

Reading Disability in Mahesh Dattani's Play Tara from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, popular Indian dramatist unveils the realities about contemporary Indian society in this plays. His play Tara is set in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai where protagonist Tara lives with her parents and twin brother in an affluent locality. She shares the same disability with her brother as they both have to use artificial Jaipur legs each on the opposite side. The history of their birth as conjoined twins is responsible for Tara's brother Chandan's disability. However, Tara's disability is an outcome of discriminatory treatment given to her right after her birth. Tara's struggle to cope with her physical disability by excelling in intellectual spheres is aborted abruptly as she realizes that being born as a female has primarily rendered her socially disabled in the male dominating society. This paper purports to focus on the aspect of society as a disabling agent for physically impaired people with special reference to women.

Key Words: Disability, Manipulation, discrimination, subjugation, subaltern

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani's plays reflect his social responsibility in focusing on the issues that concern the larger humanity though they are usually set in contemporary urban India. He deals with multiple issues such as: gender discrimination, problems faced by the subalterns and underprivileged sections of society, communal tension, identity crisis faced by those who are different than the majority, and so on. His literary career as a playwright started in the decade of 1980s. By the time his play 'Tara' which was first staged in 1990 under the title 'Twinkle Tara' appeared in the theatrical world, he had already earned a good reputation not only in Indian theatrical circle but on the global platform as well. The play highlights the problem of gender discrimination and subjugation of females in the male dominating Indian society. The irony of technological advancement and stereotypical notions co-existing in contemporary India and moreover among elite people; has been exposed aptly in *Tara*. Its plot deals with the separation of conjoined twins born in an affluent family that could afford the heavy expenses for the surgery. The twins who belonged to different genders had three legs together and as the blood supply to the third leg went from the female baby, it naturally belonged to her. But the discriminatory decision made by the mother of the twins under the influence of her own father who paid the heavy price for this unethical surgery; chose the baby boy for giving the privilege of two legs. However, the leg could not be adapted by his body and hence it had to be discarded. Thus the baby girl Tara's arrival in the world after her surgical separation from twin brother

Chandan, is marked by the subjugation attempted by her own kith and kin by depriving her of her rightful second leg.

Both Chandan and Tara share a pair of Jaipur legs to cope with the defect that each one has on the opposite leg due to their history of conjoinment. They limp while they walk and need regular physiotherapy sessions to ensure better movement. In addition, Chandan has weak lungs while Tara requires kidney transplant. In spite of these physical limitations, they have good academic record and they aspire to make bright careers. The sound financial background of their father Patel also proves to their advantage. But yet wherever they go, they are discriminated by the society and often by people with lesser merit who remind them of their limitations just to score a point over them. In case of Tara, her spirit is undaunted by all these attacks and she is strong enough to retort to everyone, until she realizes that it was her mother's decision that actually deprived her from having a normal life. That climatic realization results in her untimely death which hints at the intolerance of society towards people with special needs.

Mother of the twins. Bharati, is filled with repentance soon after her fatal decision and then dotes all her attention on Tara to make up for her former discrimination. She takes utmost care of Tara's likes and dislikes as the latter is made to feel that the entire household moves at her whims and shines at her twinkling smile. Tara finds strength in this thought. She regards her mother as her strongest support system but is unsure about her father's feelings towards her. His disregard for her aspirations pains her and the strained relations between the parents make her side with her mother. Patel, who was once dominated by wife Bharati's wealthy and influential family returns the bitterness by suppressing Bharati's gestures of repentance and harping upon her unfair deal with Tara. It is due to his domination that Bharati needs to be institutionalized for psychological treatment; and Tara, unable to digest the shocking revelation about her mother, succumbs to her troubles even after the successful surgery of kidney transplant. In case of Tara, the disability is manipulated by her mother and her maternal grandfather while in case of Bharati, her disability caused by the emotional and psychological imbalance is partly due to the feeling of remorse but is mainly due to Patel's suppression of her. Thus in both the cases, disability is manipulated on female victims in order to subjugate them. Among the twins, mother favours the male baby and in the family power structures, chauvinistic Patel wants to subjugate wife Bharati whose family had always tried to overpower him with their economic and political influence. In both the cases, female's position as a subordinate is reasserted by the culprits.

Present paper aims at exploring the aspect of manipulation of disability projected in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara*. The disability caused by congenital disease or any accident can be accepted as part of destiny but the disability that is the result of manipulation by someone creates a deep sense of loss. In case of Tara, the protagonist of Dattani's play, the manipulation is made by mother who is supposed to be the symbol of unconditional love, with the help of Dr. Thakkar who forgets his noble profession while charging high fees for the unethical surgery.

Disabling Society versus Disabling Kins

The disabling society in Dattani's play *Tara* is represented by the characters Roopa, Prema and Nalini (neighbors of Tara) who towards the end of the play, display a poster with the message "WE DON'T WANT FREAKS". Thus people with special needs are downrightly denied participation in society. After her first encounter with them, Tara describes the gaze of the

three as ugly. They make Tara conscious about her disability and deny her the right to be considered as one of them. Yet she asserts her individuality by introducing herself and shows them her Jaipur leg as a kind of special attribute of her personality. This gesture scares them away.

Roopa later befriends Tara and Chandan in order to enjoy the hospitality of Bharati and also to watch movies that are forbidden for her at her home. The twins notice her disability in using language and they make joking references to it whenever she makes them feel low about their disability. Once during Chandan's stay at home, Roopa comes to give him company and suggests that they should watch a movie. While watching the movie, she flirts with Chandan and when he starts responding, she shirks back and shouts, "Stay away from me you horrible thing! (Dattani 82). She makes him feel that no girl will have any feeling for him ever. Tara is hurt by Roopa's abuses on Chandan and reveals her knowledge about the physical deformity in Roopa that she had noticed long back. She asks Roopa, "How does it feel having one tit smaller than the other?" (Dattani 84) Roopa is stunned by her remark and plans a revenge with the help of her friends Prema and Nalini.

The last scene of Roopa's revenge on Tara and Patel's revenge on Bharati has been contrived skillfully by Dattani as he makes use of expressionistic techniques. One part of the multi-layered stage represents the action in Patel household and other part depicts the action taking place on the street. At home, Patel confides into his children and reveals to them the fact of disabling role played by mother Bharati in the life of Tara. The simultaneous action taking place on the street, presents Roopa, Nalini and Prema with the placard condemning Tara and denying her the right to mix in their society thus disabling her socially. From the beginning of the play Tara is depicted as a strong girl capable of dealing bravely with the world that discriminates her. But as soon as she realizes her beloved mother's role in disabling her and discriminating her at her birth; she loses all the will and motivation to fight back. The reality about her mother behind the facade of caring and supportive person whom Tara regarded as her strength; shatters Tara and leads to her demise.

It is not the disability that kills but the approach towards that disability by people and moreover by one's own kins, that kills the people with special needs. They are marginalized in all spheres. Outside, they can put a brave fight but on the home front they demand unconditional acceptance. If they are refused that basic right by their guardians, they feel powerless to fight the world beyond.

Bharati, the mother of the twins is both the culprit and the victim in this play. Her repentance after discriminating her own daughter at birth was never looked in positive light by her husband who wanted to give her a lifelong punishment. He puts the future of his own children at stake in the process of scoring a point against her. As a result of constant mental harassment, Bharati starts losing reason and is looked upon as loony by neighbours like Roopa whom she bribes in order to be friendly with Tara. Patel arranges for a psychiatric treatment for her but is far from being kind to her himself. He in fact treats her like a criminal and accuses her of setting the children against him. He disallows her to donate her kidney to Tara which she had planned in order to make up for the former neglect. Patel instead looks for a professional donor Bharati's attempts at reaching out to the doctor on phone also fail as she realizes that she did not know the doctor's phone number nor did she know his full name. Thus staying at home and away

from social life makes Bharati socially impaired which is the case with many Indian home makers in the patriarchal set up of the society.

Role of Cultural Patterns in Preference and Deprivation

It is true that Bharati manipulates the handicap of her own daughter in favour of her son whom she wanted to have as able bodied man. Her decision was influenced by the patriarchal setup of our society that wants the men to have upper hand both on the home front and in social life. It is believed that only an able bodied man can head the household efficiently. In social sphere also weak boys or men are victimized as male hood is often associated with physical power. This way Bharati's partiality is influenced by larger social considerations. But later she feels that being a man, the world will tolerate Chandan better than it is likely to tolerate Tara. In his will, Bharati's father gives all the property to Chandan while Tara is allowed to share his house in Bangalore with Chandan. This preference to male child in property matters is an outcome of patriarchal mode of thinking in which a woman is looked upon as a dependent. Economic dependency also has a disabling impact upon a woman's life.

In many Indian households, discrimination is made between a girl child and a boy child. The choicest resources, good education are reserved for the male progeny while the second rate things are offered to the female child. In addition, the same partial though is indoctrinated in a girl's mindset while bringing her up which ensures its continuation. This is a subtle disabling device using which the females are subdued and are given a subordinate status. They stand as the 'other' which is always looked upon as flawed and incomplete. A tendency to cater to the needs of the male child is evident in the context of prioritizing between the two. This consideration seems to have triggered Bharati's decision of disabling Tara in order to make Chandan a healthy man.

Self-Image of the Disabled

People with special needs often experience anxiety about getting acceptance from the society as they fear that people will not be able to see beyond their disabled bodies and will fail to judge their true capacities. Chandan and Tara were always together since they started their schooling but after matriculation Tara was not to join Chandan in college as she was supposed to undergo a kidney transplant surgery. Chandan was reluctant to go alone for his higher studies because he had become dependent upon Tara's strong protection and unfailing companionship. She chides him for his fear and motivates him to face the world bravely.

Both Tara and Chandan have refined taste in literature, music and other cultural aspects of life. Chandan is an aspiring writer while Tara could have excelled in any field she chose. Yet they are marginalized wherever they go. They boost each other's morale whenever they come across any bitter situation causing self-doubt. They are painfully aware of the fact of their sterility and Tara even questions the logic behind keeping them alive when they cannot contribute in any creative way to society. But then she soon expresses a noble desire of helping poor and disabled people so as to find meaning of her life in offering her services to them. Thus a feisty girl like Tara has answer to any question that life poses before her and in her absence Chandan feels incomplete.

Attitude of the caregivers towards the disabled

An impairment refers to the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment (Goodley, 2011, p. 29). Disabled people or people with impairment are often treated unkindly by those who remind them of their disability or impairment. In the play *Tara*, physiotherapy sessions become a harrowing experience for Chandan when the nurse makes a rude reference to his disability saying, that she had worked with mobility impaired children before. When Chandan asked her with almost a sense of disbelief, “Mobility impaired?” and then she pointed to his leg and shrugged. The reminder to his impairment stung Chandan so deeply that he promptly retorted, “Well, I haven’t worked with brain cell impaired people, so I’m sorry, we cannot have a true cultural exchange” (Dattani 75)

In the play *Tara*, Dr. Thakkar, in charge of the surgery that finally separated the four month old Patel babies was thus instrumental in shaping the lives of the twins. He looks upon them as entities and their predicament as an opportunity that awards him name and fame for his surgical skills. Allured by the prospects of getting land in the prime location of Bangalore, he accepts the unethical proposal of Bharati’s father who wanted Chandan to have both the legs even when the supply of blood to the leg was from Tara’s body and it naturally belonged to her. It is this decision that renders both the babies as physically impaired and Tara, who always dreamt of a fulfilled life was denied her birth right. Therefore, Chandan rather opines that nature had designed them to be kept as specimens bottled up in laboratory as anomalies, and the decision of medical professionals of separating them and giving the two of them their impaired identities was actually an interference.

Conclusion

Tara and Chandan were capable of everything that other able-bodied individuals could do. Yet, they were discriminated, pitied and simply driven outside the social frame. Bodily impairment does not always lead to disability but unfortunately society perceives both in the same light. This reveals the disabling attitude of the society towards people with special needs.

“The interplay between literal and metaphorical, physically and socially disabling factors is also central to twentieth-century institutional definitions of disability. The definition of disability makes a clear division between ‘impairment’ as ‘lacking part or all of a limb, having a defective limb, organism or mechanism of the body’ and ‘disability’ as ‘the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities.’” (Hall 22) Dan Goodley opines that it is the ‘terms such as ‘disablism’ and ‘disablement’ that acknowledge the marginalization of people with impairments’ (Goodley 12).

When we say that people with impairments are labeled as disabled by the society and are shunned from the social sphere; it is more applicable for the womenfolk because the notion of aesthetic beauty associated with them makes their position more vulnerable with impaired bodies. In the view of above deliberations, it becomes clear that our flawed social structure that wants to see the women in a subordinate and marginalized position; is responsible for disabling them and relegating them to the margins. Only when all the sections of society get equal representation and opportunities, the optimum progress of the society is possible.

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