and sex. As Kumud Pawade rightly says that, "The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression that I heard somewhere: 'What comes by birth and can't be cast off by dying- that is caste'" (Chakravarti, 2009:6).

Gender, caste and class are closely interrelated and shaped each other. The caste of Bharati and Patel is different which creates tension in the family. Mr. Patel has left his father's house and suffering in social relationship of kinship system. Therefore caste is extraordinarily successful for the bias and prejudices of marriage. Women and gender are inextricably linked and women's subordination to gender oppress is also maintained through women's complicity. Ratna forgets to protest to get her identity and gradually loses her passion of dance. The feminine self is considered as inferior because of the category of work. For Amritlal, Bharatnatyam is the "craft of prostitute to show off her wares (CP137)".

It shows that a socio-cultural bias against the art of dance among men is predominantly highlighted. He plays a conspiracy to keep away Jairaj from dance. He gives permission to Ratna to dance with the condition that she would keep away Jairaj from dance. He says, "A woman in a man's world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is pathetic" (CP427). His attitude to dance is based on discrimination against gender. Thus in this critical situation she neglects her identity as a woman. Afterward she tries to see her unfulfilled dreams in

her daughter Lata. Ratna learns the art of *Bharatnatyam* and become a shining star. Hence Ratna finds herself happy in the pleasure of her daughter. Dattani says, "I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatnatyam in my mid-twenties...a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up on a world that believes dance is for woman." The playwright himself accepts that the play is centered around the bias of gender binary and its causes. For Amritlal, dance is not the standard profession and his attitude towards dance is prejudiced. As Agarwal correctly points out:

“Amritlal’s definition of ‘happiness’ and ‘manhood’ was absolutely a personal concept. Ratna’s yielding against the desires of Amritlal apparently extends a depressing impression. She seems to be governed by her own sensual pleasures, swayed by irresistible passion but the argument can’t be denied that she is a double sufferer” (Agarwal, 2015:80).

The play *Tara* also particularly deals with our attitude to gender. Tara gets fewer opportunities for her personal and professional growth due to discrimination against gender. She wants to live and struggle to maintain her identity from birth to death. Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins having three legs to one body. Advances in Science and technology are also used to destruction of life. Dr. Thakkar has separated the twins physically and not emotionally by taking the bribe from Bharati's father. The play has the multi-level set. The lowest level of set consists the family of Patel- Mr and Mrs Patel, their twin children Tara and Chandan. This level is seen only memory. The next level presents the older Chandan on a bedsitter in London which is the only realistic level. The highest level is occupied by Dr. Thakkar who remains seated throughout the play. Dr. Thakkar is also responsible for making Tara crippled. Doctors are equal to God because they save the life of others. Conversely Dr. Thakkar has taken a bribe from Bharati's father and he gives untimely death to Tara. He has separated Chandan and Tara physically but not emotionally, once they have shared one body in one comfortable womb. The Doctor is mainly responsible for the crime of an unequal and unfair operation of Tara. More importance is given to the male rather than the female. Therefore this discrimination gives to all the negative thinking and attitudes. Chandan and Tara talk on the film *Sophie's Choice* in which Sophie faces the difficulty in choosing one from her two children a boy and a girl. In this case Tara's friend Roopa makes fun of a serious topic but Chandan raises an issue of gender in the following dialogue:

Chandan. What would you do if you had to choose between a boy and a girl? Who would you choose?

Roopa. A boy definitely!

Chandan. Definitely?

Roopa. Yes. It's bad enough studying in an all-girls' school. I would definitely want A boyfriend.

Chandan. No, No. I didn't mean that!

Roopa. Then what did you mean?

Chandan. I meant a son and a daughter.

This conversation supports the theme of gender issue as a casual discussion between a boy and a girl. While reading the play *Tara*, one cannot deny that we Indians discriminate between male and female children. With a long history of female foeticide, Indian society spoils the life of girl. *Tara's* father Mr. Patel reveals the truth:

"A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive...on the girl. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I was not asked to come. That same evening, your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. Except- I couldn't believe what she told- that they would risk giving both legs to the boy" (p.371).

This shows the causes of gender oppression and false complicity of women. According to G.J.V. Prasad, "If the nation seems to have been inserted by force here in this beginning of a reading of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*, then perhaps one must point out that the play seems to stage a large part of our nation, particularly our attitude to gender" (A.J.V. Prasad, 2011:156). The irony is that *Tara* feels that she is like a star to her mother. She has sacrificed her life; perhaps, she may be so small to understand the situation. But at the end of the play *Bharati* does not get consolation from her wrong decision. Finally *Tara* dies because of wrong decision.

Asha Chaudhuri writes, "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 play. It suggests that is a woman who continues 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" (Kuthari Chaudhuri, 2005). Dattani shows the severe consequences of differentiation between a male child and a girl child on the basis of gender. Both *Bharati* and Mr. Patel prefer a male child over a female child and because of this they all suffer a lot. So she wants to donate her own kidney to *Tara* when she becomes ill and for that she asks permission. She wants to come out of guilt consciousness. *Bharati* and *Ratna* are under the burden of patriarchic structure but somehow proved to be polemical and combative. Patriarchy gives the birth to injustice, inequality and automatically it leads to discrimination against male as well as female. The position of women and men in our society is an unequal one on everyday phenomena. To some extent because of education the position of women is changing to get honour, identity along with emancipation. The subordination of women, the rigid social conventions, power, patriarchy, caste, class and money are crucial to the maintenance of the gender issues in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* and *Dance Like a Man*. In our culture it is considered that women are worshipped like 'Goddesses' and on

the other hand they are brutally exploited, oppressed and marginalized in the male dominated Indian society. In our society it is granted that women are like Goddesses such as Saraswati, Durga, Kali etc. but discrimination and injustice and only oppression are related with women. The conversation between Tara and Roopa brings out the deplorable condition of women. The girls are drowned into the milk because of social ills like dowry. As Roopa says, "Since you insist, I will tell you. it may not be true. But this What I have heard. The Patel 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....So When people asked about how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk(p.349)". Tara is the representative of thousands of girls in Indian conservative society who suffer economically, physically, mentally and emotionally. On the other hand very interestingly Pramod Singh writes," Tara is not only a girl of our society but it is a glimpse into the modern society which claims to be liberal and advanced in its thought and action. But still in the world, the action confirms that male chauvinism prevails in the present society" (Singh, 2012:118). It unfolds the present situation of a woman.

As a true observer of Indian society Dattani reveals that not only Tara undergoes through the pathetic incidents on the basis of gender but on the other hand her brother Chandan is also suffered from the consequences of gender differentiation. Chandan has changed his name as Dan in order to forget the past painful memories of life. He feels that he is responsible for killing his sister.

Dattani said in an interview, "The play is misread and people tend to focus on the medical details but that is really not what the play is about. It is a metaphor either for being equal as male and female and sharing so much more and with the surgical separation comes a cultural distinction and prejudices as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and the female self and half the female self is, whether your gender is male or female, is definitely given the lower priority."

Therefore both Tara and Chandan are the victims of gender bias. We all born as human beings but gender based discrimination has divided into a male and a female. Tara and Chandan are separated from one another by the Indian society with preference of male. Dattani highlights in the following conversation: Tara.

You. Me. There's no difference.

Chandan. No difference between you and me?

Tara. No! Why should there be?

Chandan. That is the nicest thing you've ever said to me (Dattani, p.361).

This reveals that Tara is very rebellious because she does not want to see the difference between her and her brother. Throughout the play *Tara*, she suffers because of gender discrimination. at

the end of the play her twin brother says, 'Dan (Chandan). Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy (p.380). Chandan suffers because of her mother's and grandfathers cruel decision. He is emotionally attached to Tara after the physical separation. So he recalls the past memories and could not write about other subjects in spite of Tara. Therefore he always tries to escape from the painful experiences of past. All the characters in these selected plays come forward as real one. M. K. Naik tells, "In making his Indian characters speak in English, the playwright needs therefore no qualms at all. Let him first create living characters in live situations and the language will take care of itself"(Naik, 1977:191). Thus through the performance and language these plays give the spellbound effect on audiences.

To sum up, in these plays *Tara* and *Dance like a Man*, Mahesh Dattani has exposed the gender bias and the individual is forced to follow the rules of society against his or her desire. Amritlal, the father of Jairaj has socio-cultural, psycho-philosophical consciousness about 'Dance' and 'Devdasi'. Mr Patel, the father of Tara has different plans for Chandan. He wants to send his son to the office and for further studies to London but he is interested in music and writing. Tara is very intelligent, strong, energetic, enthusiastic, full of zest and talkative but she is always deprived from better opportunities and her grandfather left his all property to Chandan and not for Tara. Therefore the lives of Jairaj and Tara are governed by the desires and aspirations of others. Mr. Patel of *Tara* and Amritlal of *Dance Like a Man* have authority over the rules of family and they follow the rigid social customs and conventions. Chakravarti in her foreword to his *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* observes, "There is endless scope for educating ourselves. In the quick and easy recipes of 'gender awareness' programmes, what is missed is that behaviour change occurs never by rhetoric but only when there is a clear understanding of what the limitations and possibilities are or gaining one's freedom in the present situation" (Chakravarti, 2009:xi). Obviously there is a need to understand and tackle the problems of gender issues. One can further bring out the potential research about gender awareness programmes in society.

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