

Beyond Biology: Gender Bias and Patriarchal Violence in *Tara*

by Mahesh Dattani

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Abstract

Tara by Mahesh Dattani is a thought-provoking dramatisation of patriarchy, disability, and gender in modern India. The play, superficially about the tragic case of conjoined twins who are divided by a complicated surgical procedure, functions as a form of social critique. It shows how society promotes maleness over femaleness. *Tara* is a powerful metaphor for institutionalised gender discrimination. Dattani shows the entanglements of the interwoven lives of Tara, Chandan, Bharati, and Patel and how patriarchal ideology manifests itself in every facet of their family life, their morality of medical practice, inheritance, and affect. The play also illustrates that violence against women is not only physical but also psychological. This paper uses close reading of the text to make the argument that the dualistic discourse of *Tara* is a challenge to biological determinism, showing that gender disparity is not a given in nature, but is constructed culturally. It also argues that Dattani reimagines the split body of the twins as a metaphor for a society that seemingly brings in an endless split of the female image on several occasions through discriminatory social practices. As a result, something more than a domestic tragedy, *Tara* is a powerful feminist denunciation of the exercise of male power.

Keywords – Patriarchy, Gender Bias, Feminism, Body Politics, Disability.

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani has a unique place in Indian English drama since he chronologically explores the puzzles of the modern Indian society in the smaller sphere of family intimacy. Dattani will not seek examples of social violence in the remote structures of political institutions, but shows that oppression often stems from apparently loving relationships within the home, where mechanisms of oppression, silence and exclusion are at play. Rather than villains in the common sense of the word, it is ordinary people whose participation is, rather, shaped by cultural values taken into the self. Thus, his plays uncover patriarchy, communal prejudice, heteronormativity, and social hypocrisy that are at work in the current middle class. Among his dramatic pieces, *Tara* (1990) ranks as one of his most acute pieces on gender discrimination, as it illustrates how, according to the patriarchy, the value of human life would depend long before one has managed to reach maturity as a person. Whereas many stories in the tradition of feminist drama tell the viewer about the injustices of men and women in school, work, or marriage, *Tara's* story brings the viewer back to birth and finds gender injustice there. Conjoined twins Tara and Chandan Patel are at the heart of the play as the fleshy location where the patriarchy is violently scripted. Children are given an equal chance of survival in medicine in the first place. But the social prejudice makes its way in, favouring the boy child. Hence, it moves the debate around gender from the realm of the biological to the realm of the cultural with Dattani. Beauvoir's famous observation that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir p.330) provides an appropriate theoretical framework for reading *Tara*. Dattani similarly demonstrates that Tara's suffering originates not in biological sex but in patriarchal culture. The real crux of the play is that Tara is not born physically impaired, but that society deliberately decides to enshrine and make her disability permanent. Dattani sets the emotional level at an abnormally high level for both Tara and Chandan from the start. They are bound to each other with love, humour, intellectual fellowship and not rivalry. Tara is

continually telling herself that she is not any less than other people because she is a wheelchair user. She declares her resolve in every aspect of life; she tells Chandan, "And I plan to do everything that you do" (Dattani 33). This offhand remark gives one a clue to one of the play's bases of ideology. Tara will not accept the notion that women need to be confined by feminine ideals of what is possible. Instead, she envisions equality as a given, and discrimination as a nonexistent state of affairs, or a construct of society. Tara is funny, sharp and sensitive and sometimes tougher than the adults who care for her. Her humour helps her not be overwhelmed by the pity that others try to impose. After surgery, at home, she teases herself about how she is an "Oscar-winning celebrity" (Dattani 39) and says "my wonderful brother and my wonderful mom and dad" dismissively, even if it is somewhat exaggerated. In this way, by not playing a passive disabled female, Dattani demolishes stereotypical portrayals of disabled women. Despite being an inbuilt part of the conditions that refuse her dignity, Tara continually claims it as her own. But behind this glow, there is a growing undercurrent of anger. Although it seems as though Bharati's love for Tara is maternal at first, it is too much. When she returns from the hospital after the surgery, she tells her daughter again, "My beautiful baby! ... I love you very much", and insists, "I want you to remember that, Tara" (Dattani 38). She further promises, "I will make up for all the things God hasn't given you" (Dattani 38). Parental love is revealed in these declarations, but so is a longing sense of guilt. Bharati recognises that something is missing from Tara's life, something she was deprived of. The nature of the compensation itself implies a substitution for justice in the name of love. In a negative turnaround, Tara throws down this compensatory logic. Reminded by her mother of things that make her feel better emotionally, she can quietly say, "I have plenty. I have you" (Dattani 38). In spite of the simplicity of the statement, it gives us an indication of Tara's remarkable emotional generosity. She sees relationships as a measure of her life, not as a measure of her fullness. But her words seem to carry a tragic irony of which the audience becomes more and

more aware. Little does Tara know that her most trusted ally was also involved—albeit unwillingly—in the choice that has forever upended her life. Dattani embellishes this irony by having Dan narrate the action of the play in the past tense. When he would peruse old newspaper clippings about the twins' medical history, he would sarcastically say, "Poor Tara. Even nature gave her a raw deal" (Dattani 39). At this point, it is as if the audience is invited to accept that the reason for Tara's suffering is biological necessary destiny. But this is a calculated assault performed later in the play when Bharati's confession shocks everyone with the fact that, no, nature did favour Tara. So, the tragedy is not congenital but that of the patriarchy. Bell hooks remind us that "patriarchy has no gender." (Hook p.44) Bharati's participation in the surgical decision illustrates how women themselves may internalize patriarchal values without ceasing to be its victims. At first, the medical man seems objective, scientific. Dr Thakkar assures, "Nature had done a near-complete job. Medical science could finish it for her. Theoretically, the separation was possible" (Dattani 39). His words resonate with trust in the rationality of medicine and in technological progress. However, the infallibility of that confidence is slowly called into question by Dattani. When knowledge falls under a social prejudice, it can no longer be ethically neutral. Finally, medicine becomes implicated in patriarchal violence as the ultimate choice for surgery is not determined solely by the biological evidence, but also by the cultural preference of the male child. The play also condemns the insidious manifestations of the patriarchal ideology in daily family life. Patel time and again states that he is the same to both kids. In his heated face-off with Bharati, he tells Tara, "I love you very much, and I have never in all my life loved you less or more than I have loved your brother" (Dattani 36). At first glance, the line is comforting. But the emotional realism cannot extinguish the structural inequity which is already part of Tara's life. Dattani so differentiates between Institutional justice and personal affection. A parent can love his daughter, but he is also a part of a culture that predisposes him to a preference for sons. The tension between

Bharati and Patel underscores that patriarchy's presence is not only in the form of dominant ideals, but also through emotional muteness and values entrenched in the social structure. Bharati tries to make up for the previous injustices by showing her mother like too much love, whilst Patel wants to look for safety in deception. Their marriage turns into a battleground of guilt and denial, and it is the emotional burden of choices made long before they were able to make their own that requires Tara and Chandan to bear. The telling of the history of patriarchal violence is most forcefully captured through Roopa's seemingly casual anecdote about the practice of female infanticide. Reminiscing about past traditions, she says that "In some families of Patels, unwanted females were drowned... in milk," due to the dowry and social norms of those days (Dattani 31). The story is a funny rendering of a disturbing history that nevertheless forms an important historical chain. "Tara's tragedy is not unique but, in fact, is an expression of a traditional and patriarchy-dominated culture." Previous generations physically got rid of the girls, but the modern-day society keeps girls and takes away opportunities from them. So, the techniques have been changed, but the ideology remains the same. So, according to Tara, it is 'cultural difference based on the biological difference' that is the greatest form of violence against women. The conjoined body represents the unity of nature, while the suture represents the unity imposed by patriarchy. Opportunity is distributed to society based on gender, while Nature provides Possibility. Dattani's dramatic success is in his ability to uncover that discrimination does not just happen or happen out of chance but that it is made, produced, and accrued through family power and institutional connivance as well as through social values that are passed along through family. Through this process, Tara makes an intensely personal family tragedy a powerful critique of patriarchy itself, as a civilisational value. Millett's observation that "patriarchy's chief institution is the family" (Millett p.33)s vividly realized in *Tara*, where discrimination originates within the household before it is reinforced by medicine and society.

Another amazing feat of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is that it is a question of gender discrimination that moves from social customs to the very politics of the human body. The play claims that patriarchy isn't just used to manage – or discipline – women's behaviour; it establishes whose bodies are worthy of care, opportunity and life. The dishomogeneous cut which separates Tara and Chandan is the play's central political metaphor, representing the literal rewriting of biological possibility through the cultural, indeed surgical, process. Butler argues that "gender is performatively constituted." (Butler p 44) Dattani dramatizes this insight by showing that Tara's identity is shaped less by anatomy than by social expectations surrounding femininity. Through Dattani's work and the influence of these significant female builders, the idea that gender inequity is a priori from biological difference is questioned. Rather, he shows how patriarchy is at work in creating inequality by placing unequal value on the male and female body. The conjoined twins are an important element of the symbolism of this argument. Prior to the surgery, Tara and Chandan were the same person. Nature is willing to make no difference between them on the grounds of sex. They are physically dependent on one another and represent equality, dependence and common humanity. But as soon as the children turn into adults, the adults around them start to look at them differently. They make their choices according to the expectations of the patriarchy about inheritance, masculinity and family prestige, and not upon biological evidence. The operation is thus no longer a medical act, but rather a cultural act, which rearranges the body in line with the thinking of patriarchy. For instance, Bharati knows that Tara is judged much more harshly by society than Chandan, and this is due to the fact that she is a girl. In a fight with Patel, she has anxiously asserted that the world will one day accept Chandan; on the other hand, it is unclear what kind of response awaits Tara as her disability will be scrutinised along with her gender. The fear she feels shows that she grasps the gendered aspects of social discrimination prior to the actual truth of what the operation entails. But the patriarchal society does not simply measure the body's physical

ability; it measures that differently in the male and female body. It is a form of anxiety that is reflected in Bharati's very unusual display of emotional concern for Tara's happiness. She tries to make amends for some unnamed grievance time and time again with love. Discussing the future for her daughter, she states that she's going to give her daughter "all the love and affection" she can because "love can make up for a lot" (Dattani). This sentiment is maternal and chivalrous, but also reveals Bharati's subconscious awareness of the ineffectiveness of emotional treatment to the opportunities that have fallen to Tara.

At one level, Patel's statement is quite moving; it's paternal affection expressed with genuine feeling. But the dramatic irony is oh so powerful. What he said reaffirmed equality, but what he did – or didn't do – (the truth) – has reinforced inequality. Dattani thus reveals an important paradox of patriarchy, wherein the affective sincerity of a man cannot be used to combat structural discrimination. A father can genuinely love his daughter and still be a party to a system which backs his son. Tara's response to the situation in this scene adds emotional weight to the scene. She assures him in silence: "I never doubted it, Daddy." (Dattani 37). Tara's trust is apparent and leads to a huge dramatic irony. Then she had no idea of her father's decision that would never change her destiny, and she wholeheartedly trusts his love. Her innocence heightens the audience's awareness of betrayal. Instead, Dattani builds tragedy by the incongruence between what Tara knows and what we see, and suggests that the audience knows, and slowly discovers, over the course of the play. The play also raises the issue of personal discrimination and the ways that it relates to larger historical patterns of gender violence. The act of female infanticide is the extreme form of patriarchal bias in favour of sons. As Showalter argues "Women's experience is the source of feminist criticism." (Showalter 56). The whole audience just sees the connection between this past practice and what Tara underwent. Older generations disposed of daughters physically, while daughters in the current society are preserved, but equality of opportunity for life is denied. The techniques may have

altered, but the ideology is the same. In this short anecdote, Dattani places Tara's tragedy in a long history of systemic violence against women in South Asia. It is further seen in the play that within an educated and urbanised family system, the bias against women remains. The Patel family looks like a typical forward-thinking, well-off family valued in society. However, deep-seated gender discrimination remains in the modern system of education. This conflict culminates, or is best expressed, in Bharati's own later admission about the operation. She reveals: The girl's blood supply to part of the third leg was very successful, as was shown in a scan: "The chances to the third leg were good as it received a lot of blood supply from the girl. This is a total turning point for the audience's perception of Tara's handicap. Girls are blessed, and Chandan is not. Medical evidence showed that the shared-limb was more tightly attached to Tara's skeleton and so was more likely to succeed when separated. Equality, indeed, an advantage for the female child, was provided by biological reality. The tragedy is in the fact that they are intentionally denying science. Bharati keeps her confession going with the most devastating line in the play: My father wanted the leg so that the boy could have. This compact declaration encapsulates all the ideology of patriarchy in one single instance of violence. It is a calculated and ideological choice, not an emotional or an accidental one. Thus, the politics of the operating room, with masculine privilege prevailing over medical ethics, is created by a father figure, the grandfather. The order of value that governs the symbolic economy of patriarchy deems the worthiness of the female body as disposable compared with the male body. Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices." Dattani thus illustrates how violence done to women often looks respectable when undertaken in an exercise of family authority and in the name of cultural tradition. When the question of professional ethics gives way to social power, science itself is put on trial! It is thus not only the patriarchal family system that Dattani condemns, but also institutions that abdicate objective judgements to cultural prejudice. This is no fault of medicine as such; it is a fault of society which uses

medicine for ideological ends. Bharati promises, "I will make up for... all the things God hasn't given you" (Dattani 38). It is so ironic. God did not say no to a full future for Tara; humans did. The reason for Bharati's attributing the responsibility to fate rather than to other factors is that if she does so, she will have to recognize her own culpability in the injustice. Through Dattani, one is thus exposed to the way that social violence is rendered as anything but a fatality. Tara responds in an amazing and generous manner: I have plenty. I have you. (Dattani 38) This simple sentence gives a glimpse of ethic superiority of the daughter to the adults around her. Even though she was raised without justice in a family, Tara still deems love and human relationships as important. The turnaround she makes is what stops her from being the focus of pity and makes her the moral core of the play. Overall, Tara attacks the notion of a woman's destiny being fixed by biology. The woman's body isn't naturally weak; it is made weak by the patriarchy. Dattani turns a medical procedure into a metaphor for cultural discrimination, suggesting that gender inequalities are a socially created phenomenon, dependent on family power, institutional collusion and passed-on politicised ideologies. That which is inscribed in the body is the battlefield where the power of patriarchy imposes itself. The tragedy of Tara is thus not only because of the congenital handicaps, but also because of the deliberate process involved in redistributing opportunities from daughter to son. By exposing this process, Dattani forces readers to see that sometimes the most violent act against women can be simply a decision made, and deemed reasonable, loving, and necessary.

The most remarkable contribution of Tara to Indian English drama is by examining the medical ethics in the light of the prevailing patriarchal power. Dattani is not content to simply consider the separation surgery as "a remarkable piece of medical work." He rather turns the operating theatre into a political arena that is inhabited by science, the family authority, and gender ideology. The tragedy of Tara is thus not one that can be blamed on the narrowness of medical science but one that can be blamed on the corruption of moral judgment through the

involvement of a man, with a medical mob looking the other way. As Dattani shows, institutions can sustain social prejudice, while wielding professional knowledge moves to a lower tier of importance than the power of the family. The operation is at first hailed as a success of modern medicine. The twins are hailed as medical miracles, and the public marvels at the exciting and unprecedented medical procedure performed by these doctors. Dan recalls the sensational coverage that typically was afforded to the twins, noting that newspaper clippings praised their survival and continuously showed them to be exemplars of medical advancements (Dattani 38-39). But there's a dark, hidden secret to this public story. Appearance of success covering up the ethical failure. Hence, Dattani doubts the era when people have taken pride in technological advances without looking at the rationale behind the moral choices that go with the technology. In the case of Tara, medical necessity was a secondary choice to patriarchal wishes. The doctor's confidence in nature and its job is thus highly ironic: Cosmic justice is at the service of ideology, and vice versa. When Bharati tells the truth about the operation, the game is won. It was not that nature discriminated against any girl child, but society. The influence of the grandfather shows that the authority of the family is not limited to family life but can reach into institutions such as work. Wealth, prestige and patriarchal privilege are enough to change a medical decision. The operating theatre is therefore a space in which the human body is made to fit a feminine image through the use of the symbolic power of masculinity – into a new moulding that does nothing but reflect cultural positions instead of scientific needs. The grandfather is never seen or heard in the play, but all else is his. Excluding him from the main drama was exactly what Dattani wanted, as his significance is not in him but in what he stands for. He represents continuity in a Patriarchal sense, how cultural beliefs extended to his forebears still influence today's social practices. Though the Patel family seem to be learned and modern, their important decision is ruled by a very old-fashioned notion that the son will contribute to the betterment of the world. Thus, Dattani insists that the modern

institutions are often trapped in traditional ideologies. Bharati's psychological breakdown is a reflection of the moral implications of this. She tries to make up for all the things she did not do for Tara in the past in extraordinary ways of affection – that perhaps the maternal love might save her. Bharati hugs her daughter before her kidney surgery. She immediately adds, "Everything will be all right. Now that I am giving you a part of me" (Dattani 38). The offered donation of the kidney reflects the urgency with which Bharati is seeking to right the wrong of years ago. But Dattani says that there's no way to make up for the initial crime using only physical means. Social injustice is identified over and over as fate or destiny, or God's will; hence, the human decisions that lead to inequality are blurred. Dattani is well-versed in shattering this illusion and shows that tragedy may be man-made and is not inevitable for Tara. Through multiple surgeries and social stigma, she learns to treasure love more than harbouring enmity. Dattani, therefore, creates Tara as the play's moral heart. Her humanity reveals the errors of judgment of the adults who have tried to judge her fate. Patel embodies another aspect of patriarchy. Whereas the suffering of Bharati is apparent, Patel hides his emotions within a rational, disciplined blanket. He thinks if you don't talk about the painful things, you can keep the family together. Patel is thus the presentation of two different reactions to a situation of guilty masculinity. Bharati tries to compensate for her emotions, but Patel has taken to silence and denial. But neither of these answers is successful, as neither deals with the structural nature of the injustice done in the first instance. Until the truth is accepted, there can be no genuine reconciliation.

Dattani does not depict Tara as helpless or a passive victim of patriarchy but as the direct casualty of patriarchy. Rather, she becomes the most intellectually anguished and psychological sturdiness of the play. Tara, the character in the play, refuses to be seen as disabled throughout the play. After one of her surgeries, she mocks an Oscar acceptance speech: "First of all, I would like to thank my agent. And those wonderful people, my mum

and dad. And my wonderful brother... without whose glorious presence this operation would never have been made." (Dattani 39) The scene shows off Tara's incredible cleverness and creativity as an actor. Humour is an attack on pity. She's not going to be written by suffering, she's not going to be written by suffering people, she will be the writer of the moment. But Dattani also uses dramatic irony. The audience knows that the joyful sincerity and gratitude expressed by Tara reflect the injustice that has been done to her. The wonderful brother she celebrates was made wonderful by the fact that he entered into a system which denied her a better future. The same with Bharati makes one realise her emotional maturity. Bharati is constantly asking for forgiveness and showering her with love, where as there is never any bitterness or looking for explanations from Tara. She desires to trust her own parents, and she doesn't know that there is something hidden. This innocence heightens the tragedy. Patriarchal violence is successful because it doesn't get acknowledged by the victim. The operation is also shrouded in silence, which splinters Tara's identity. She suffers repeated surgery, is in physical pain, and is missing out on social interaction, all without knowing the historical context of why she suffers. In this way, Dattani shows the aspect found in secrecy as a tool for the control of patriarchy. Knowledge is unequally shared. The adults enjoy the truth while Tara carries on a fabricated emotional reality veiled in silence. Tara's openness and the adults' concealment playfully highlight the moral logic within the centre of the play. The physically impaired daughter shows more emotional integrity than do the able-bodied adults who have caused her distress. This moves Dattani's representation of disability away from the body and to the culpability of society itself. Tara's tragedy is that she is denied the freedom to know her own history, in the end. On her body, patriarchy superimposes its values, and silence prevents her from recovering the history. By the voice of Tara, Dattani shows that the most violent act of patriarchy is not only that of refusal of physical violence, but also taking agency and voice from her.

Conclusion

Tara, is one of the strongest feminist dramas in Indian English literature, as it takes the debate on gender discrimination from its obvious and visible social manifestations to the obscure and unseen spheres of family life, medicine, emotions and memory. However, instead of places of patriarchy being visible structures of domination, Dattani shows how often they are structures of loving-kindness, silence, institutional power, and inherited cultural beliefs. The tragedy, therefore, in particular, is not just about a girl with a disability, but about a society that allows and enables the lives of disabled girls and women of unequal value according to gender. Menon's argument that "gender is produced through social practices"(Menon 32) resonates strongly with Dattani's portrayal of Tara, whose disability becomes meaningful only within a patriarchal social order. The central theme of the play is that it outright refuses to accept biological determinism. The fact that Bharati had been found to confess that 'the chances were better that the leg would survive on the girl', but my father wanted the leg for the boy, tells us that Tara's suffering had nothing to do with congenital abnormality, but it was a result of the patriarchal ideology (Dattani). In biology, equality was a given, and in society, it wasn't. It is through this revelation that Dattani challenges all efforts towards the naturalisation of gender discrimination. Meanwhile, the play also rejects the facile moral dualism. All of them finally suffer from a lack of emotional connectedness, thanks to Bharati's lifetime burden of guilt, Patel's wall of emotional repression and Chandan's haunting feelings of remorse. All the same, Tara must shoulder the brunt of it since her future is now permanently altered, ripped from her control. She has been moved by her courage, her wit and her emotional generosity to be the moral centre in the midst of all the immoral lapses of the adults who were once, or should have been, her protectors. In a broader sense, Tara forces readers to see how violence toward women can be presented in "respectable" ways such as an obligation to family, a care for parents, medical decisions, or cultural customs. Dattani succeeds in exposing the ideology

behind these institutions out of the body of an intimate domestic tragedy, rendering global a criticism of patriarchal civilisation. Tara still asks readers to look at the societies which continue to treat sons better than daughters and to envision a world where biology is not the justification for gender injustice.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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