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Exploring Gender Discrimination and Oppression in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: A Tale of Ableism and Social Disability

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's plays primarily revolve around the marginalised individuals and their quest to gain recognition within society. They challenge the established conventions, politically constructed mindsets, gender categorizations, and societal generalisations. He adeptly illustrates the intricate nature of socially approved gender norms. Dattani does not provide a definitive resolution for the social problems he addresses; instead, he encourages the audience to confront these concerns and develop an awareness of them. This research investigates gender inequality and the exclusion of women and disabled individuals in relation to Mahesh Dattani's play "Tara". In this play, the playwright explores the topic of disability by analyzing the character dynamics, familial relationships, and societal expectations. The main character of the play, a disabled young girl named Tara, serves as the focal point of the arguments in this research paper. The story alludes to women's subservient status in Indian society, which is a result of ingrained prejudice and gender bias. It challenges the roles and behaviours that society assigns to each gender as well as the specific ways that people—male and female—are supposed to behave. Dattani challenges viewers to consider their own views and fight towards a more equal society by exploring the linkages between gender and disability. This article

emphasises how critical it is to address these problems in order to build a more equitable and inclusive society.

Keywords: *Disability, Gender, Inclusive, Oppression, Prejudice.*

The representation of women in Indian English literature across different eras, focuses on the evolution of their roles, challenges, and empowerment. The portrayal of gender discrimination in Indian English fiction offers a window into the evolving dynamics of Indian society. This disparity manifests in various forms, including limited educational opportunities, restricted career paths, and societal expectations centred around marriage and motherhood. By highlighting these stories, Indian English fiction not only reflects societal issues but also serves as a catalyst for change, inspiring readers to rethink their assumptions about gender roles and equality.

Mahesh Dattani, an eminent Indian playwright, has gained recognition for his plays that delve into contemporary social issues with a focus on the experiences and challenges of marginalized groups in Indian society. His plays are a compelling exploration of religious tensions, and social issues, especially those related to gender discrimination, the roles and expectations of women and LGBTQ+ identities. Through powerful storytelling and nuanced character development, the playwright offers a profound commentary on the need for societal change and greater acceptance of diversity in all its forms. By referring to the play *Tara* (1995) by Mahesh Dattani, this article investigates issues of gender inequality, marginalisation of women, and the crippled body. Here, the playwright has touched upon the issue of disability as to reveal how it affects not only the persons having it but also the immediate family, their reactions, responses and biases. By analyzing character dynamics, familial relationships, and societal expectations, this study demonstrates the

profound impact of discrimination on personal identity and relationships. It also investigates the broader implications of these themes for social justice and equality, suggesting ways in which literature can contribute to societal change. This research paper employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on textual analysis of *Tara*. It examines the play's dialogue, character interactions, and plot developments to extract key themes and insights. Besides, secondary sources, such as critical essays and academic articles, are used to support the analysis and provide a broader understanding of the societal context.

Robert. J. Stoller writes: "Gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are "Male" and "Female", the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex" (n. pag.). The body is based on socially constructed terms, ideas, and narratives and the gender role played by an individual, is almost consciously or unconsciously acquired. The conventional norms of the patriarchal society reinforce the concept that a man is expected to be active, dominating, adventurous, rational and creative and a woman is considered to be passive, acquiescing, timid, emotional and traditional. The feminists challenge these culturally constructed gender roles and stereotyping. In the society the disabled body is severely marginalized giving rise to the idea of disability as a minority discourse. The discrimination and oppression perpetrated against individuals in a gender and social construct can be referred to as the social disability. In this research paper, the arguments are centered around a teenage girl with special needs who happens to be the protagonist of the play. The narrative refers to the subordinate role of women in the Indian societal scenario rooted with gender bias and prejudices. It questions the role and behaviour assigned to a gender by the society, and the particular way an individual, both male and female are expected to conduct oneself. Any

deviation from the same is considered to be *abnormal* or *freakish* and soon the society regulates and imposes marks of anomaly and censure upon the subject.

Set at the backdrop of a Gujarati family, the play *Tara* focuses on gender bias and reflects the predicament of women in Indian society who face discrimination with their male peers in all paths of life. The traditional thoughts and beliefs of the spectators are often challenged by discussing such issues which are denounced as impermissible by the common populace. There is an urgent need for the cultural expression of the contemporary in his composition. Tara represents the voice of all women who challenge their marginalised treatment at every stage and aspire to become self-reliant individuals. By defying the conventional expectations placed upon her, she expresses her feminist viewpoint.

While conversing with Prof. Angelie Multani, Mahesh Dattani says:

Well, basically, it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated, and, of course, they were invariably of the same sex and there was this thing about a fused leg and which had the qualities of both left and right so there had to be some careful consideration as to which twin was supplying the blood to the leg. The journal went into the detail because obviously it was a very unique operation and separation...
(p. 130)

The dramatist has exercised artistic licence in this instance, as Siamese twins are consistently of the same gender. This drama revolves around the story of two infants, a male and a female, who are conjoined at the hip and require a surgical procedure to be separated. The first act of the play *Tara* opens with Dan, in London, ruminating over the past.

DAN: ...Tonight I drop everything I've desperately wanted to be in my years in England. (Mimes removing a mask and throwing it away.) The handicapped intellectual's mask. (Mimes removing another mask.) The desperate immigrant...The last being the hardest to drop having spent two whole years in acquiring it. And what remains is what I intend making capital of. My freakishness. I am a freak. (Pause.) Now, a freak doesn't have to look very far for inspiration. (Moves to his table.) But what is hard is to let go. Allow the memories to flood in. (Winds another sheet on the typewriter and then stops.) To tell you the truth, I had even forgotten I had a twin sister...Until I thought of her as subject matter for my next literary attempt. Or maybe I didn't forget her. She was lying deep inside, out of reach...

A spot on the stage level Chandan and Tara walk into it. They both have a limp, but on different legs.

TARA. And me. Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out ...And separated. (Dattani, p. 285)

In the above extract, we can see Dan confessing about the fact that he tried suppressing the memories of his twin sister Tara, who is inseparable from him.

The play *Tara* centres on the lives of conjoined twins, born with three legs, who are surgically separated shortly after birth, thereby allocating a greater share of body mass and functionality to the baby boy, underscoring the cultural preference for male children in many South Asian countries. Bharathi, fully aware of the challenges a girl child with

a physical disability may encounter, supports her wealthy and domineering father's choice to allocate both legs to the male child, even though the limb rightfully belongs to the girl. Patel also verified the whole process. In order to alleviate her own feelings of guilt for being complicit in the conspiracy, Bharati displayed an extraordinary amount of affection and care for her daughter. Tara could have spent the rest of her life with the leg that had only lasted two days with Chandan. The drama unfolds through a series of flashbacks and monologues that illuminate the emotional and psychological landscape of the characters. Chandan, who has moved to London, looks back on his childhood and writes about the events surrounding his sister Tara, whose life was tragically cut short. The play explores themes of family dynamics, guilt, regret, and, most prominently, gender discrimination. Tara's disability and subsequent complications from the surgery serve as a stark symbol of how gender-based discrimination can lead to tangible and devastating outcomes. The inequity in the treatment of the twins reflects a broader issue in society where the worth of individuals is judged based on their gender. The following conversation between Patel, and his twin children reveals the favouritism towards the boy Chandan which underscores the entrenched patriarchal mindset that pervades many families in the contemporary Indian society.

PATEL. Chandan.

CHANDAN (dealing the cards). Ya.

PATEL. I was just thinking ... It may be a good idea for you to come to the office with me. (Glances surreptitiously towards the kitchen.)

CHANDAN. What for?

PATEL. Just to get a feel of it.

CHANDAN. You can take Tara. She'll make a great business woman.

TARA. How do you know?

CHANDAN. Because you always cheat at cards!

TARA (crossly, throwing her cards at Chandan). Just because I win doesn't mean I cheat, okay!

PATEL (firmly). Chandan, I think I must insist that you come.

CHANDAN. We'll both come with you.

PATEL. No!

Tara looks at Patel, slightly hurt.

(Softens.) Yes. You may both come—if you want to.

(Dattani, pp. 287-288)

The play deals with issues of gender identity and discrimination, exploring how gender can influence the way people are treated. Through Tara's character, Dattani underscores the disparities in opportunities and recognition between genders. The societal expectation for Chandan to be sturdy and the healthy reflects the patriarchal values that often disregard the needs and potential of women. Chandan is given the best medical care and opportunities; Tara suffers from neglect and a lack of support. This aligns with societal norms that prioritize men for educational and career advancement while limiting women to domestic roles; as Tara sarcastically speaks in the first act: "...The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani, p. 288). While writing about gender and sex, Judith Butler refers to the comment of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 35).

Woman's identity is not determined by her biology, but society and men define her roles, in turn rendering her subordinate and voiceless. Through Tara's character, Dattani challenges these restrictive norms, presenting her as a vibrant and intelligent individual whose growth is stifled by gender discrimination. As she grows up, she becomes acutely aware of the disparity in treatment between herself and her brother, leading to resentment and feelings of worthlessness. This awareness affects her self-esteem and her relationships with her family, particularly with her mother, who played a role in the decision to prioritize Chandan. Tara's story demonstrates how gender discrimination can damage not only individual lives but also the fabric of family relationships. The play's exploration of these issues encourages the audience to question their own beliefs and consider the consequences of perpetuating gender stereotypes. By highlighting the destructive impact of gender discrimination on Tara's life, Dattani invites viewers to reflect on the broader social changes needed to create a more equitable society.

Tara epitomises the contemporary society that purports to be benevolent and forward-thinking, however in actuality, all promises of gender equality and equal chances for women in all sectors are a hoax. Everyone anticipates that Chandan will uphold traditional masculine ideals. When Mr. Patel discovers Chandan assisting Bharati with knitting, he feels uncomfortable and concerned, prompting him to rebuke Bharati:

CHANDAN. Daddy, that's unfair...

PATEL. I am disappointed in you. From now on you are coming to the office with me. I can't see you rotting at home!

CHANDAN. I don't want to go to the office!

PATEL. You will come with me to the office until your college starts.

CHANDAN. I don't want to go to college! (Fighting his tears.) Not without Tara! If she is going in for surgery, I'll miss a year too! (Dattani, p. 308)

The dominant paternal figure abhors Chandan's assistance to his mother in unravelling the needlework, considering it as a traditionally 'feminine' activity that should only be carried out by a female. However, Chandan derives pleasure from his work and is also comfortable in the presence of women. Here we are presented with the concept of gender-based allocation of roles. The heterosexual conventions of the sexist society cannot accept this effeminate male persona. Here, the play subtly explores the fluidity of gender through the intertwined lives of Tara and Chandan, and illustrates that gender identity is more complex than society often acknowledges. The medical decision to separate the twins in favour of Chandan underscores societal biases that prioritize male over female, highlighting the androgynous connection that is forcefully broken by external pressures. Though the term "hermaphrodite" is not explicitly mentioned in the play, the idea of conjoined twins, each representing a gender, serves as a subtle exploration of hermaphroditism, emphasizing the shared origins and the artificial division enforced by societal and familial expectations.

Tara was first performed by the Playpen Performing Arts Group as "Twinkle Tara" on October 23, 1990, in Bangalore's Chowdiah Memorial Hall. Later it was staged at Sophia Bhabha Hall by the Theatre Group, Bombay on 9th November 1991. *Tara* is a discourse on the identity of disabled women by including contributors who either happen to be disabled themselves, or are the siblings or parents of the disabled. It reflects the marginalization of women with disabilities and the multiple forms of oppression disabled women face in Indian society. It seeks to explain disabling processes starting from individual prejudice to institutionalized discrimination. The play deals with the anguish and

misery associated with disability and its adverse repercussion on all the members of the family. It reveals how the physical impairment of the children embitter and strain the conjugal relationship of Bharati and Patel, the caregiving parents, who once too readily took a pledge of togetherness despite belonging to different culture, community and tradition.

Ironically the publication of the play *Tara* coincides with the passing of the *Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act* in 1995 (enforced by the Government of India in 1996). This Act was “[...] to give effect to the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of the People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region” (p. 5). The PWD Act had as its central aim to bring persons with disability into the mainstream and provide them with equal opportunities in education, employment, and access to essential services.

The growing literature on disability studies in the West gradually started to influence intellectual work on disability in India, though initially in a very minor way. Various terms have been coined to describe discrimination on the bases of impairments such as *handicapism*, *ableism*, or *disablism*. Whatever may be the term used to describe this discrimination, it indicates that the disability lies in social structures and processes rather than in individual physical, sensory or cognitive impairments. In the book *Reader's Digest Oxford Wordfinder*, Sara Tulloch defines the term “ableism” as “...discrimination in favor of the able-bodied...”. Additionally, Simi Linton further states: “...*ableism* also includes the idea that a person's abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to nondisabled people” (p. 9). It can be understood that disability is comprehended by evaluating the standards and assessment of physical capacity as well as towards people with disabilities. From an ableist perspective, impairment or disability to any extent is essentially

inadmissible and should be fixed, cured or wiped out altogether from the body and the society as well. Disability can no longer be considered to be an individual problem leading to personal tragedy, but something rooted in the social values and the physical environment that are not accommodating of any kind of difference based on physical, sensory or cognitive impairments. Disability, therefore, is a difference to be accommodated rather than a loss to be compensated. The last decade has been a testimony to the relentless efforts of disabled people in India. Disability legislation, inclusion in census and representations in media are some of the features of this struggle. However, the concerns and issues that specifically confront disabled women often go unnoticed in this endeavour.

As female infanticide is still rampant in different corners of India and the gender ratio is steadily declining, life as a disabled woman cannot be an easy proposition. The desire for a son has translated into abortions of the female foetus. The play "Tara" brings forth this issue through Rupa's comment: "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" (Dattani, p. 306). In such a context, the birth of a disabled girl child is devastating and is full of excruciating pain; apart from being considered deficient, passive and dependent, they have no economic or social value attached to them.

Leading a stigmatized life, a disabled woman in India belongs to the marginalized and the invisible category. Whether disability is congenital or acquired, the oppression starts very early in life. With no opportunities for improving the quality of life, the disabled girl-child has no option but to live a life of subordination. In a culture where any deviation from a norm is seen as a marked deviation, the impaired body becomes a symbol of imperfection. The myth of the beautiful body defines the impaired

female body as unfeminine and unacceptable. The society's duplicity towards those with disabilities is exemplified by Roopa, who mocks Tara by referring to her as the "one-legged thing" and claims that her friendship is an act of benevolence. The gendered body acts as the undercurrent of all the political stances taken by the characters in the play. For her sexuality and disabilities, Tara is a victim of social prejudices. She possesses all the attributes of a promising modern woman who is prepared to challenge long-standing biases and constraints imposed by patriarchal norms. The manifestation of her transformation into a new woman is evident in her capacity to make decisions and assert her individuality.

ROOPA (calling to her friends urgently). Prema! Premaa!
Come quick! Where's Nalini? Never mind, you come here!
My God! Oh, my God! Guess what? I went to her house!
Yes. Right inside! I met everyone there. She is a real freak
of nature all right, but wait till you see her mother! Oh
God! I can't tell you—she is really... wandh tarah. (Dattani,
p. 300)

Roopa's reactions to Tara's disability reflects broader societal prejudices and norms that marginalize and exclude people with disabilities. The repeated use of the word 'freak' throughout the play describes the twins' childhood as heavily stigmatized. Although both of them are smart, intelligent, fun-loving individuals, their capabilities are continuously questioned, and they are looked down upon by society. They are trapped in the identity of freak children, and their survival is deemed unnatural, as stated by Dr. Thakkar in an interview: "...It is indeed a miracle that they were born alive. Twins with a conjunction of such complexity are, in most cases, stillborn" (Dattani, p. 291). Further, when they grow up, the objectification of their bodies leads them to form negative self-images. Even their parents take part in this process as they constantly remind

their children of their shortcomings. Throughout the play, Tara's disability is not only a physical condition but also a metaphor for the societal barriers and discrimination faced by people with disabilities. By challenging ableist narratives and centring the voices and experiences of people with disabilities, Dattani's text plays a crucial role in promoting empathy, understanding, and social change.

Tara, as a female and a person with a disability, experiences double discrimination. This intersectionality results in unique challenges, including reduced opportunities, diminished autonomy, and social marginalization. These issues hinder her ability to function optimally in her relationships and society, highlighting the barriers she faces in achieving personal fulfilment and empowerment. Dattani uses this intersection to highlight the compounded effects of discrimination and the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to addressing both gender and disability issues. Through his play, Dattani challenges societal norms and advocates for change. He presents Tara as a character with immense potential, creativity, and intelligence, qualities that are often overlooked due to gender discrimination and disability biases. By depicting her struggle and ultimate tragedy, Dattani calls for a re-evaluation of societal attitudes, emphasizing the importance of equality and inclusion.

Tara exemplifies the broader societal problems related to gender inequality and disability in India. The play calls into question the rigid definitions of gender and challenges the audience to consider the impact of societal expectations on individual identity. Tara's strength, resilience, and humanity are emphasized despite her mistreatment, subverting traditional gender norms and illustrating the arbitrary nature of gender-based discrimination. The play's portrayal of the impact of societal biases on personal identity and familial relationships is both poignant and thought-provoking. By examining the intersections between gender and

disability, Dattani encourages audiences to reflect on their own beliefs and work towards a more equitable society. This article underscores the importance of addressing these issues to create a more inclusive and just world.

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