

Unconscious of Spirit of Parental Care: A Critical Reading of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

Dr. Santosh Kumar *



Abstract :

Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* tries to delve deep into psyche of a typical Indian family in order to unravel the patriarchal bias of Indian society: his creative genius visualizes and dramatizes this situation through the example of Siamese twins Tara and Chandan. Though the playwright has to take recourse to poetic license in depicting a boy and a girl as Siamese twins, as Siamese twins are either both boys or both girls, it was imperative on his part in order to highlight the nuances of gender bias in society. A dramatic situation has been created in the play where the parents of the Siamese twins have to choose one of them; as they are born with conjoined limbs and Nature has given them only three legs. A surgery has to be done in order to separate them and it is the parents who have to decide which child will get two legs and which one will be left crippled. In order to analyze this situation, one more point should be taken into account: certain medical tests confirmed that the major part of the blood supply to their common leg was provided by the girl. So, it was natural for the girl to own two legs and consequently the boy to be left crippled. But, will the guardians accept this? This is the central conflict of the play and needless to say that unjust guardians do not accept this fate of the boy. Despite being fully aware of the medical facts, they decide to save the boy by hook or crook. They bribe the doctors and spend a lot of money to get the medical reports changed in favour of the boy. Their unjust decision deprives the girl of her own limbs and left her crippled and as medical prophecy the legs also do not

survive on the boy. Is it not very much like female foeticide in which female children are killed before their birth? Through the pathetic story of Tara, Dattani aims to explore the partiality and bias of male dominated society.

Key words: *psyche, patriarchy, unconscious, partiality, sibling rivalry*

Mahesh Dattani is a man of various talents—director, playwright, actor, dancer and teacher, all rolled into one. As a playwright, he handles contemporary issues of society in contemporary setting itself. Just as Kannada playwright Girish Karnad aspired to be a poet in the beginning but found his artistic genius best expressed in drama, somewhat in the same way Dattani's theatrical inclination is more towards direction than playwrighting. He admits that he became a playwright accidentally and that the moment he writes a play he wishes to direct it: "I sometimes get itchy fingers as a director! ... The minute I write a play, the minute it's ready and finished on my computer, I want to direct it" (quoted in Chaudhuri 2005: 45). He himself directs his plays, at least, for their debut performance.

Mahesh Dattani's birth and parentage left indelible imprints on his young mind and paved a way for his literary and creative journey. Born in Bangalore on 7 August 1958 Mahesh Dattani studied in Baldwin's High School and St. Joseph's college of Arts and Science, Bangalore. He graduated in History, Economics and Political Science and post-graduated in Marketing and Advertising Management. His parents were of Gujarati origin and along with them he used to attend Gujarati plays that were often produced in Bangalore. The young Dattani started developing interest for the world of theatre as the aura of stage thrilled his innate artistic sensibilities. Since his childhood Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have been his favourite playwrights. He was chiefly influenced by a contemporary Gujarati playwright Madhu Rye for his excellent portrayal of the aspirations and ideals of the Gujarati middle class and its hypocrisies. Vijay Tendulkar's complex portrayal of women characters along with a severe criticism of hypocrite society also appears to have influenced him.

Dattani's theatre group Playpen was formed in 1984. He made his directorial debut with *Mango Souffle*, a big screen adaptation of his own play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Since then he has directed several plays for his theatre group ranging from classical Greek to contemporary works. He is a visiting professor at the Portland State University in the U. S. He has been conducting classes and workshops in theatre in that university. A multi-dimensional personality Mahesh Dattani is an Indian theatre director, actor, writer, teacher and dancer. He has written both the stage plays and radio plays. They include *Where There is a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999), *Tara* (1990), *Thirty Days in September* (2001) and *Brief Candle* (2009). Among these plays, *Do the Needful*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* are the radio plays.

A winner of Sahitya Academi Award, Dattani does not write on conventional subjects. He rather explores the mean, murky and unpleasant aspects of human life. The analysis of his plays reveals an ongoing shift in contemporary urban Indian culture. The issues of sexuality, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse, communalism, etc. he deals with in his plays are rooted in the Indian context which is constantly changing with the passage of time. Mostly his characters belong to the upper middle class of the urban India. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the burden of tradition, cultural constructions and repressed desires. His plays focus on the marginalized and neglected groups of society (minorities, women, gays), people who are considered misfit and inferior in a hypocritical society. Like Girish Karnad, Dattani undermines the socio-cultural constructions and stereotypes in order to present an invigorating social critique. Theatre director Erin Mee makes it clear in 'A Note on the Play':

In his plays, Dattani takes on what he calls the 'invisible issues' of Indian society... By pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre (Dattani 2000: 319).

In path breaking play *Tara* theatre personality Mahesh Dattani has raised a burning issue i.e. the cause of a woman and female child in Indian society. A woman, throughout the world and particularly India, has been second rate citizen from the time immemorial. Nearly in all cultures, women are played second fiddle to men. Despite the numerous campaigns of women's emancipation, there is little change in anguished and inferior condition of women. *Tara* probes into psyche of the modern society which has not been freed from the gender bias despite several advancements in other walks of life. Discarding their traditional gender roles women have been able to occupy nearly all the posts, hitherto assigned to men only. Even after this, they are looked down upon by their male counterparts and when their interests collide, it is female who is always at disadvantage. In Indian families, most often, a male child is always a winner in the sibling rivalry because parents are not impartial. No matter how intelligent or precocious a female child is, she can never attract equal attention of parents. So far as Indian socio-cultural milieu is concerned the sexual double standard and gender discrimination has been its endemic feature. Women are still supposed to get themselves confined in conservative gender roles.

Mahesh Dattani has devised a quite suitable dramatic situation to represent this issue on the stage. Siamese twins Tara and Chandan are born with conjoined limbs. The nature has given only three legs to both of them. Either the boy or the girl can have two limbs and one of them is bound to be crippled. This crucial decision is to be taken by their guardians, and needless to say the guardians are governed by the mental set up of the patriarchal society. Certain medical tests showed that the major part of the blood supply to their common leg was provided by the girl. So, it was natural for the girl to own two legs but unjust guardians deprived her of her own limbs and left her crippled. This is very much like female foeticide in which female children are killed before their birth. Through the pathetic story of Tara Dattani aims to explore the partiality and bias of male dominated society.

This custom of gender discrimination is so deeply ingrained in our society that even the women are instrumental in the downfall of women. Male hegemony

operates so insidiously that in the Indian household women are denied of their freedom by women themselves i.e. daughters-in-law are persecuted by mothers-in-law and daughters are deprived of their expected rights by mothers. In this play Tara's mother Bharati is instrumental in serving the male interests and bringing about the ill fate of her daughter. In spite of being well aware of the fact that the third leg belonged to Tara, she exhorted the surgeons to give it to Chandan. With the help of her wealthy and influential father, she manipulated the whole surgical procedure. At the end of the play Patel, father of Tara and Chandan, tells them what actually happened before their separation as conjoined Siamese twins:

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 slightly better that the leg would survive... on the girl. Your grandfather and your 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 if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn't right and that even the doctor would realize it was unethical. The doctor had agreed, I was told. It was only later I came to know of his intention of starting a large nursing home— the largest in Bangalore. He had acquired three acres of prime land— in the heart of city— from the state. Your grandfather's political influence had been used. A few days later, the surgery was done. As planned by them, Chandan had two legs— for two days. It didn't take them too long to realize what a grave mistake they had made. The legs were amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have— might have— been Tara. (Dattani 2000: 378).

Bharati's unjustifiable act of giving undue preference to male child is outcome of an ill patriarchal system which instills gender bias in the individuals from the very childhood. The effect of this social conditioning is so affecting that girls and women become inferior in their own eyes. Bharati fulfilled the unjust cause of patriarchy and male hegemony but she had to pay a very big price for it. After all she was a considerate human being with an affectionate heart of a mother. After realizing the gravity of her misdeed she started suffering from guilty conscience. In order to atone for her moral crime she started doing her best for the welfare and better future of Tara. But she could not soothe her tormented soul and consequently her love for Tara deteriorated into abnormal passion. She started teaching Tara that she was the only one who really cared for her. Though a commercial donor was available, she was intent on donating her own kidney to Tara. Somehow or other she wanted to make herself believe that Tara was her lovely daughter and she could do anything for her. But the memory of her unjust action was so agonizing that she could not repent and regain her confidence. She intended to unburden her guilty conscience by confessing her sin to her children but she was not allowed to do so in male ruled world. Her mental condition went on deteriorating and ultimately, she could not survive and met her premature death.

Her life partner Patel is also a typical husband and father in the matrix of patriarchal society. Though he is educated and modern, he has not learnt well the lesson of equality of sexes. He tries his best to confine Tara and Chandan in their stereotypical gender roles. He can not stand to the bitter truth that Chandan has feminine habits and Tara is brave, adventurous and masculine. He scolds Chandan when he finds him interested in women's job of knitting. He enforces study on him

and makes a master plan for his academic success. On the other hand, he doesn't have any such plan for Tara in advance. When Tara refuses to go to the college, Patel wants her to comply not for her own sake but for the academic upliftment of her brother Chandan. Neither he encourages Tara to pursue her ambitions nor does he want to know her aspirations. His oft quarrels with Bharati reveal his unconscious desire of male domination. Though he was also dominated by Bharati and her resourceful father, he can not be completely acquitted of the crime and injustice done to Tara because at any cost the ultimate decision of crucial issues like this should be taken by parents only. If Bharati had been led astray by her father's high-handed decision, why didn't Patel put his foot down and stand against their decision? He had broken away from his parents for his love marriage to Bharati, then why didn't he dare to break away from Bharati's father as well? Isn't a father strong enough to fight any hurdle, no matter how strong it is, for the welfare of his siblings?

Tara, like other girls, is victim of a biased and unfeeling social system. She could shine like a bright star and fly like a winged bird but she was handicapped. She was denied of the natural right of breathing freely, flourishing and flowering only because she belonged to the category of 'second sex'. Zestful Tara detested her crippled body and she resisted strongly the unjust and binding patriarchal forces. But she could not fight against the social and physical deformity and met her tragic end. To a great extent her mother's father was responsible for her tragic fate. He bequeathed a lot of money for Chandan and not even one penny for Tara. In Indian society girls have always been burden for their guardians. So they stoop so low as to dispose of their daughters by marrying them off at tender age or by some other way. Some unfeeling parents degrade themselves to the inhuman state of killing female children before their birth. Through the various insinuations of neighbor Roopa, Dattani hints at the female infanticide prevalent among the Gujaratis, "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 the milk." (349)

The setting of the play is also aimed at unraveling the covert designs of patriarchy. In a sense *Tara* can be seen as a play within play. Dan (Chandan) is writing a play on the tragic life of his sister Tara. Dattani has revealed the events of plot to the audience through the immature efforts of Dan to write a play. The presentation of the events is non-linear as sometimes he narrates the story on his realistic plane and at other times he recalls the past incidents through his memory. This reminds us of the stream of consciousness technique profusely used in the novels. One more novelistic technique, simultaneous action and overlapping conversations, has been used to highlight the principal points and provide the realistic color. The shifts in time and setting have been portrayed through a multi level stage. The main action of the play, which is projected through Dan's memory, is presented at the lowest level of the stage. The next and higher level represents the room of Dan (older Chandan) situated in a suburb of London. Chandan escapes London, changes his name and attempts to sublimate the guilt he feels over his sister's death by writing a play on her. On the stage level L-shaped street is suggested by cross-lighting. At the highest level Dr. Thakkar remains seated throughout the play in a chair. "Although he doesn't watch the action of the play" state the stage directions, "his connection is asserted by his sheer God-like presence." (323) This statement is ironical as God-like Dr. Thakkar turns out to be instrumental in bringing

about ill-fated existence of Tara and serving the nefarious ends of a prejudiced society.

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*** Assistant Professor**
Department of English
Jeewachh College, Motipur,
B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur
E- mail: santoshwebid@gmail.com