

Postcolonial Female Subalternity in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, one of the greatest dramatists of the contemporary age, focuses especially on the suppressed or the less-privileged people. He is not only a dramatist but also an actor and director. He deals with sensational issues like homosexuality, gay relationship, taboos, the position of women, and the hijra community. In Tara, Dattani has vehemently attacked the prevailing socio-cultural system in India, which poses several kinds of limitations, confinement, compulsions, and coercion to female children. They are not permitted either to act freely or to think freely. Tara is also the victim of such a sociocultural system. Being a disabled girl she faces prolonged suffering, humiliation, and subsequently death. Dattani wants to uphold the rights and dignity of women and to bring about equality between men and women.

Keywords: Subaltern, Patriarchy, Resistance, Hybridity, Appropriation

Mahesh Dattani is the new and unconventional voice in contemporary drama. He mainly aims at identifying and uplifting the marginalized sections of society, and hence he has portrayed the revolt of the subaltern to get back their identity and dignity.

Some of his plays like *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *Where There's a Will* deal with the discrimination between men and women. In *Tara*, Dattani argues that society ordains the rules, and regulations forcing that a girl child's life must be patterned in a certain way simply on account of her being a girl child. Thus, the dynamics of the society for the boy and the girl seem to be at variance. Women, including little girls, are forced to adhere to the patriarchal ideology, and to accept male domination over females. Consequently, the socio-cultural canons are responsible for the inferiority of the girl child. All these factors, together, create a social system in which the girl child will have to live or die. People generally think that girls are others' property; therefore, there is no necessity to take care of them.

In *Tara*, Dattani wants to emphasize the fact that equality in birth and brought up is only an illusion. Chandan and Tara Patel are Siamese twins surgically separated after birth. The pair has only three legs, and the third receives most of its blood circulation from Tara. But at the time of separation, the twins' mother, under the guidance of her male chauvinistic father, tells the surgeon to graft the leg on to Chandan. It is rejected. And on the stage, the 15-year-old twins appear limping, each fitted with a Jaipur leg. The illegal and unjust decision of giving Tara's leg to Chandan leads to the death of Tara and, finally to the end of her mother and ruins the life of the boy who was very much attached to Tara. Chandan suffers from the cruelty of the elders. He somehow feels responsible for the death of Tara and lives a self-condemned life in London.

Postcolonialism and feminism mainly emphasize equality, individuality, and identity. Both movements might have originated along with the origin of human beings, as domination and subordination were always there in the life of people. But postcolonialism as a literary theory started with the publication of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Yet Postcolonial criticism was supposed to have been inaugurated with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* published in 1978. In the words of C. L. Innes: "Postcolonialism is the amalgamation of commonwealth literary studies, Black studies, and Third World studies." (5) The term 'Postcolonialism' has its theoretical base in poststructuralism, which as Leela Gandhi said, was "a western critique of the western civilization" (25) and which introduced the 'decentered universe.' This led to the postcolonialist effort to push their boundaries beyond Europe to include the colonial periphery and the marginalized others. In the world of inequalities, Postcolonialism wants to give rights to the subalterns, as Robert J. C. Young says: "Postcolonialism claims the right of all the people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being." (2) Through his plays, Mahesh Dattani pleads for the individual's right to live their life according to their right.

Tara analyzes the tragic life of two subaltern women, Tara and her mother, Bharathi. Tara was more enthusiastic and full of zest and a spark of life. She had high aspirations which she could not accomplish because of her handicapped state while the boy was comfortably ensconced and had come to terms with his handicapped life. If the third leg had remained with the body of Tara, she would have lived a happy and successful life. Its severance not only made Tara handicapped but also endangered her life, and consequently, she died. Everyone knows that without women, society will ultimately come to a standstill. Yet there is a terrible partiality and differentiation done to women and girls. People have degraded themselves to such an extent that they kill the fetus of the female child even before it takes shape in the uterus.

Tara experiences conspicuous gender discrimination in her own family. In addition to the deprivation of her leg she has not been granted a single rupee by her maternal grandfather, who has left a

considerable amount for Chandan. Chandan and Tara's maternal grandfather was a wealthy man. He was a politician and was in a position to become the chief minister. His will is a testament to the kind of treatment that all girls get in Indian society:

Patel. He left you a lot of money.

Chandan. And Tara?

Patel. Nothing.

Chandan. Why?

Patel. It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it. (Tara 360)

The deprivation of her leg and the denial of money suggests the fact that a girl is deprived of her rights to walk independently and to be independent. A sense of hatred develops in Tara for her father because he is not so friendly to her as he is to Chandan. His cruelty is so much that he does not allow Tara to see her mother alone in the hospital. Nurses in the hospital were strictly directed that Tara must not be allowed to meet her mother all alone at any rate.

Feminism in the play *Tara* is parallel with Postcolonialism in the sense that modernity breaks with tradition, and the development of new forms of discourse are harmonious with the women's. Both feminism and postcolonialism show societies in which social and political hegemonic shifts have occurred. The analysis of *Tara* proves that the play has many characteristics of postcolonial literature. Though the play deals mainly with female subalternity, the other aspects of postcolonialism, like hybridity, multiculturalism, and resistance, can also be found in the play.

Having been enlightened by the current views of equality and democracy women are not the silent sufferers of atrocities of the patriarchal society. Almost all the women characters of Dattani resist the injustice committed against them. A sense of resistance can be found in Tara's voice and in her refusal to be duped by the gullibility and maliciousness of the tormenting people. She fights against the dogma-ridden society. Tara thinks that there is enough reason and justice in her resistance when Patel shows his partiality by not worrying about her future and by planning many things for Chandan.

When Patel compels her to go to college for the sake of Chandan, she stubbornly refuses: "I am not

going to go to college for his sake. So tell him not to go to college for my sake.” (Tara 360) Again she decides to go to the hospital by herself to see Bharati in spite of Patel’s forbiddance. The pangs of Tara are too heavy to survive. In extreme frustration, she wishes to go back to her schoolmates. She wants to be Mother Teresa. Out of the frustration that there is no one in the world who can care for her, she says: “How do you expect me, to feel anything for anyone if they don’t give me any feeling to begin with. Why is it wrong for me to be without feeling? Why are you asking me to do something nobody has done for me!” (Tara 371) She feels that she can also be unsympathetic and selfish while all the people around her are apathetic. There is no single incident in the play where Tara feels subordinate to Chandan. She finds no difference between herself, and Chandan. She is more sensitive, more intelligent and more compassionate.

Even an iota of difference made by others in treating Tara and Chandan makes Tara feel humiliated. When Chandan’s words seem to show some kind of superiority, she immediately says: “You’re not my big brother, okay! I can teach you a trick or two if I want to.” (Tara 371) It is resentful that such a high-spirited woman with an indomitable spirit was not able to live just because she is a disabled girl.

The revolt of Tara and Bharathi against Patel reflects the aim of feminism in the 1920s, which tried to break down the public /private split and the binaries of masculinity/femininity, mind/body, and reason/feeling. Bharati is a victim but she is not a silent sufferer. She has the will to provide the best care to Tara. She learns to live with her handicapped daughter and is not perturbed by those who make fun of her deformity. Bharati also shows her resistance against the chauvinism of Patel in all possible ways. She blames her husband for not worrying about the future of Tara and not taking care of her properly. She fights against him courageously to get justice for herself and for Tara, but in vain. She wants her husband to stop all kinds of madness and let her live peacefully. When Patel does not allow Bharati to donate a kidney to Tara, she quarrels with him:

Bharati. You can’t stop me from doing what I want! (Dialing) 6438...

Patel. Bharati, put down that phone!

Bharati. How dare you run my life! (Tara 343)

Despite her father’s wealth, Bharati feels desolate. The burden of torments is so annoying that she feels suffocated, and her nervous system breaks down. Had Patel given enough freedom to Bharati, she would have lived, and the death of Tara would have been averted.

In addition to resistance, there is hybridity in the character of Tara and Bharati. Bharati is a conventional mother, preferring the male child over the female before the separation of the twins. After the unlawful fitting of the third leg to the boy, there is a sea-change in her character. The way she fights against her husband shows her as a modern woman demanding equality and liberation. She wants to make equal opportunities for both Tara and Chandan. Not minding the difference between a girl and a boy in Indian society, she asks Chandan to do some knitting work. Unlike the prejudiced father Patel, who makes arrangements for Chandan alone to get into a good university in London, Bharati thinks about the future of both Tara and Chandan.

There is hybridity in the character of Tara. There is an oppressive attitude of colonialism as well as an undomitting nature of postcolonialism in Tara. She dominates her friend Deepa by making her do all her (Tara’s) homework, for not revealing Deepa’s secret. Shockingly, Tara, who wants equality in all cases, does not treat Deepa on par with herself. In all the other situations, Tara stands for justice, equality and freedom. Like a modern woman, she bravely fights against all the unjust treatment of Patel.

Among the male characters, Patel and Bharati’s father are equally oppressive and dominating with their views of women as ‘subalterns’. Dr. Thakkar uses his intelligence for the materialistic purpose of amassing wealth like a modern man in a corrupt society. Chandan alone belongs to the rare group of ‘conscientious men’ upholding the dignity of Tara as a girl.

The ambiance of multiculturalism found in all the postcolonial literature can be seen in *Tara* also. Chandan and Tara always watch TV and listen to music rather than play traditional games. There is a reference to western musicians, Brahms, and Beethoven. The separation of the Siamese twins

using modern inventions shows the influence of the west. Dattani's desire expressed through Dr. Thakkar also reveals the inclination to imitate the western ability: "Dr. Thakkar. Yes. Indeed, it was a complex case. But modern technology has made many things possible, and we are not far behind the rest of the world. In fact, in ten years time, we should be on par with the best in the west." (Tara 379)

The reference to knitting sweaters using needle and thread, the revelation of the cruel method of killing female children in India, the preference to a male child over a female child, and the male chauvinism of Patel and that of Bharathi's father give a traditional vein to the play. Dattani suggests that if there had been a mutual understanding between Bharati and Patel, Bharati would have lived longer, and Tara's death would have been avoided. The traditional family set up with mutual understanding and love between husband and wife with no partiality between the male child and female child is the need of the hour. Thus Dattani has portrayed a new society that learns to live with the hybrid culture in the most natural way by reclaiming the cultural past and looking forward to a multi-cultural and polyvalent future. At the same time, it can be said that Dattani wants the society to throw off colonialist-like subjugation of women and medieval India's torturing tradition of degrading women.

Dattani's appropriation of imperial cultural discourse takes place not with the assumption that his own culture is unimportant but assuming all intellectual and artistic discourse as aspects of the way of life, strands of the cultural texture, intimately and inextricably linked in the textual fabric of the endless human history of conquest. By using binary oppositions, the traditional western culture stimulated male dominance over women, and has aired the view that men are associated with reason, logic, objectivity and the like. In contrast, women are linked to the body, matter, an absence of logic, and reason. Not taking into account the western tradition or the native tradition, Dattani wants to give a dignified position to women.

The play, more than gender bias, dramatizes the gender hierarchy and strong patriarchy prevailing in Indian urban society. It shows that women are not allowed to act on their own accord since time

immemorial. The weight of tradition is too much for them to survive on this earth. Dattani propagates the idea of the preference of individual choices to social conventions, which will lead to the elevated state of the human self.

Like men, women also require proper space and atmosphere for the right and healthy growth of their personality. There are, however, certain social elements that create hindrances in the free and fair development of women. Dr. Thakkar is used as an essential social factor in the play by Dattani. Doctors are supposed to be the true messengers of God, as they save patients from different sorts of diseases and sufferings. Even when ordinary human beings falter and try to move in the wrong direction, doctors are not supposed to involve themselves in unethical grounds. In the contemporary era, female foeticide has become so common that people kill the fetus in the uterus after detecting the gender of that child. Dr. Thakkar, who is supposed to abide by the ethical norms of his profession, becomes an accomplice in the bizarre act of severing the leg from Tara under the temptation of Tara's influential maternal grandfather, who had assured sufficient help to Dr. Thakkar in establishing a grand nursing home at Bangalore. The societal factor of the collective human mind is much more responsible for taking away Tara's life than any other factor in our society. The human psyche, which is rightly regarded by Simone De Beauvoir as the cultural construct, is to be radically altered for the balanced and healthy growth of women in our society.

The inner world of each character is used as a tool to deal with the recurring rhetoric of hatred, aggression, monetary and political exploitation, chauvinism, and the parochial mindset of the moral police and guardian of the society. The politics of representation of the self, as eulogized by the playwright, keenly exposes the anarchic, ludicrous facts of social life. However, the searches for a space between the always male-centered secure representations of gender and what that representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes 'unrepresentable' give birth to a 'psycho-philosophical frame' of cultural model. The frame re-marks the woman as a signifier or metaphor; the man becomes the un(re)marked norm, the point of view. The play, however, aims to reinvest value in

a subjectivity or identity that is not, or cannot be, represented in these terms.

For the problem of subalternity of women, their fellow women themselves are responsible. This idea finds expression in the play, *Tara*, when the audience comes to know that Bharati, along with her father, had taken the severe decision of the attachment of the fateful 'leg' to her son Chandan. It is shocking that why Bharati, who has given birth to both children looks at Tara with a different and unusual eye. Why the children of the same womb are regarded differently? Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri opines:

That the injustice is perpetuated by Tara's mother, who professes to belong to the more 'liberal' community, rather than the father, who belongs to the more rigidly patriarchal social milieu, gives immense power to the play. It suggests that it is the women who continue to be willing instruments in the vicious cycle. Dattani, however, counters one woman with another: Tara herself – spirited, tough, a survivor with a sense of humor – fighting against prejudices the society has against the disabled, and the female. (38)

Dattani wants to subvert the norms of patriarchal ideology. The open condemnation of the patriarchs by the women protagonists reveals their desire for independence and happiness under the domineering credence of tradition and cultural constructions. The aspirations of Tara and Bharati to go beyond the mundane existence of women despite all conflicts and contradictions convey Dattani's steadfast faith in women. The portrayal of Tara as a character of profundity, and receptivity shows the belief of the dramatist in the unconventional role of women.

The female subaltern Bharati in *Tara* has to follow the decision of her father at the time of the separation of the conjoined twins, and later, she has to constrain herself within the dominating shackles of her husband. Patel, an emblem of male chauvinism, maintains his absolute authority in making decisions about the family. He restricts her from giving her kidney to Tara, who needs a kidney to be transplanted, and it is his whim, not letting her enjoy her own freedom. When Bharathi asks why he is against it, he ruthlessly admits: "Because I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it." (Tara 334) Unconsciously, he prevents Bharathi from making a confession of

her sin that she committed to Tara. It is another mode of injustice in which she cannot get rid of her guilt: "No, I don't want to give her the satisfaction of confession." (Tara 347) Bharathi is a pathetic victim of patriarchy.

Bharathi's excessive fears and her love for Tara, her concern for her future, her empathy and sympathy for her, her passion to donate her kidney to Tara even when there is another donor, her desire for Tara's exclusive love – everything is motivated by her realization that she has denied Tara a leg, that it was her decision that caused this particular disability to her daughter. It is this horrific knowledge that leads to her mental breakdown as well as the breakdown between her and her husband. Because of the pricks of her conscience and her motherly concern for her disabled daughter, she says: "Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you - but not her! Oh, the pain she will feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty!" (Tara 349) But Patel has no sense of guilt. In addition, he treats Chandan differently from Tara, making plans for his future and trying to make a man of him. This leads to the question of whether he wasn't complicit, in his lack of action, in what happened during the operation to separate the twins. He believes in gender hierarchy, and thus, his protestations are ultimately hollow, and his rejection by Dan seems apposite. The son does not go to England as the father wants, not to educate himself and make Patel proud, but to run away from the family.

While all the familial relationships have been spoiled by prejudice against the female, the brother and the sister relationship of Tara and Chandan, is a realization of the identity of distinctive selves working in a union in the comprehensive scheme of things. The psycho-pathetic trauma of Chandan after the death of Tara and his escape for London is a justification to the argument that males and females are not separate entities representing domination and subordination in the social order. Mahesh Dattani mentioned in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramanyam that *Tara* is a play about the male self and the female self. The male self is preferred in all cultures. Thus, the drama, *Tara* is about the separation of self and the resultant angst.

The death of Tara becomes an unbearable anguish in the life of Chandan. The suffering of Tara and Chandan is a symbolic justification for the perception that the grace of relationships exists not in their separateness but in their togetherness in moving in coordination or interdependence. The loss of Tara's life was more than the loss of a sister and it was really the extinction of himself that has rendered his life weak, intolerable, and crippled, in the real sense. Chandan, despite his identity as Dan in London, fails to get rid of the evil that was lying buried in his conscience. Whenever he tries to write a story, he inevitably writes the story of Tara. Thus Dattani brings out that injustice to women will lead to a deep and unfathomable sense of isolation in men to the extent that men will lose their life in an abyss of distress.

The question is who is responsible for the agony, suffering, and eventually the death of Tara – Is it Dr. Thakkar, her mother, her grandfather, or her father? The dramatist does not blame anyone to the tragic death of Tara. He has left it for the readers or audience to get a conclusion in their way. It may be conjectured that it is only the socio-cultural construct of the collective human mind that is more and more responsible for taking away Tara's life than any other factor in the society. The psyche or mindset of the human being must be changed to ensure balanced and healthy growth of women in their community.

Dattani, in this play, establishes that even the relationship between mother and daughter depends on the directions of patriarchy. Patel tells Bharati: "Yes, call me a liar, a wife beater, a child abuser. It's what you want me to be! And you. You want to believe you love them very much." (Tara 354) Again he tells Tara: "Tara, please believe me when I say that I love you very much and I have never in all my life loved your brother. But your mother..." (Tara 354) But Tara has always been led to believe that she has been discriminated against by her father and always gained the extra bit of affection from her mother.

This is why there is a death-like response from Tara when she learns the truth. She was discriminated against, because she belonged to the other gender, but not by her father. It was Bharat's decision which deprived her of what she needed more than anything

else in the world, a second leg. It is a shattering discovery for the naturally ebullient Tara: "And she called me her star!" (Tara 379) This is the crucial moment in the play making Tara feel frustrated with the world and leading to her death at the end. Chandan moves far away, never to return, forever, incomplete. The bereft, divided self of Dan renders his final apology to his significant other, Tara: "Forgive me, Tara, forgive me for making it my tragedy." (Tara 380) The play *Tara* without debate is a tragedy of the conformation of individual choices against social conventions. Through this play, an attempt has been made to highlight Dattani's innovative approach against conventional canons and his daring spirit to bring new and radical issues like gender identity into theatre.

Selfhood, an essential aspect of post colonialism, is not attained by Tara and Bharati in *Tara*. They are always aware of the fact that they are treated as subalterns. They never survive actively or joyously on the assumption that the effective instruments of domination always belong to someone else. Selfhood for Dan lies not only in himself but also in Tara and in their togetherness. For Don, Tara was an inseparable part of his inner self. The separation and death of Tara become a prelude to his doom. He confesses:

Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crush with some unknown force. I no longer like that freedom. I move, just move without meaning. I forget Tara. I forget I had a sister with whom, I shared a body in one comfortable womb till we were forced out ... and separated. (Tara 378-79)

Thus the play *Tara* is exposed through the consciousness of Chandan, who emotionally suffers after the forced separation. It is not a matter of Tara's tragedy alone because it involves some significant issues related to 'self' and 'society'. This is where Dattani's concern for androgyny comes in – if we could learn to value both sides of ourselves, and give equal importance to the feminine and the masculine, we could have an entirely differently abled world, a world of actual abilities and possibilities. That is why

the play ends with both of them whole and complete, with two legs each, because they are finally, in his memory, beyond nature and society (and science, embodied in the greed and expertise of Dr. Thakkar).

Dattani is highly philosophical towards the end of the play. He concludes that identity depends so much on family, class, religion, caste, values, culture, and language competence. A man can never be whole and complete unless he escapes from the clutches of them and faces his inner self squarely to grow to the fullest possible extent to realize himself. Such movements can only be earned beyond the level of everyday life, beyond language, beyond time in the silence of the hug that ends the play, the feminine and the masculine of the twinned self meeting and emerging on an even footing. Dan's incompleteness after his separation from Tara justifies that both are interdependent and not independent. The perception of the duality of male and female is an illusion of human consciousness. Havelock Ellis has accepted: "We may not know exactly what sex is, but we do know that it is mutable with the possibility of one sex being changed into the other sex that is frontiers are often uncertain, and that there are many stages between a complete male and a complete female." (143)

The strategies adopted in the play can be used to decipher the meaning of the subaltern discourse. Despite the lack of resistance in front of the dominating men, women have a language of their own to shatter the constraints made by men. And thus, in response to Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the characters of Dattani would always answer in the affirmative. There are various agencies of power and domination in the day-to-day life of women. Still the subaltern voice of women can be traced in women's strategies of appropriation to the dominant discourse. The voice consciousness of women is encountered through their roles in society. Women try to redefine their selves in terms of their cultural parts, independent of the functions assigned to them by the male world. Apart from various cultural parts, women have also rediscovered their traditional roles, but now with a greater sense of freedom.

Conclusion

Thus Dattani's *Tara* has made the readers think about the subaltern position of women. The play

reveals that man and woman are created by God separately only to lead a life of togetherness and not to spoil energy in the name of discrimination, and domination. The Siamese twins in the play may be the symbol of the interdependence of man and woman. Just as Postcolonialism tries to be free from the Europe-oriented discourse, Dattani wants women to eliminate male-chauvinistic discourse.

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