

A ‘Critical Disability’ Reading of *Tara: A Stage Play in Two Acts* by Mahesh Dattani

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ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines the socio-cultural and political constructions of disability and their impacts on the oppressed and marginalized subjects in Mahesh Dattani’s play *Tara: A Stage Play in Two Acts* (2000) in the light of ‘critical disability’ theory. In the play, Dattani highlights the issue of disability through the portrayal of conjoined twin protagonists, Tara and Chandan. It explores the ways in which persons with disabilities are stigmatized, devalued, discriminated, and marginalized based on power, gender, and sex. The patriarchal hegemonic culture reinforces the physical and psychological conditions of the disabled people and simultaneously undermine their abilities for and beliefs in self-transformation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-reliance. The paper attempts to unfold the dominant meaning-making process, essentialist perspectives, and reinforcement of unjust stereotypes which are applied to woman with disabilities, granting them the marginal status in every sphere of life. The play’s treatment of disability evokes a need of replacing the common socio-political assumptions regarding it and simultaneously reassigning new narratives and meanings to it in a more symbolic way. Its task is to challenge the distinction between ability and disability, to bring about justice for disabled subjects and to transform the oppressive and dehumanizing circumstances under

which they live. The ‘critical disability’ theory of Rosemarie Garland-Thompson and Simi Linton is used in the paper.

Keywords: disability, Siamese twins, gender stereotype, marginalization, patriarchal normalcy, self-reinvention

INTRODUCTION

“... gender (or disability) is a way of signifying relationships of power”—(Garland-Thompson 6)

“Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being”—(Beauvoir 26)

“The problem of disability is relocated from the individual, to the barriers and attitude which disable her. It is not the disabled person to blame, but the society.”—(Shakespeare 200)

‘Critical disability’ theory focuses on the socio-cultural, political, linguistic, and ideological formations of disability and their impacts on disabled persons. It addresses the ways in which persons with disabilities are stigmatized, devalued, naturalized, and discriminated through these dominant systems. The existing hegemonic discourses reinforce the physical and psychological conditions of disabled people and simultaneously undermine their abilities for and beliefs in self-transformation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-reliance. Disabled are categorized such as disabled women and men not only in relation to gender, but also in relation to power, position, and opportunity. The critical disability theorist Simi Linton points out that “similarly, it is important to examine the nondisabled position and its privilege and power. It is not the neutral, universal position from which disabled people deviate, rather it is a category of people whose power and cultural capital keep them at the center” (171). Disability studies aim at challenging the distinction between ability and disability, bringing about justice for disabled subjects

and transforming the oppressive and dehumanizing circumstances under which they live. It evokes a need of replacing the common socio-political assumptions and meanings regarding disability and simultaneously reassigning new meanings to the disabled people in a more symbolic way. One of the major tasks of this study is "the denaturalization of disability" ("Critical" n. p.).

With regard to disabled people and the nature of their representations, disability theory uncovers disability's marginal position, subaltern identity, absence in dominant cultural milieus, and lack of rights and opportunities. It critiques dominant culture's ideological view, control, and formation of disabled people and their pervasive passive roles and disadvantageous life. Simi Linton argues that "the term *disability* is a linchpin in a complex web of social ideals, institutional structures, and government policies" (162; original emphasis). A more feminist approach in disability is articulated by Susan Wendell in her essay "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability." She raises concern about the issues of women body and women's oppression which affect the personal, social, cultural, and psychological conditions of women with physical disabilities (243). Women with disabilities are 'doubly' oppressed through "the oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the abled-bodied" (Wendell 244).

In *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani realistically depicts the negative role of parents for their daughter, Tara. The familial conflicts continue till the early death of the protagonist, Tara. Tara is bold, courageous, and rebellious against unjust traditional social norms. Dattani questions the marginal status granted to women in the traditional Indian society. He comments on the *phallogocentrism* of the patriarchal Indian social systems in which Tara is denied values of individual choice, agency, humanity—the life of an autonomous, normal human being, and the possibility of a happy life, and is reduced to a subaltern because she is compelled to donate one leg of hers to her twin brother,

Chandan, the favourite male child of the Patel family. Her voice and individual identity are subdued because of her status as a disabled girl. She obviously becomes passive, helpless, and marginal victim due to discrimination and domination in the male oriented society. Through the plight of the protagonist Tara, Dattani critiques the discriminatory attitude of the parents who are in favour of their male child, Chandan, ignoring the agency and identity of their female child, Tara. The play portrays the plight of the disabled and marginal who are ostracized, suppressed, and devalued in patriarchal society.

Unlike disability studies in the West that overlook the interrelated issues including caste, class, race, and gender, disability studies in the East deals with these issues. Feminism has been an inseparable part of disability studies due to disabled women's experiences of gender oppression and dehumanization. In India, disabled women are more oppressed and discriminated against than disabled men. It is important to take into account the plight of women with disability in India in relation to their physical impairments and gender roles.

Tara deals with sufferings and victimization of disabled persons in Indian patriarchal society. It demonstrates the ways in which gender and sexual identities are merged through dominant normative cultural discourse. As it reveals the nature of oppression and domination of disabled through the nondisabled authority and its privileged position. In addressing disability in relation to class, gender, and sexual orientation, it gives voice to the disabled and oppressed to combat the existing dominant ideology and its meaning-making process through which they are oppressed and excluded. This oppressive system prevents them from being positive, self-reliant, and self-determined and is responsible for their lack of opportunities, personal achievements, and well-being. It highlights traumatized and oppressed children and their survival strategies amidst the different domestic, socio-cultural, and political spheres that prioritize male children over female ones. It boldly depicts common stereotypes in patriarchal Indian society that assign certain meanings and norms

to those disadvantaged and marginal to bear out of their desire and recognition. In this play, disabled characters are compelled to seek their happiness and personal achievement by bearing both the personal burden of their own body and the unreasonable societal and cultural norms that dehumanize them and are imposed on them to follow. In an article, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson marks the processes of socially and culturally constructed concept of disability based on difference in which disabled bodies are categorized as abnormal, incomplete, dependent, ugly, deformed, and passive, while privileged nondisabled bodies are seen as normal, complete, beautiful, competent, independent, and fit. As she writes:

“The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment.” (5)

The play effectively depicts the characters' fractures psyche, repressed desires, enforced acceptance of unreasonable traditional norms, and adherence to socio-cultural construction of gender and identity in a patriarchal society in which they live. It focuses on gender oppression, alienation of women, immoral and unjust nature of discrimination, and family favour of male child over female one. Women are prone to discrimination, marginalization, dehumanization, injustice, exploitation, and domination as a result of socialization and patriarchal normalcy. They are forced to accept and live under the hegemonic socio-cultural norms. In this play, Bharati ruins her daughter's life. Though Tara and Chandan are two disabled persons, only Tara goes through 'double' marginalization. The play illustrates the impacts of dominant ideology, essentialist perspectives, and reinforcement of unjust stereotypes on women, and which are applied to women, and which grant them marginal status in every sphere of life.

ANALYSIS

Tara graphically portrays contradiction, normalcy, and hypocrisy to which an individual is subjected to accept them. Different identification factors like class, gender, sexuality, religion, language, and culture act as obstacles for an individual's self-articulation, self-realization, and self-determination, and self-representation. It delves into the deep cracks, oppression, power axes, and inhumanity through which familism is built and retains its fake morality and adjustment. Age-old patriarchal society's double standard is apparent as it regulates individual freedom, gender discrimination against women, and certain attitudes for one to strictly follow. The play revolves around the physical separation of Chandan and Tara, the Siamese twins. They have three legs, but their effectiveness depends on Tara's body. Their physical separation through the surgical operation is done in such way that Chandan has two legs while Tara remains with one leg. It is done due to the unreasonable tradition that prioritizes a boy child to survive. The operation is manipulated by her family members who favour Chandan. After the operation, Chandan's leg is not supported by his body, resulting in mutilation. Despite having her intelligence, strong will, humanity, and ability for self-determination, Tara is denied the same opportunity and normal life as her brother. Consequently, her constant sufferings from several physical complications result in her early death.

With a sense of guilt over his sister's death, Chandan migrates to London, adopting the name Dan. In London, he attempts to hide the contrition of killing his sister. He strives to start a new life there by erasing his past and the incident of his sister's demise. It is Tara who accepts the decision of giving one leg of hers to Chandan so that he could have two legs and survive. She is compelled to do so, because, for being a girl, she knows well that she is required not to exceed the traditions of society. It is because of her status as marginalized and underprivileged. In this sense, her premature demise is brought about by the patriarchal attitudes of the society where she is forced to

compromise them. Despite knowing the plan of the surgery in favour of him and its impact on Tara, Chandan accepts it. Even though he is against his wish as he is forced to do by his family members who strictly adhere to patriarchal beliefs. Later he suffers from mental torment and repressed desire, leading to a life of his isolation, trouble, and guilty consciousness. To him life appears to be miserable, lonely, and unbearable without his personal history and his sister. He laments for the past life in which they were interdependent, inalienable, and two parts of the same life. Though he desperately strives to be away from his past life history, it haunts him in the memories of Tara and his guilt. He therefore continues the burden of being frustrated, alienated, and lost.

In his work, Dattani seems to challenge the rigid gender binary because both masculinity and femininity are interdependent and innate quality of an individual's identity. In this context, gender division is undesirable and unjust as it brings abuse, inequality, discrimination, and inhumanity to an individual identity and humanity. Both men and women are equal and to be valued in every sphere of life. The unjust and immoral social systems are responsible for the construction of gender norms that Dattani attempts to bring to fore. According to Judith Butler, female body becomes "a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed" in order to exercise unequal power, privilege, control, and domination in which females are excluded and oppressed (12). Chandan and Tara symbolize both self-masculine and self-feminine respectively in their disabled positions. They are "two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities" (Mee 281). The family's priority of Chandan over Tara represents a male's privileged and dominant position than a female's, exposing patriarchal hegemony. Tara becomes an "Other," a socially constructed category which restricts her autonomy and individualism. She expresses her agony and reaction to the injustice done towards her:

“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 I. 285).

Her above words strongly indicate the importance of innate nature of gender identity in one’s life. The separation of gendered self brings about the rendering of humanity in many ways especially death in case of herself. The family’s gender prejudice creates problems for the conjoined twins. Chandan finds himself in internal dilemma as he is unable to forget his previous self-identity and to overcome his emotional breakdown. He feels an incomplete history, incomplete identity without his twin sister. Haunted by past memories of his sister, he lives a troubled and helplessness life due to the dominant traditions that restrict his freedom, desire, and self-determination. This clearly reveals the multidimensional nature of patriarchy that are functional in the very structures of typical Indian societies. Patriarchal hegemony enters the realm of collective human psyche and reinforces its dominant assumptions, rendering individuals passive and inert and disempowering them. Therefore, the family’s preference for boy child suggests a man’s privileged and dominant position in various aspects of life. In regard to financial stability, though Tara is not a barrier to the family, it discriminates against her by preferring Chandan to run business. Though the notion of familism is centred on care, love, affection, comfort, and understanding among family members, it lacks for women in a conventional patriarchal society.

The play vividly lays bare the dark truths of the typical Indian familial and social norms that treat female children differently based on rigid gender systems. It addresses the function of social construction of gender in which males and females are assigned fixed roles to be performed. In this context, men are placed in higher status than women because of gender bias – male’s roles are expected in a society by ignoring female’s. Gender oppression is done to Tara when she is required to stay at home while her twin brother is encouraged to run family business and go abroad for studies. Tara ironically replies:

"The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani I. 288). Obviously, this is a result of gender-biased division of work in which men and women are expected to perform their assigned duties in a patriarchal norm. In addition, sex-biased division of labour affects both males and females, and even it becomes an obstacle to men, as it restricts their abilities, capacities, interests, and self-creativities. The play seems to dismantle strict gender roles as exemplified by Chandan's wish to do domestic duty what is traditionally considered as feminine quality, as he states that: "I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle" (Dattani I. 288). In stark contrast, Tara is more interested in pursuing a public job like other males. Chandan's father, Mr. Patel rages at him for doing domestic work at home and rebukes him to knit clothes like women. In this regard, the absolute binary oppositions between men and women are unstable because of their dependency on each other and multiple performative and relational roles. In her groundbreaking work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that there exists the 'decentred' nature of sexuality and gender, as exemplified in the case of imposed sexual categories-homosexual and heterosexual. She argues that both categories are interdependent for their meanings through their "simultaneous subsumption and exclusion" from each other and "internal and external" to each other (10).

In this play, ironically, women are not free from their negative roles in supporting and continuing discrimination against women in a conventional patriarchal society. During surgical operation, Bharti, despite being a woman, prefers the male child. Mr. Patel reveals the dark truths about the surgery that is done in favour of the male child:

"A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were better that the leg would survive. . . on the girl. Your grandfather and mother had a private meeting with Dr Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. That same

evening your mother told me of her decision. Everything will be done as planned. Except—I couldn't believe what she told me—that they would risk giving both legs to the boy. . . Maybe I had protested more strongly!" (Dattani II. 331-2)

The play unveils the impacts of patriarchal value-systems on individuals in such a way that such value-systems are internalized by them and under which they live. Therefore, in this manner, women become an instrument to be controlled by men and are used against other women in a passive and apathetic manner. This is what Bharati does against Tara.

Over the course of the play, Bharati confesses her guilt that her decision was wrong that she has ruined her daughter's life. It is only after the unsuccessful operation, she recognizes her wrong decisions and becomes aware of the necessity of her daughter's emotion, love, and choice. She attempts to pamper Tara and provide her with much more care, love, and affection, and happiness in time of great distress. As her words prove a change in herself and motherly affections to look after her physically handicapped child in the best possible way:

"She. . . she must make more friends. Chandan is alright—he has his writing, but she. . . He is different, he is sort of self-contained, but Tara . . . She can be very good company and she has talents. She can be very witty and of course she is an intelligent . . . I have seen to it that she . . . more than makes up in some ways for what she doesn't have." (Dattani I. 298)

Bharati feels guilty that she manipulated the surgical operation of the conjoined twins. After the operation, Tara undergoes physical and emotional torments, leading to her death. Bharati is emotionally broken and attempts to mask her guilty conscience by showing her excessive care, love, and affection to Tara.

Tara's death brings about domestic and emotional trouble in Bharati's life, as exposed in the bitter arguments between Bharati and her husband, Patel. Later she accuses Patel and attempts to show that

she loves and values her daughter more than her husband. Her guilty conscience makes her insane. Her torment for the wrong decision and for the bad condition of her daughter physically and mentally and her struggles for self-esteem seem to reveal the impacts of patriarchal ideals on women who are unable to move beyond their clutches. Tara is mentally shattered when she learns the truth about her mother's role in discrimination against her.

Dattani exhibits the ways of subduing and overpowering women like Tara by rigid socio-cultural norms. In a conversation, Bharati is deeply concerned about the plight of Tara. Because a girl child is less privileged in society:

"It's all right while she is young. It's all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. 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! Oh God!" (Dattani I. 306)

When Dr Thakkar explains the details of surgery to separate the conjoined twins that results in their complete sterility, Tara instantly comments: "Oh, what a waste! A waste of money. Why spend all the money to keep me alive? . . . I don't care! I don't care for anyone except mummy!" (Dattani II. 325)

Dattani's play intersperses the issue of disability, evoking sympathy along with other issues. Persons with disabilities are devalued, discriminated, and marginalized based on gender and power relation. The principal reason of gender stereotype is various socio-political forces and dominant cultural viewpoints that reinforce the physical and psychological conditions of disabled subjects and simultaneously undermine their abilities for and beliefs in self-transformation, self-realization, self-determination, and self-reliance as in the case of Tara.

Though Chandan and Tara are physically handicapped persons, they receive differential treatment from their family. They are being compelled to take on strict social positions and perform stereotypical

gender roles assigned by dominant socio-cultural norms. Tara is doubly marginalized as a female and a disabled in terms of patriarchy and gender. Dattani is critical of society's unjust attitudes towards disabled individuals as it treats disabled women differently than disabled men based on strict gender norms.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Dattani's play uncovers the dominant roles of familism and patriarchal ideals in affecting women, women with disability, and their self-identities, self-capacities, and self-determination and in rendering them passive, inert, and helpless. Disability and gender stereotype intersect in regard to the issue of Siamese twins in a conventional patriarchal society. The play addresses the plight of a girl with disability who succumbs to fatalism and the norms of patriarchal ideological society. Dattani unfolds the dark sides of Indian society in which disabled women are treated unjustly and differently than disabled men based on the strict gender norm. Women is reduced to a subordinate and a second-class citizen. Though tradition-bound society oppresses women, women are yet desirous, courageous, and confident to make a transformation and well-being for themselves. Dattani raises questions regarding the pre-determined norms of society and family in relation to gender and sex where women and disabled individuals go through identity crisis, discrimination, alienation, isolation, and dilemmas. The play's universal appeal to the audience is to support justice and emancipation for disabled persons with a humanistic approach. Therefore, the issue of disability is socio-cultural and political constructions that define and stigmatize particular bodies as disabled. It is to be understood not only for individuals with disabilities, but for everyone, as an embodiment of human experience and relationship-enhancing our understanding of the concept of human in our lives.

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