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Mahesh Dattani's Clarion Call to Indian Parents for Their Maltreatment to Daughters: A Critical Study of *Tara*

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Abstract:

A critical study of Mahesh Dattani's any play draws our attention to his sincere urge of having some practical solutions from audience to redress issues of marginalized sections of the Indian society. Several social issues from pre- Independence to post- Independence period have largely affected Indian middle class and lower-class population. Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* addresses the issue of parental negligence in bringing up girls equal to boys. The orthodox mindset of Patel and Bharati, disadvantage of political power of Tara's Grandfather and unethical medical practice of Dr. Thakkar, all together, contribute to painful end of Tara's life. The play challenges the parental authority, which is dominated the patriarchal ideology. The present research paper seeks to anticipate Mahesh Dattani's Clarion Call to Indian parents who commit maltreatment with female children to secure the life, career and future male children. Dattani succeeds in bursting the pumpkin of illusion that 'girls are treated fairly in Indian families'. The play critically foregrounds the gruesome issue of parental indifferent altitudes towards girl children and resultant angst.

Keywords: Clarion call, parents, Tara, negligence, maltreatment, girl children.

Introduction:

Indian writing in English has broadened its horizon achieving sustainable success on both national and international levels. Indian writers writing poetry and prose are recognized as globally competent literary figures. However, only prose and poetry writings have achieved a status of the canon of literature. Drama, for that matter, did not survive on international platforms. Reasons to its failure are multiple such as linguistic barriers and performative aspects. However, with the arrival of playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan, drama is shot into focus. Indian English fiction depicted several social issues in both pre-Independence and post- Independence period. Most of the fictional writing does

have a feminist touch. Few are the novels, which focused on issues like communalism, diasporic tone, nationalism, social hierocracies, etc. So is the case with Indian English poetry. Both fiction and poetry thus deal with problems of marginalized people. However, India being a multi-regional and multi-lingual country, readers were reluctant to respond to English literary writings.

Representation of marginalized sections of Indian society is profoundly seen in the plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Mohan Rakesh. These playwrights wrote plays in different regional languages such as Marathi, Kannada, Bengali and Hindi, which were later on translated into English. The translated versions of these plays were further labeled as Indian English Plays. However, Mahesh Dattani is the first playwright who directly wrote his plays into English. With his appearance on Indian literary horizon, a rejuvenation/ revival of Indian English Drama took place.

Mahesh Dattani is a writer, director, playwright, film maker, artist and teacher per excellence. Almost twenty-plus plays are to his credit and each of them has contributed to heighten his dramatic career. Simply his every play expresses the truth and perhaps dark reality of the situations in India. Dattani gives voice to voiceless people who are politically and strategically refrained from entering into mainstream Indian society. Dattani does not only entertain audience but enlightens them. He perhaps shakes the illusion of people. He portrays the predicaments of transgenders, women, children, diseased people and communally-affected people who are ideologically placed on the periphery of society. In fact, these all people are marginalized. By representing their life, Dattani, in a way, encourages them to survive, to seek opportunities and justice for the betterment of their life. His plays such as *Where There's A Will, Tara, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen, Seven Steps Around the Fire, Do the Needful, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Dance Like a Man, Thirty Days in September, Clearing the Rubbles*, etc. all have explored issues of marginalized transgenders, helpless women, pitiable children and boycotted minority people with acute sensitivity for urgent social change. As a matter of brevity, the present research paper critically analyzes only one play entitled *Tara*.

Mahesh Dattani is the first English Indian playwright to be awarded the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award for his tremendous achievement in *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays* in 1998. The Penguin Books Publication has published Dattani's plays in two volumes entitled *Collected Plays* (2000) and *Collected Plays Vol. II* (2005). Bangalore and Mumbai are the places where most of his plays have theatrically performed. His Radio plays have been broadcasted on BBC and AIR. The present paper critically analyses Mahesh Dattani's path-

breaking play *Tara* in the context of Dattani's attempt at awakening parents who for the most part give secondary treatment to their daughters for the sake of the future of their sons.

The Critical Analysis of the Play *Tara*:

The simple narrative of the play is that the twins named Tara and Chandan are born together unfortunately having only three legs between them. The parents Patel and Bharati decide to carry out a surgical separation of the Siamese twins and fix two legs to Chandan's body and one to Tara irrespective of the fact that a major blood supply to two legs is from Tara's body. However, Chandan's body does not support two legs and one leg is to be amputated. Tara has to survive on an artificial leg brought from Jaipur. Dattani very critically exposes the unethical medical practitioners like Dr. Thakkar who are easily bribed by corrupt politicians like Tara's Grandfather. Similarly, Dattani further represents Tara's Grandfather as patriarchally induced person who looks forward only to Chandan as the solo inheritor of his wealth leaving Tara to suffer the agony of her life on her own. One of the worst facts Dattani remarkably puts in this play is that of Bharati's involvement in the complicity of Tara's deformity despite being a woman herself. The ill-effects of surgery due to unnatural medical practice and conservative mindset of the Patel parents fetch Tara's sad demise.

The play is an exemplary of prevalent gender discrimination and child abuse repeatedly happening in Indian society. It is a critical commentary on the burning issue of gender discrimination and the peripheral role of women in the male-centred heterosexual society. The deep-rooted cultural traditions and patriarchal ideology prohibit women from leading a normal life equal to men. Rajiv Azad in his book *Gender Discrimination: An Indian Perspective* presents the irony of the situation in context with women in India as:

“In a nation wherein we take pride in worshipping plethora of female goddess, for instance Durga, Laxmi and Saraswati that is indeed ludicrous and embarrassing. Head bows in shame coming across news pieces featuring down death, rape, domestic violence and host of other crimes inflicted against women every new and then.”¹

Indians proudly celebrate several festivals by worshipping Kali Durga, Saraswati, Laxmi, etc. Instances of female foeticide are also found in ancient times and in great Indian epics like *The Ramayana*. Sita could be said to be a first victims of female foeticide. Dattani through this play opens the eye of those parents who commit injustice with their daughters.

As mentioned earlier, Dattani brings about a disillusionment of audience. His play *Tara* exhibits controversial social issues related to discrimination on grounds of gender and partial attitude of parents towards their daughters. It could be stated that Dattani challenges the age-old belief system and political framework of the country. In an interview given to Laxmi Subramanyam, Dattani says: "I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and the female self. The male self being preferred (if one is to subscribe to conventional categories of masculine traits and feminine traits) in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst."²

Dattani's clarions call to Indian parents foregrounds the burning issue of gender inequality in India. Gender inequality is deeply rooted in Indian society since time immemorial. Women are ideologically conditioned to accept that it is a natural phenomenon to be inferior to men. The present paper traces the depth of gender inequality and resultant psychological facets of women with respect to the character of *Tara*. Further, an attempt will be made find out the causes of social prejudices/hypocrisies forcing women to accept a subjugated womanhood. The character of *Tara* in this context stands for those girls in both urban and rural societies in India who are coerced to sacrifice their 'self' for the sake of their male counterparts in the family.

Tara is Dattani's one of the most enthralling plays as it raises a question on parents' lop-sided treatment to their male and female children. Traditionally women have been caught in the labyrinth of fixed 'gender role' at the cost of their potential, intelligence and skills. In this play, *Tara* is shown intellectually superior to Chandan. Yet, her parents especially Patel has nothing to do with her potential and is always worried about Chandan's career. He accuses Bharati of involving Chandan in household duties like knitting.

PATEL: Let *Tara* do it.

CHANDAN: It's Okay.

PATEL: Give it to her.

CHANDAN: Why ...?

PATEL: Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!...

PATEL: (to Bharati). How dare you do to him?... You can think of turning him into a sissy- teaching him to knit! (CP 351)³

Even before Mahesh Dattani the issue of gender discrimination has been very much represented in some of Indian English Novels. As far as gender roles are concerned, Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* is one of the best examples. As a part of the household

duties which are traditionally to be done by women only, the husband of the protagonist Jaya is expecting her to mend his shirt as it is her duty only. Jaya's expression brings out the depth of fixed gender roles as: "Man and Woman ... I realized the deep chasm between the two. They are separated forever."⁴ In *Tara* Patel has a grand plan for Chandan's future. Therefore, he prefers Chandan to go office rather than to waste his time in knitting, etc. Simultaneously, he neglects Tara's potential and measures her in the traditional framework of cooking, child bearing and rearing, serving men politely. Tara criticizes this situation through ancient allusion of the Stone Age. She says: "Not at all. The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave." (CP 328)⁵ By speaking so Tara proposes parents to stop inculcating the myth of 'active male' and 'passive female' and let children (son or daughter) to be a part of the advancement taking place in the world.

The title of the play *Tara* is quintessentially symbolic in the sense that the girl Tara longs for twinkling and shining like her name but unfortunately, she is destined to suffer painfully. Therefore, it is the blunder of parents to situate their daughters in a particular gender role which destroys their 'self'.

Dattani is the playwright of modern times bringing about multiple experiments and innovations in the performing aspects of the play. His plays frequently shift from present to past and vice versa breaking the unity place, time and action. In the beginning of the first act of the play, Chandan is represented as Dan living in London with his uncle and uttering a soliloquy. Suddenly Dan shifts from present to past and appears as Chandan in Mumbai. With the help of light effects, Dattani highlights action by frequently breaking scenes in the play. Devices like lights and music strengthen the unity of action and enhance the mood of characters. The flashback technique with faded music discloses the dark secrets of hidden and shameful conspiracy in operating the body of Tara and Chandan. By using this technique, Dattani in a way, reprimands parents for their ill-treatment to daughters and consequent repentance.

As the play opens in London, Dan is shown as a playwright who is writing a play on his childhood. However, unintentionally Tara, his sister, dominates his play. While writing a play he realizes the fact that he and Tara are the two sides of the same coin. He further learns that his physical separation from Tara left her crippled from the rest of her life. It was a complicity committed by his parents to secure Chandan's career at the cost of Tara's life. Dan undergoes a sense of purgation that irrespective of physical separation he and Tara are still emotionally entwined. The play throws lights on the selfish attitude of parents who prefer

male child to female one. The narrow-mindedness of parents increases the proportion of gender discrimination.

Upon realizing the hollowness of her life as a handicapped woman, Tara gives a way out her frustration as "...Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body in one comfortable womb." (CP 325) ⁶ Tara's expression reveals the fact since she and Chandan were born as twins; they were biologically equal but culturally Tara is deemed inferior to Chandan. Through this dialogue, Tara criticizes her parents for crime in surgically separating the twins. This is Dattani's motive behind reprimanding parents. Tara, in this context, can be compared to Sita, a pregnant woman character in Anita Desai's novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer* ⁷ who is reluctant to deliver her fifth baby and wishes to protect it in her womb. However, Sita stands out as superior to Tara's mother Bharati because Bharati is involved in the complicity of conspiracy whereas Sita does not wish her baby to enter into male chauvinist world.

Commercially speaking, male child is an 'asset' for parents and girl child is 'liability'. The reasons behind having such different attitudes towards son and daughter are age-old religious superstitions and the issue of dowry. Through this play, Dattani warns Indian parents to safeguard their daughters from falling prey to heinous practices like female foeticide, female mutilation, child sexual abuse, early marriage, gender-based violence, etc. Dattani has highlighted the practice of female infanticide in the Patel families. Roopa, Tara's friend, refers to how the Patel girls used to be killed by their parents to avoid the problem of dowry in future as: "Since you insist, I will tell you. It may not be true. But this is what I have heard. 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. So when people asked them how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking her milk." (CP 349) ⁸

Dattani juxtaposes tradition and modernity in this play. Patel, Bharati and grandfather are having traditional mentality whereas Chandan and Tara advocate modern lifestyles abundant in individual freedom and privilege.

Chandan treats his sister equal to himself and hopes for her bright future through proper education and equal opportunities. He skips his one academic year for Tara's sake as the latter is unable to pursue education due to kidney transplant. Thus, both Chandan and Tara are transgressive in nature as they challenge the conservative mind-set of their parents. The final dialogue between Chandan and Tara reveals their projection of gender equality which is a challenge for the hypocrite parents like Patel Bharati.

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 have ever said to me. (CP 361) ⁹

Patel and Bharati do not accept the fact that Tara is more intelligent than Chandan. Patel expresses his grudge over Chandan's decision of losing one academic year for Tara. Bharati's attitude of being a woman finds expression in what she says to Chandan as: "Yes, Chandan. The world will accept you. The world will tolerate 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!" (CP 349) ¹⁰ Besides Tara, her mother Bharati is also a victim of patriarchal nature of her father and husband. Both Patel and his father-in-law carry forward the lineage of patriarchy, which destroys Bharati and Tara thoroughly. Bharati's father makes takes disadvantage of strong political power by bribing Dr. Thakkar for carrying the surgery. Both Bharati and Tara are the subaltern under the patriarchal dominance of Grandfather and Patel. Upon realizing the sin, Bharati tries to shed her burden of guilt by asserting her moral superiority over her husband and father. She affectionately goes closer to Tara and donates kidney to her, which ultimately does not suit to her body. However, the relation between Bharati and Tara breaks as Tara comes to know the truth. Bharati throughout remains anxious about Tara's life and repents over her participation in her deformity. Dattani shows that Patel, Bharati and Chandan for that matter, are the escapists who do not wish to see Tara's predicament despite of being involved in ruining her life. At the end of the play, we come across that his shifting to London and living as Dan is an escape from the past, which still haunts his present. Tara and Bharati are shown to be dead. Bharati's death is a sacrifice for her daughter but still it appears to be an escape from reality. His blame on Bharati and her father regarding Tara's disability proves to be an escape from his initial indecisive nature.

Conclusion:

Thus, according to Rabindranath Tagore, "Every child comes into the world with a message that God has not yet disappointed with man".¹¹ But unfortunately the girl child is exploited even before and after her birth. The parental attitude towards daughters is often influenced by established social taboos. The birth of a girl child is usually attached with a

social stigmatization which results in parents' negligence towards girls. Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* highlights the dire need of dynamic shift in the treatment given to girls in Indian families. The play sends a message that parents should not discriminate girl on gender grounds, rather advocate and celebrate the birth of a girl child. Dattani appeals to parents to bring up both male child and female child on common platform by giving them equal opportunities for the balanced and sustainable development. The play *Tara* is truly Mahesh Dattani's Clarion Call to those parents who are still treating their girls with gender prejudice. It is also a problem play in the true sense of the term for its sincere efforts in drawing attention of people to this pressing issue. Dattani proposes a problem and makes audience to respond it actively. In short, his play *Tara* is a great theatrical platform which addresses the problem of parental negative approach in treating girl children. The character of Tara bears resemblance to innumerable girls in India who are repeatedly being victimized by parents for securing the future of boys. Dattani anticipates this threat in the play and sensitizes people to initiate preventing measures for the welfare of girls in India.

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