

Mahesh Dattani's Tara: A Study of the Disability trope and gender discrimination

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's play Tara presents a critique of the patriarchal bias prevalent in Indian society in favour of the male child. It also examines closely the theme of parental authority and how invasive it can be. The disability trope is woven into the play with great sensitivity. The play written in 1990 focuses on the aftermath of the separation surgery performed on the conjoined twins Chandan and Tara. The surgery leaves them severed and disabled with a Jaipur foot for the second limb. Dr. Thakkar's landmark surgery, a miracle of science separates the twins who share a very affectionate bond with each other. The intrusion of science and the parental authority is interrogated in the play. The play navigates in an interesting manner through the past, present and future seamlessly through the memory of Dan who is none other than Chandan who grows up to become a writer. Twinkle Tara, the play that he writes as a tribute to his twin sister Tara, presents through the multi-level set how easily one traverses between the past, present and future not necessarily in that order in the modernist narrative. The play gives us an insight into the beautiful relationship between the twins who bravely face a cruel, insensitive world of Roopas, Premas and Nalinis who scoff at their disability. Dattani reveals how difference is perceived as abnormality in society. The play also scrutinizes parental upbringing and authority by examining the debilitating impact of the surgery which is imposed on the siblings when they are just three months old. Also, the preferential and discriminatory attitude of the parents stands exposed at the conclusion of the play when the truth is revealed about the third limb they shared. The play exposes in a subtle manner the discriminatory attitude embedded in the fabric of Indian society that decimates daughters.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, disability trope, modernist narrative, self-reflexive, parental authority

INTRODUCTION

Tara by Mahesh Dattani was performed as Twinkle Tara in 1990 after the publication in the same year. The two-act play revolves around the life of the Siamese twins Chandan and Tara who are born conjoined. The play qualifies as a family drama that focuses on the fortunes of the Patel family. It is built on the aftermath of the separation surgery performed by the renowned surgeon Dr. Thakkar on the three-month-old twins Chandan and Tara. The play is truly Modernist in spirit and uses a multi-level set to present

the past, present and future simultaneously. Dattani makes the play truly modernist through the use of this strategy which he has employed in other plays such as **Final Solutions**. The play traverses between the memories of Dan revived from different periods of the growth of the twins interwoven with the attempts of Dan to pen a play dedicated to Tara's life. The back and forth movement of the play drifts through time in the present to the past when Dr. Thakkar performed the landmark surgery on the infant twins; to the period before Tara's kidney transplant surgery when she is sixteen. In this aspect the play falls in the category of memory plays like Tennessee Williams' play **The Glass Menagerie**. The play reveals the heart-warming narrative of the twins who were soul-mates but were severed by the ironical miracle of science. While giving us an insight into the bond between the siblings the play also investigates the discriminatory attitude of mainstream society to disabled people. Chandan and Tara do not need the sympathy of the so-called normal children like Roopa, Prema and Nalini. They are self-sufficient and much brighter than them. Dattani reveals how difference is perceived as abnormality in our society.

DISABILITY AND DIFFERENCE

In the beginning when they have just shifted to Bombay both brother and sister are revealed with a limp on different legs as per the stage direction. We discover from Tara that since they use a pair of Jaipur foot they walk in a limping gait which becomes the subject of curiosity among the neighborhood kids such as Roopa etc. The inability of children who are conditioned by mainstream society to accept difference is revealed here. The twins are constantly conscious of being looked at as if they are freaks. As Chandan confesses at the beginning of the play, "I am a freak". The gaze of the 'normal' ever scrutinizes the different as even Tara felt in interactions with other children. However intelligent and witty the brother-sister duo may be they are looked upon condescendingly by the normal children. The tendency of mainstream society/ children to look upon those who differ from the 'normal' as inferior/freakish is exposed here. Tara as a retort and befitting reply ridicules Roopa for ill-matched tits. Thus the idea of body-shaming is used by her to pay her back in the same coin.

The disabled is treated as the freakish 'other' that may be conveniently used to grind an axe or cast away as the frustrated 'rapist' as Roopa attempts to cast Chandan as

to cover up her own overtures. The ultimate judgement of mainstream society is conveyed through the poster that Roopa places outside Tara's home stating ' We don't want freaks'. The play also reveals through the collusion of Dr. Thakkar how science colludes with mainstream society to maim the twins. The play seems to pose the question that were not the twins better off without the surgery. Science and the doctor come in handy to patriarchal society as well as the doctor sets out to implement the wish of Bharati's father to give the leg to Chandan only to waste it as it derived its nutrition from Tara's body and becomes dead after the surgery.

PRIVILEGING SONS OVER DAUGHTERS

The play not only investigates the cruelty of mainstream society through the misbehaviour of Roopa, it places parental upbringing under scrutiny as well. Patel and Bharati who are Chandan and Tara's parents are also guilty of differential treatment. They exercise their parental authority to meddle with the future of their children in a manner which seems authoritarian. The privileging of Chandan's interest over Tara that begins at the tender age of three months when the surgery is performed continues through life till they are college going students. While Bharati and her father discriminate against Tara by not allowing her to inherit from her maternal grandfather, Patel carries on the patriarchal legacy by not having any plans for Tara's future while he ensures Chandan studies abroad. The play exposes subtly this embedded attitude of Indian society that makes elaborate plans for sons but decimates the daughter even in educated families. Dattani has often expressed the view in interviews that the cultural construct of gender in India is invariably biased towards the male and believes in the marginalization of the female which is exposed in the denial of the legacy to Tara and the third leg that rightfully belongs to her. There is some truth in the joke Roopa cracks about the Patel's drowning their daughters in milk. The metaphorical drowning of Tara was pre-determined as she is a daughter of the family and not a son. First, her maternal grandfather enacts it by denying her the family inheritance; then her father by denying any career plans for her; again by denying her the third leg that rightfully belongs to her but through familial connivance with Bharati and her father is given to Chandan. Dan suffers the guilt of yet again repeating that injustice by deriving from his sister's life to weave a masterpiece in the play Twinkle Tara that he has written. So every member of the family participates in one way or another in the drowning of Tara.

In the institution of marriage the Patel- Bharati marriage is examined parallel to the marginalization of the girl child. Patel who has been ruled by a powerful, influential father- in- law seeks his revenge from Bharati by not allowing her to compensate her guilt by donating her

kidney to Tara. Bharati's obsession with Tara's health results from the guilt of denying her the third leg which could have been useful. The parents are depicted buckling under the strain of their faulty decision and this results in friction between the mother and father. The strain takes its toll in the form of Bharati's mental breakdown. The family is seen disintegrating under the pressures of their faulty decisions and tragic loss of Tara. The defunct family is seen scattered in its disjointed state after Tara's departure.

Chandan is relatively more sensitive to this discriminatory mind set and shares a very loving relationship with Tara. They are witty and respond to each other's wisecracks spontaneously with their great sense of humour. The decisions of the parents and the doctor sever apart the two soul mates. The symbiotic bond is broken by the marvels of science and the interview series with Dr. Thakkar ironically called Marvels in the World of Medicine. The decision of the parents and grandparent in collusion with the doctor results in the deprivation of the shared limb which Tara could have benefitted from. It was a sheer waste to give it to Chandan as it died out because it got its sustenance from Tara's body. The sarcasm in Roopa's joke about the Patels drowning their daughters in milk comes through in the revelation of this decision that has haunted the family and engendered the guilt experienced by Bharati. The metaphor of drowning in milk speaks volumes in the light of the decision taken regarding Chandan and Tara. Chandan too tries to drown his sense of guilt being the survivor by drinking as he is constantly haunted by it. But the precious bond between brother and sister is heartwarming. They can together face the world and settle scores with the mainstream society of Roopas and Premas . The past reveals how self sufficient they were despite the handicap and the futuristic vision of Chandan and Tara as normal children with both limbs presents the wish fulfillment. The vision assures Chandan of a better future free from guilt and a sense of parity. This is the ideal vision of gender parity and is therefore a vision of the future. In the play the disability trope allows the investigation of gender discrimination and discrimination against the differently able simultaneously in Tara. The play within the play i.e Twinkle Tara pays a tribute to many bright star daughters who have been marginalized by patriarchal attitudes. It also provides an opportunity of post- modernist self analysis of the creative process of how art is created from reality and vice- versa. A very well constructed; stylistically very novel and well wrought play that deserves to be read.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION ENTRENCHED IN INDIAN SOCIETY

Patriarchal attitudes have been examined in a number of Mahesh Dattani's plays. The bias in favour of the male child is here problematized differently. In this play it is entangled with the disability trope. Thus the twin themes of

disability and gender discrimination are more complex than in normal situations. Dan's confession at the end and admission of guilt for having made an attempt to appropriate everything from his sister and making it his own tragedy draws attention to the selfishness. Through the self-expose of Dan he also comments on the creative process where art borrows from life. The symbiotic bond he shared with Tara is a metaphor for the creative process. Tara, as her name derives from the stars remains the sustenance for her brother. Even after her death she continues to be a benefactor to him as his work 'Twinkle Tara' derives from her life. Dan(the creative artist), her brother is compelled to acknowledge his indebtedness to her at the conclusion of the play.

The Patel family for all its liberation and education still resembles the Patel community about which Roopa jokes. Ironically, the conclusion of the play seems to suggest that like the traditional Patel's who are guilty of infanticide of daughters because of the bias against daughters, the liberated Patel's still sacrifice their daughters in the modern world through their ill-ordained decisions as in the case of Tara.

CONCLUSION

The modern day liberated family is still not free from the gender bias that has been practiced for ages in Indian society. In Final Solutions Dattani raised questions pertaining to gender bias and stereotyping of women through the three generations of women he presents in that play(Hardika, Aruna and Smita). He engages in the examination of the social conditioning at work in the creation of gender. In Tara, once more the playwright scrutinizes the subtle workings of gender discrimination in liberated and educated families in India. The feudal mindset of the Patel family is not very different from conservative families of ancient societies that practiced infanticide by drowning daughters in milk. Even contemporary Indian society carries the burden of guilt for having treated daughters differently. Dan, the educated and yet failed writer who drinks to forget his role in his sister's life and death, acknowledges his indebtedness to his counterpart- his dead sister Tara. Selfishness and gender bias do not succeed is a message conveyed by the

play. The family that discriminates, disintegrates, seems to be the message of the play. A powerful discourse that exposes the destructive force of gender discrimination is wrapped here intricately in the fabric of the disability trope. Through the questioning of the role of science in the life of Chandan and Tara, the playwright also questions the intervention of society and parents in the life of the disabled. The play seems to question the confident and critical gaze of the so-called normal people of society like Roopa who are in reality no less freaks. The play is empowering in presenting the perspective of those who are considered disabled by directing their ridicule and sparring as is seen in the confident attitude of Tara and Chandan. They hold a mirror to that society to reveal its ugliness. The play also questions the role science plays in the lives of the disabled by treating them like objects. The invasive intervention of science in the lives of individuals can be debilitating and disempowering rather than improving our life. The playwright successfully engages in rigorous questioning of these through the use of the conjoined twins narrative.

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