



## Patriarchal Dominance: Projection of Gender Biasness in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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**Abstract:** It is considered that Indian society has basically been patriarchal in nature. The male members of the family (grandfather, father or son) act as the chief agents of patriarchy and hold the dominant position within the family unit. In *Manusmriti*, Manu states: “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in (her own) house. In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's, and when her husband is dead, under her sons”(12). However this text was written centuries ago, it still seems to affect the lives of contemporary women. Similarly, numerous ancient dramatic and epic texts, in keeping with Manu's principles glorified the father figures. These texts promote the patriarchal culture through the portrayal of strong male figures. Such texts depict women as dependent on the male members of the family. Ironically, even today, patriarchal dominance is quite visible in the Indian society. Parents think their daughter as an outsider as one day she would be married and would live with her husband. They have superstitious and mythical beliefs of being ultimately emancipated at the hands of their son. The plays of Mahesh Dattani highlight the above mentioned concepts time and again. The present paper brings to light the theme of patriarchal dominance or gender discrimination in Dattani's play *Tara*. The issue of discrimination with women has been comprehensively dealt by Dattani in this play. It shows how female is subjugated by patriarchal society. It also points out that female is treated only as a care taker for household chores, children, husband, other domestic requirements. The preference of a boy child over a girl child forms the infrastructure of the play. In a way, Dattani's drama showcases the stark reality of life. It also attempts to draw the attention of the world towards the pressing needs of the time.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal dominance, gender biasness, inequality.

Drama is treated as the most powerful genre in the world literature. The origin of Indian drama is without a doubt a groundbreaking genre that projects the society and culture. Earlier the drama focused on the religious convictions, philosophical approaches and the political changes of the country. With the passage of time, there came the issues related to contemporary politics, social and economic problems, art, human life etc. The modern Indian drama highlights numerous issues of the contemporary Indian society and the real life problems. The plays of Mahesh Dattani throw light on the issues related to gender biasness and patriarchal dominance. His plays depict the marginalized sections of the society such as : minorities, women, gays and hijras (eunuch). These plays not only reveal the violence of one's private thoughts but also project the hypocrisy of public's morals. His plays also highlight the discrimination of all sorts. The power struggles are also clearly visible in his plays. His plays deal with gender biases and prejudices which still affect the lives of many girl-children even amongst educated, urban families.

Mahesh Dattani (August 07, 1958) is one of the leading contemporary playwrights in English. He is a renowned director as well as an actor apart from being a playwright. He has dealt with the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. He is credited with being the first Indian English playwright who won the Sahitya Academy award for *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays* in 1998. The plays of Dattani have



attracted attention as these plays have projected bold themes in an unusual style. His plays have presented the marginalized sections of the society. They also deal with issues related to discrimination such as religious prejudice and homosexuality. The struggle of women in a patriarchal society is a recurring theme in his plays. In the domain of Indian English Drama, Mahesh Dattani's plays have emerged as 'fresh arrivals'. Dattani's plays also express his political beliefs, without being instructive. According to Erin Mee: "by pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of "India" and "Indian" as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre" (319).

In India, literature of all languages have penned down the pathetic plight of women due to patriarchal dominance. Numerous writers have raised voices against this subjugation of women. Indian writing in English is no exception to this. It is noteworthy that Mahesh Dattani's perception of women is quite unconventional. In fact, there seems to be no specific agenda of feminism in the plays of Dattani. His works depict the continuous battle between the feminine psyche and patriarchal order. To the question, asked by Laxmi Subramanyam, Dattani replies: "They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All eyes focus on in the powerlessness of these people..... And I am not going to change my sensibility for political correctness either. My only defense is to say that I am not biased against woman"(Subramanyam, Laxmi, 134).

Without a doubt, *Tara* is one of the distinguished plays penned by Mahesh Dattani. This two-acts play presents a tale of Siamese twins namely Tara and Chandan. The play oscillates between the past and the present events. The present play, *Tara*, directed by Dattani himself, was first performed as *Twinkle Tara*. The play revolves around the life of the Siamese twins Chandan and Tara who are born conjoined. It focuses on the fortunes of the Patel family. It is built on the aftermath of the separation surgery which was performed by the renowned surgeon Dr. Thakkar on the three month old twins Chandan and Tara. The play drifts through time in the present to the past till the time before Tara's kidney transplant surgery when she is sixteen. It is considered that the play falls in the category of memory plays like Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*. The play gives an insight into the bond between the siblings the play. It also brings to light the discriminatory attitude of mainstream society to disabled people. Chandan and Tara do not desire for the sympathy of the so-called normal children such as Roopa, Prema and Nalini. Both Tara and Chandan are self-sufficient and much brighter than the other children around them. Dattani remarks: "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" (Sachidananda, Mohanty, 171).

Gender Discrimination in India has existed for generations and has affected the lives of both the genders. Although the constitution of India has provided both men and women equal rights, gender biasness still remains. Women are perceived to be disadvantaged in every sphere of life due to gender biasness. The plays of Mahesh Dattani portray the life of ordinary human beings in India. The present play, *Tara*, shows the gender biasness and how society practices it in various ways. The play reveals the cruelty of mainstream society through the misbehavior of Roopa. At the same time, it places parental upbringing under scrutiny. Patel and Bharati are the parents of Chandan and Tara who are also guilty of differential treatment. They meddle with the future of their children in a manner which appears to be authoritarian. The privileging of Chandan's interest over Tara begins at the tender age of three months. This privileged continues through life till they are college going students. Bharati and her father discriminate against Tara by not allowing her



to inherit from her maternal grandfather. Patel is the head of the family. He remains concerned about the future of his son, Chandan. He wants his son to join college. On the other hand, he does not really speak about any plans for Tara. Patel wants Chandan to accompany him to his offices so that he can be bold and outgoing. Chandan helps his mother in knitting and this makes Patel absolutely furious. He scolds Bharati for encouraging his son to do the work which is considered feminine. It can be seen through these lines:

“Patel : Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!

Bharati : (Frantic) Go! Chandan, just go!

Patel : (To Bharati) How dare you do this to him?” (Tara, 256).

Patel is disappointed at the growth of his son. The fact remains that he never took any responsibility for his children in life. He remarks: “I am disappointed in you. From now on you are coming to the office with me. I can't see you rotting at home!” (Tara, 256) It shows the embedded attitude of Indian society which makes elaborate plans for sons but does not treat the daughter in the same way, even in educated families.

Dattani has often expressed the view in interviews as well that India is invariably biased towards the male and believes in the marginalization of the female. Roopa cracks a joke about the Patel's drowning their daughters in milk. This metaphorical drowning of Tara seems to be predetermined as she is a girl child of the family. First, her maternal grandfather denies her the family inheritance; then her father does not make any career plans for her unlike her brother. She is denied to have the third leg that rightfully belongs to her. Thus, every member of the family time and again participates in the drowning of Tara. It can be stated: “This is thus a play about the injustices done in the name of construction of gender identities – this hierarchisation and demarcation of roles does as much harm to men as to women. Dan carries as much harm of the unfair burden this imposes as Tara” (Prasad, G J V, 141).

It is an age old custom in India to look at the son and daughter with biased and discriminating eyes. This gender biasness has been tagged with rites and rituals of life. Parents consider their daughter an outsider who would as one day she would be wed one day and would leave to lead her own life. This play presents the gender biasness through the lives of Tara and Chandan. Tara and Chandan are Siamese twins who don't resemble with each other. They are separated after the three months of their birth. Actually, they were conjoined from the chest and were having three legs. The chances of survival of the third leg were more with of Tara. However, it was given to Chandan. It reflects gender biasness due to which the decision was not made on the basis of medical report. This decision was taken by Mrs. Bharati Patel and her politically powerful father. It would not be wrong to say that Mr. Patel had no role in this injustice. The surgery was performed in Bombay. All this project how Tara is the victim of sex discrimination in patriarchal society. The play portrays a brutal fact that a woman's life is always governed by patriarchy since time immemorial. Dattani appears to state patriarchy is deeply affected by the power of wealth. Both the power of wealth and patriarchal dominance have been the major reasons for the subjugation and oppression of the women in any society. Tara's grandfather uses both his political and monetary power in order to convince the doctor for giving third leg to Chandan at the place of Tara who should actually have it. It has been attributed: “*Tara* centers on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favor the boy (Chandan) over the girl (Tara). Tara, a feisty girl who isn't given the opportunities given to her brother (although she may be smarter) eventually wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name to Dan, and attempts to repress the guilt he feels over his sister's death by living without a personal history” (Mee, Erin, 319).



The most shocking part in the play is when Tara is discriminated by her mother. Dattani somehow brings to surface the age old belief that woman is the destroyer of another woman's life. However, Bharati's father is equally responsible for the decision made regarding Tara's future, still it is Bharati who bears the brunt of blame ultimately. It appears that the decision of Bharti is influenced because of the huge fortune of her father. Bharti believes that her father's fortune will be inherited by Chandan, his only grandson. All this is the result of the patriarchal system of the society as this society treats women as inferior to men. Bharati performs double roles in the play. She is a woman who tries to find her own place in the society. She is also a mother who tries to make the right decisions for her children, at least according to her. The fractured images of Bharti's inner-self affect her love for her daughter, Tara. She feels guilty for the decision that changed Tara's future and it appears that she continues to shower love on Tara in order to get rid of that guilt. She remains deeply concerned about Tara's future. In another context, she reveals her inner thoughts to Chandan about Tara: "The world will accept 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!" (Tara, 254)

Bharati is the only character in the play who makes plans for Tara. It might be said that it is Bharti's guilt which governs her mind in the later part of the play. Bharti remarks about her daughter: "I plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It's what she deserves" (Tara, 255). It seems that Bharti's husband, Patel, is not happy about the way Bharati treats her daughter. According to him she treats Tara, "as if she is made of glass". (Tara, 257) it is because of the mental trauma of Bharti that she completely loses her senses and breaks down finally. Tara returns to her home after kidney transplant. She is depressed to hear about her mother's severe illness. She fears that she might lose her mother who loves her the most. She understands the loss that she will have to bear for the rest of her life if she loses her mother.

Tara is the innocent victim of the society's injustice. She has to carry the burden of being physically disabled all through her life because of the gender biasness which is prevalent in the society. She truly aspires for two legs. Her desire for the same can be observed when she mentions to her brother:

"Tara : I would wish for both. I would wish for two of them.

Chandan : Two Jaipur legs? Tara : No, silly, the real ones" (Tara, 266).

Tara considers that her mother truly loves her. Although, she begins to assume that her father hates her. Needless to say that Tara is a bold girl who cheerfully faces her critics. Her brother, Chandan, supports her throughout her life.

The present paper highlights the fact that the modern day liberated family is still not free from the gender bias. The patriarchal dominance which has been practiced for ages in Indian society still remains a part of it. The playwright raises questions pertaining to gender bias and stereotyping of women through the women characters portrayed by him. In *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani scrutinizes the subtle workings of gender discrimination. He has depicted the same in liberated and educated families in India. The feudal mindset of the Patel family is similar to the conservative families of ancient societies. Both of these have practiced infanticide by drowning daughters. The contemporary Indian society treats their daughters differently purely on the basis of gender and they carry this guilt within them. Chandan is an educated but failed writer. He keeps drinking alcohol as he believes that this helps him in forgetting his role in his sister's life and death. Chandan understands his indebtedness to his counterpart- his dead sister Tara. The present play somehow conveys the message that patriarchal dominance and gender biasness do not succeed every time. It also shows that gender biasness becomes the reason for unhappy families around the world. The playwright also questions the intervention of society and parents in the lives of the disabled. It also questions



the critical gaze of the so- called normal people of society like Roopa who are actually no less freaks. The play also presents the perspective of those who are considered disabled. Both Tara and Chandan are highly confident in their bodies and do not consider themselves as disabled in any way. They show a mirror to the society which reveals its ugliness. The play also questions the role of science. It shows that science treats the disabled lives as objects while treating them.

To put it briefly, it can be said that Mahesh Dattani has projected the theme of gender biasness in the play, Tara. It depicts that patriarchal dominance works on different levels such as social norms, economic standards and cultural factors. All these have been responsible for the injustice against the girl child. All these factors create a social system in which the girl child has to survive and ultimately die. Dattani appears to convey a message to the readers that women should be treated the same way as their male counterparts are treated. Women should be given equal opportunities to develop their potential. People need to understand that a life would be more worth living if all the genders in the society are treated equally, without any gender biasness.

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