

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: Voicing the Subaltern

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Abstract

Tara is one of the most celebrated plays of Mahesh Dattani which deals with the issues of gender discrimination and identity crisis of women in Indian society. It raises the questions of marginality and subalternity of women. A woman is treated as a subaltern; she is not given the central position in the power structure and that is why, she has to bear oppression. The play deals with the role of patriarchy in killing of Tara. Tara and Chandan are born as conjoined twins. Tara had more chances to lead a healthy life than Chandan. Nevertheless, Bharati's father decides to give privilege to the boy over the girl and denies a healthy leg to Tara which ultimately leads to the death of Tara. Both Bharati and Chandan are unable to absolve themselves from the guilt of murder which Tara did not deserve. The play voices the case of women who are denied the equal status, opportunity and rights with their male counterparts in Indian families and society. Dattani has presented the tragedy of all women through Tara.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, subaltern ,marginality, subalternity, patriarchy

Mahesh Dattani is an acclaimed dramatist of contemporary times who has carved a niche among other dramatists by virtue of voicing the voiceless. He is ,undoubtedly, an upholder of the neglected and the marginalized subalterns including women ,gays, lesbians, third gender, AIDS patients etc. A major portion of his dramatic output is devoted to depict the feminine sensibility, female liberation and subalternity of women. He critically points out that despite the deification of women in Hindu mythology and religion, women are suppressed in the male chauvinistic Indian society. Women have to go a long way to break the shackles of patriarchy. Gender discrimination is a curse upon Indian society which does not allow women to live a life of their own. Mahesh Dattani is not a feminist; he is a humanist. He depicts that women are subordinate to men and they bear the second grade position even in the modern times. He has depicted women as the subaltern, that is, inferior to man in rank and position. While talking in an interview, he says to Lakshmi Subramanyam about his perception regarding women,

"They are humans. They want something. They face obstacles. They will do anything in their power to get it. All I focus on is the powerlessness of these people.... And I am not going to change my sensibilities for political correctness either. My only defence is to say that I am not biased against women."¹

The term 'subaltern' was first used in a non- military sense by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist theorist. According to some scholars, he used the term as a synonym for the proletariat. According to Bill Ashcroft , subaltern means inferior rank. It was a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in the society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes and who are lacking in autonomous political power . Therefore, this term can be used for such classes, including peasants, workers, women, dalits, minorities and other who are

denied access to the hegemonic power. Thus, subaltern means the colonised and subordinate class, which remains always suppressed and silenced. Subalternity refers to a condition of subjugation brought about by colonization or other forms of social, economic, racial, linguistic and cultural supremacy. The term subaltern has now been adopted as a very popular umbrella term in post-colonial studies to denote all the marginalized classes of the society and the subaltern studies group of historians have emerged in South Asian society to express the dilemma of the subordinates and marginalised in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way. Gayatri Spivak writes in her celebrated work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983) that subaltern cannot be treated merely as a synonymous word for the marginalised; it includes that group of people whose voice is unheard or deliberately ignored by the socially superior power. We find women characters whose voice is unheard in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. Since Mahesh Dattani deals with the issues of the suppressed, silenced and subordinate sections of the society, his dramas can be termed as part of subaltern literature. *Tara* is one of them.

Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* is a play which voices the subaltern women who are victimized by the system of patriarchy. It is about the role of patriarchy in bringing out the destruction of Tara's life. He gives us a picture of the helplessness of women in our society. Tara and Chandan, the two conjoined twins, are separated at the cost of the life of Tara. Tara is a subaltern who has to sacrifice her life on the cost of the life of Chandan merely because she is a girl who is inferior to a male child.

The play illustrates the deep rooted preference for a boy than a girl in Indian patriarchal society. The story is about Patel family in which a girl child namely Tara is victim of injustice due to her parents' preference for a male child Chandan. Mr. Patel is the representative of the patriarchal authority in the play. He clearly differentiates the role of his son from that of his daughter Tara. The two conjoined twins Tara and Chandan are physically separated at the time of birth, but their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the male child Chandan over the girl child Tara. The story of *Tara* is presented to us through the childhood memories of Dan, who was Chandan in his childhood. Dan suffers from the sense of guilt because he holds himself responsible for the premature death of his sister Tara. He considered Tara to be a more talented and stronger girl than himself in his childhood. But due to his mother's blind love for him, Tara was denied the leg which supported her. Tara and Chandan were twins conjoined from the chest down 'siamese twins'. It was not possible for them to survive. It was Dr Thakkar who did the impossible surgery and saved the life of the twins. It was a rare phenomenon that Tara and Chandan were 'siamese twins'.

The gender politics begins the moment Tara enters into this male dominated world and continues throughout her life. First of all, she was denied the healthy leg and later on, she was forced to lead an isolated and contemptuous life of a paralysed girl who has no hope for future. She becomes a miserable creature for her brother and mother. Her existence has no meaning to her father. Being a paralysed girl, she has only an imaginative world to live in. Her physical disability does not let others to evaluate her intellectual strength and talented personality.

Mr Patel wants Chandan to give company to him in the office. Chandan says that Tara is better than him in business matters, but Mr Patel rejects his suggestion. He is always angry with Tara and does not give her due love and care because he believes in the traditional, gendered roles. It is intolerable for Mr Patel to see Chandan helping Bharati to sort out her mother's mistakes in the knitting.

Tara is an 'intelligent', 'strong', healthy and 'beautiful' as she herself remarks, but she is handicapped, so bears a second rate human being position in her house as well as in society. She is victim of injustice not only by her family but also by nature and society. Discrimination against her by nature is accidental. Tara was born as a conjoined twins and has less hope of survival. The second level of discrimination is made by the society where Tara is an isolated girl who has no company. But the most serious injustice is done by the family which is consciously indulged in conspiracy against Tara. At the time of surgery, a conspiracy is hatched against her. She is deprived of one healthy leg. She was not given the healthy leg because Bharati wanted to have a healthy son. Gajendra Kumar writes,

"In critical ambit, *Tara*, a play is neither a saga of Chandan's alienation, nor Tara's death, albeit it is a tragic tale of the patriarchal society, which is bruised by gender preference.... This drama is a kind of discourse where the dramatist through Tara talks about social antipathy, from which women badly suffers. *Tara* is a case study of our male dominated society in which Dattani depicts what happens around us."²

In addition to the fact that she was deprived of her leg, she was not given financial security by her maternal grandfather while Chandan got a lot. Tara's maternal grandfather was a powerful politician. His will gives ample proof of his partiality done on the basis of gender. Being a handicapped girl child, Tara is destined to live a life of a social outcast. She has no friends except her brother Chandan. Her mother does not allow her to go outside. She hinders the growth of Tara by giving her excessive care. The conspiracy behind her deformity and cursed life was made by her mother whom she loved most and who had so long expressed her love and concern for her. Bharati can realize the pain and misery of Tara's life and she reveals it to Chandan,

"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. The world will accept 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!" (C.P. p.348-349)

Economic, religious and cultural factors have been responsible for the antipathy towards the girl child. A boy helps in contributing to the family income either by working in the field or in business. It is through the boy that vash continues because of the patriarchal system which requires the members of the family to carry this norm. The religious belief that parents can attain 'moksha' only by a son has contributed to the inferiorization of the girl child. The backward outlook has provoked infanticide and female foeticide. Ironically, all this happens in a society where women are worshipped as Kali, Durga, Saraswati and Lakshmi. The ratio of male and female is fast reducing on account of neglect of girl child.

It is very ironical that a woman is instrumental in the exploitation of other women. It is reflected in many of Mahesh Dattani's plays. Bharati is responsible for the miserable condition of Tara; Shanta is to blame for the misery of her daughter Mala in *Thirty Days in*

September and mother-in-law Daksha is responsible for the violence against Dolly in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Dattani has also tried to show that modern urban families are still governed by the traditional preference for male. Tanu Pant writes,

“Dattani writes plays to be seen and heard, not literature to be read. Hence, the play *Tara* has two fold purpose, first to expose the modern educated urban family’s adherence to the conventional attitude of favouring anything that is masculine. The second purpose is to expose the corruption prevalent in the bureaucratic society and the ethical deterioration of the medical profession.”³

Bharati is another subaltern woman in *Tara* who is bearing the burden of patriarchy. She, too, is victim of patriarchal ideology. Once she feels repentance in doing injustice to her daughter, she grows meticulous about her daughter. She becomes overcaring and over protective. She suffers from the guilt of depriving her daughter of the leg which got blood from her. She shows her objection and resistance in defying her husband. She fights with her husband for not caring her daughter. When Mr Patel does not allow her to donate kidney to Tara, she quarrels with him. She feels suffocated and her nervous system breaks down.

In this way Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* focuses on a highly relevant Indian contemporary issue of the inferior status of a girl child in Indian families and society. It successfully voices the issues of women who are subalterns in the male dominated society of India. The dramatist is successful in interrogating the neglected life of women who are denied to live a normal human life. He pleads for the justice and humanity to make our society worth living. The guilt consciousness of Bharati and Chandan manifest the seriousness of issue and the post effects of gender politics upon the psyche of the characters.

References

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