

**Gender Equality is Still a Distant Dream: A Thematic Study of Mahesh Dattani's Play *Tara***

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to discuss how Mahesh Dattani exposes the hypocrisy of modern Indian society, which prides of equality in terms of gender, caste, and creed. By putting these claims to the test in his play *Tara*, he paints a very different picture of society, one that is riddled with sex and gender discrimination. Dattani is unafraid to discuss society's stark realities. He exposes the experiences of those who are marginalised in society, such as women, children, and homosexuals, who are discriminated against and ignored in the mainstream. As a result, Dattani appears to be a voice for a lot of people who have been silenced for a long time. He is well-known for his outspoken criticisms of society's inhumane and brutal treatment of the poor and oppressed. The paper investigates how a society can be so cruel as to support a conspiracy against the other sex simply because the majority of males do not acknowledge it as equal. He gives the oppressed class a voice by describing their emotional and physical sufferings, particularly in urban settings.

**Key Terms:** Gender discrimination, oppression, homosexuality, urban society.

Mahesh Dattani is a well-known name in the history of Indian theater. He is recognised stage director, screenwriter, and film director with vast record of scripts and works to his name. He gave new heights to the drama genre and a unique individuality. He is a true advocate of the underprivileged of Indian society and represents the serious issues concerning women, children, homosexuals, and minorities. His writings provide a thorough examination of social issues through portrayal of Indian society. The characters in the plays are shown in a realistic and believable manner with everyday problems. He defies the conventional patterns of the theater by addressing religious tensions, sexuality, and gender concerns that are rarely addressed on the stage. Moreover, he bravely tackles certain odd issues such as gay love and the socio-psychological problems of the homosexuals and is undoubtedly the first Indian writer to do so. He deals with a wide range of unseen issues that are contentious and challenging with global appeal that has been remained shredded under customs, conventions and religion. Dattani's success stems from his unique approach to difficult subjects. Thus, he is creative enough to recognise the difficulties that plague the Indian family and society. The dramatic experience of Dattani is based on an extreme emotional crisis that occurs in everyday life, the Indian family and familial interaction. The plays of Dattani resemble the kitchen-sink dramas that were popularized by famous playwrights during 1950 like John Osborne and Arnold Wesker. By portraying their real challenges in the society he allows marginalised section to be heard through stage and aiming to entrust them a dignified place in the society. He explains the complex patterns of the society that breeds number of problems for the underprivileged class through the stereotypes such as the homosexuals are welcomed at homes during holidays. But they are ridiculed, subjected to degrading laughing at traffic signals and on local trains. The society avoids looking at them with humanistic approach and treats them as persons on the periphery of

society and people with no identity. They are usually denied jobs, employment and humiliated, and are out casted from the main stream culture. Angelie Multani remarks about Dattani's efforts aptly as follows:

Dattani's themes reflect and comment on the ordinary and everyday conflicts of so many urban people who may be living in transitional periods of history, caught between the firm undertow of Tradition and social values and the pull of modernity and globalization. For a playwright who steers remarkably clear of messy and problematic definitions, Dattani manages to crystallize and represent the essence of what contemporary urban life in India is about for so many middle and upper-middle class Indians. (11)

Urban India appears to be more advanced with liberal ideas because of the education, and its strong connection to the rest of the globe in terms of socialization. Thus, it can be said that the people in the urban areas are socially and culturally advanced and the myths that the urban people do not engage in gender discrimination or preference for a male child. Gender discrimination may not be practiced by the urban populace in metros and mega-cities, as it is compared to the rural India. A playwright like Dattani, on the other hand, debunks the assumption that males and girls in metropolitan India are not discriminated. The discrimination based on gender exists in various forms in the society which can be subtle, discreet and in indirect form. These ideas are thoroughly discussed by Dattani in the plays taken to the study.

The play *Tara* exemplifies the gender preferences which results gender discrimination. *Tara* is one of Dattani's most well-known plays around the world. It was premiered in Bangalore in 1990 and left audiences around the world in tears, posing various concerns that remain unresolved even in today's educated and emancipated urban upper class. Tara the eponymous character in the play suffers the worst incidence of gender discrimination when her leg is

amputated and given to Chandan, her male twin. Subsequently, Tara grows up to be a abnormal child. It is established pattern to relegate the female gender to the position of object and it happens not only by the authority of males but powerful females also exert dominance over the weaker one. Tara and Chandan who are conjoined twins and born together. Separating the two needed a delicate and complicated surgery. It is at this point that Bharati, the mother along with her father commit the heinous and ignoble crime by bribing the doctor who performed the surgery. Accordingly he amputates the leg that was originally linked to Tara's body. As a result, Chandan's leg does not grow into his body and withers away like an undesirable lump of flesh that was medically removed later. It is a mockery of the idea of liberated, educated women who propagates among the urban upper middle class societies about equality but perpetrated injustice to her own daughter. She appears with more liberal thinking than her father who is old-fashioned and more patriarchally rigid. Tara deals with the issue of gender discrimination in a variety of ways, not all of them are based on clichéd tropes of 'bias against the girl kid.' Asha Chaudhuri comments that "With Dattani, it is never a scenario that is cut-and-dry, absolving one or directly pinning the blame on the other" (70).

Dattani showcases the act of discrimination and the oppression against the woman which is deeply ingrained in the society. It is well illustrated when Baa expresses a desire to subject her daughters-in-law to the same humiliation and violence that she was subjected to. The most cherished ideals of the urban society shatters the moment these instances of violence and injustice against women are exposed. It directly reflects the patriarchal set up of society that ruthlessly destroys the society's basic fabric. However the extent of barbarism does not stop here. Moreover, the female gender experience domestic violence, extramarital affairs, lecherous behaviour, physical and emotional dominance, unrestrained sexual behaviour, and moral

degeneration. Dattani has written on gender discrimination in a way that is relatable. He strikes the idea that urban culture in India is said to be oblivious of “gender preferences” and these instances may occur only in the rural societies. However, the incident that happens with Tara occurs in a well to-do, socially and culturally advanced family.

Dattani brings out the heinous elements and the arrogant nature of metropolitan India, as well as the ludicrous attitude it has acquired about inflexible patriarchal norms and gender inequality. Dattani employs a variety of techniques to expose the urban charade. Using dialogues, provincial language, music, multi-level stage settings, masks, and the merger of the past and present, he primarily concentrates on presenting a supposedly balanced equation to directly convey certain features. However, he frequently uses the same tactics to leave parts and tenets relating to the topic unaddressed in order to make his point more piercingly. The play *Tara* can be analysed from a variety of perspectives, as a study of the delicate and ever-changing man-woman relationship, or as a struggle of disabled children to integrate into mainstream society. But it is essentially the tragedy of Tara, the energetic 15-year-old teenager who, as her brother Dan describes that she “never got a fair deal... not even from nature” (330). Tara fights a lonely battle against Nature and Man for nearly a decade and a half, but she eventually wastes away and dies, unable to bear the burden of manipulation by her mother and grandfather. She was denied the opportunities and choices particularly by her father, Patel like her brother. Despite the fact that she was much smarter and talented as compared to her brother.

The play *Tara* relates an emotional separation that develops between two conjoined twins after their mother and grandfather manipulate their physical separation to favour the male child, Chandan over the girl. She is not only a victim of gender discrimination and patriarchal tyranny, but she is also caught in the middle of concerns of class and community, as well as the clash of

traditional and modern lifestyles and ideals. Bijay Kumar Das aptly remarks that “this drama might be viewed as an illustration of how gender consciousness operates both ways—first, as prejudice against the girl (in this case, Tara) and second, as compassion and sympathy for her” (48). Tara would have been more entrepreneurial and better ready to face the world, but she falls short in the race due to her gender. Staking the life of a female child to maintain the ‘completeness’ of a male child appears to be a common practice even among the metropolitan upper classes. Tara’s family is not the only one that is ‘gendering’ the twins in this way. The family reflects society as a whole and any segment of it would have made the same decisions. It is the entire society that schemes and conspires, thinks as one entity, and makes decisions such as giving the limb to males by amputating the female. Moreover, she is repeatedly forced to stay at home rather than accompany her father like her brother Chandan. Despite of the fact, that Tara is more brilliant than Chandan if not slightly smarter. But Patel is solely concerned about his son’s job and future security. He entreats his son to attend college so that any future aspirations can be realised by acquiring education. However, Tara receives same treatment from all the members of the family. Bharati’s father left for Chandan the entire estate when he died. He never once considered his disabled grand-daughter (Tara) who desperately needs financial assistance to survive. Tara’s wit and brilliance do not earn her favour with the patriarchal system. Instead fights for existence on two levels, physically and socially. Her misfortune is not the result of decision of a single member of her family that deteriorates her condition. But all the members of her family such as grandfather, father, and mother have been taught that men are superior and should be aided in every way possible. Asha Chaudhuri further explains:

Dattani’s deep preoccupation with gender issues leads to the emergence of the idea of the twin side to one’s self – quite literally embodied in one body and the separation that

follows. The ‘gendered’ self, as Dattani refers to it, must in some sense always partake of the ‘other’ in order that it is complete. The male equality with the female would be the ideal song that Dattani, a La Whitman, would also like to sing. But the world deems otherwise. (89)

Tara can be regarded as a play about the injustices committed in the name of gender identity. The unspoken truth is that gender roles and hierarchical structures affect males just as much as they harm women. Dattani depicts a society in which both the male and female are losers because they are forced to maintain the illusion despite their biological differences, they must embrace cultural polarities. Santwana Halder argues that “in a patriarchal society, a woman’s identity is defined by others in terms of her relationship with men. Patel, the representative of the patriarchal authority in the play, clearly differentiates the role of his son from that of his daughter”. (101). While gender discrimination, restrictive societal structures, and the patriarchal mindset of modern urban society are perhaps the principal subjects that Dattani addresses in Tara, it also highlights the family’s division, emotional turmoil, and each family member’s fight to define his or her identity. Women are unable to think for themselves because patriarchy plays a significant role in family ties and the family structure. In this regard, Bharati’s case is typical. Her father first instructs her to favour the male child by denying the girl child her leg. Dattani in an interview with Angelie Multani says,

A writer always has a theme, a place, a character that proves to be a source of energy without which the writer will not have the creative, emotional or intellectual stamina to last through the process of writing. With me it happens to be marginal people amongst others. Women interest me a great deal. I draw a lot of energy from the women I know. (166)

It is a cruel irony of life that a woman, specifically mother would fight against a daughter in order to advantage a son. The Indian urban classes, particularly women band together to improve women's status and conditions at the same time the same women might be perpetrator of such insidious and horrible crimes.



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