

Rasa, Bhava and Beyond: Re-imagining Dattani's Tara through the Prism of Indian Aesthetics

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"I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being." (Thornton Niven Wilder)

An American Playwright and Novelist, Thornton Niven Wilder has described drama beautifully in the above lines. (Brainy Quotes) Drama is one of the literary forms in which the purpose of the art is fulfilled doubtlessly. The pleasure that this art form gives along with the wisdom that is immediately impactful to the audience makes drama, a unique form of art. The roots of Indian drama can be dated back to the time of Rig Veda which was written roughly between 1200 to 1500 BCE. Initially they were written in Sanskrit but they were rich and elegant to be regarded as an art form. Rig Vedas consisted of hymns in the form of scenes and dialogues. Indian can be referred as the fore-runners in dramatic art and this credit can be owned by Bharatha Muni's *Natyasastra*, a comprehensive treatise on the artistic performance compiled by ancient scholar Bharatha Muni. The emotions play a vital role in every aspects of the Indian drama in such a way that all the major elements of drama like the stage setting, characterisation, costume designing, music and sounds, direction and so on are all decided on the basis of the *rasa* to be conveyed.

Indian Aesthetics can be regarded as the most ancient and imminent work of performing arts that stands timeless and ceaseless. The directions of this treatise hence can be considered for the successful application even for the contemporary works and may be for the future works. The Aesthetic Theory states that

"Vibhavanubhava-vyabicharibhava-sanyogad-rasanispatih"

(Bharata Muni, Natyasastra)

This quotation can be paraphrased as "Rasa (the aesthetic emotion) arises from the conjunction of the determinants (*vibhava*), the consequences (*anubhava*), and the transitory emotions (*vyabichari*)". The *vibhava* or the determinants are the elements that include the

efforts of the directors or the actors in bringing out the desired emotion, the *anubhava* is the degree of *vibhava* perceived or conceived by the audience and *vyabichari bhava* are the impacts that happen temporarily after watching a play yet it has a lasting impression in the audience. The greatness of the great treatise is evident from this single line that has sufficed and also has been blessed with the touch of the greatest artistic mastery.

The objective of this research paper is to analyse Dattani's play *Tara* under the lens of the Indian aesthetics. This Indian play is a powerful English play that delves into the themes of gender discrimination, family dynamics, personal guilt, societal norms and identity. Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is a poignant Indian story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan. The play is actually the unfolding of Chandan's memories reflecting on the past. The play is actually Chandan's narration of tragic fate encountered by his Tara. The play opens with narrative of Chandan living at London as "Dan". He attempts to write his story especially highlighting the plights of his sister but the past haunts him and hinders him from proceeding further. He is led by a series of flashbacks on his events of his childhood in Bombay. He envisions the past where Tara and he has shared a pure bond as siblings despite the differences. They always relied on each other for support and always loved to be together.

The main conflict that Tara had to face was the surgery that the conjoined twins underwent at their infancy. The twins were conjoined at the hips and the doctors determined that Tara will have a normalcy of life span if and only if she receives both the legs. But the patriarchal society influenced the medical science that only a male can have all the rights and hindered Tara from having the legs. The society believed that being favourable to the girl child will be of no use. Even the mother Bharati and their maternal grandfather decided to give the second leg to Chandan itself. This unjust bias weakens Tara physically and cursed her with reduced survival span. With the advancement of the play, it is evident that the fate of Tara worsens. She has been more intelligent than Chandan yet she wasn't exposed to the opportunities like Chandan. The society and her family altogether ruined her chance for growth and development.

The story progresses by revealing Bharati as a guilt stricken mother which makes her to be more loving, compassionate and caring to Tara alone. But the love alone was not sufficient to protect Tara from all the difficulties imposed over her in the name of the gender discrimination. Tara's father Patel was also of the same kind and the fatherly heart couldn't bear seeing Tara going through harsh realities of life. Yet he seems to be emotionally distant and believes that it is futile to dwell on the decisions made in the past. Chandan from knowing the truth couldn't bear witnessing the sufferings of his twin sister who has become a victim only to provide him with the best life. Hence even though he is intimately attached with Tara he escapes the environment of the home and makes his way to a life in London. He did not want to be Chandan anymore and that made him change his name which gives him the fulfilment of having changed his identity.

Tara has been a girl of immense will power. But she owing to her deteriorating health she dies. This makes Chandan a grief stricken soul and made him attached to a never ending loop of unescapable pain of irreparable loss. All the privileges that was enjoyed by Chandan was rightfully Tara's. Chandan realises and cries over his life thinking that his life nothing but alms lent by Tara. His life has been a mere castle of lies built upon the unfair advantages. The climax is the realisation of Chandan's acknowledgement of guilt and grief. The climax symbolises his struggle to accept the past and constant switching between the present and past makes the play appealing. The monologues and the reflective narrative highlights the internal conflicts between the characters.

Dattani also uses humor and sibling banter to balance the play's heavy themes, making Tara's tragic fate even more heartbreaking. In *Tara*, Dattani critiques the deep-rooted gender biases in Indian society. The play exposes how even within a seemingly loving family, patriarchal norms

dictate life-altering decisions. Through Tara's character, Dattani highlights how girls are often denied the opportunities they deserve, while boys, even when unwilling, are pushed to take precedence. Ultimately, Tara is a deeply emotional and socially relevant play that not only tells the story of a girl robbed of her potential but also examines the weight of guilt and the consequences of gender discrimination. The following are few of the characteristics from the play that is highlighted through the quotes from the text and analysed on the grounds of Indian Aesthetics.

"The lights fade out on the doctor and the Patels and come up on Dan." (Dattani, Tara)

The play represents a minimalistic yet symbolically charged stage setting. The play moves between the present (Dan's monologues) and the past (flashbacks of his childhood). Indian aesthetics emphasize the importance of spatial arrangement in drama, as outlined in Bharata's Natyashastra. The fading in and out of lights creates a rhythmic transition, aligning with the Indian concept of dhvani (suggestion), which evokes emotions through subtle shifts in staging rather than explicit exposition.

"Tara laughs suddenly, the way a child does." (Dattani, Tara)

The characters in Tara embody deep psychological realism, but when viewed through an Indian aesthetic lens, they align with the theory of bhava (emotions) and rasa (essence of emotions). Tara represents karuna rasa (pathos), while Bharati symbolizes shanta rasa (peace intertwined with inner turmoil). Tara's childlike nature intensifies the audience's emotional connection, enhancing the karuna rasa experienced by the viewers.

"Chandan wears a sweater while Tara is in a plain dress." (Dattani, Tara)

The classical Indian theatre witnessed the costumes and attire symbolizing the inner states rather than mere external appearances. Dattani subtly integrates clothing to reflect Tara's social and gendered struggles. Tara's simplistic dressing style signifies societal neglect towards the female child, reinforcing karuna rasa.

"A long pause. The sound of traffic outside." (Dattani, Tara)

Dattani employs dhvani (suggestion through sound) to enhance the emotional impact of key scenes. The occasional silence also speaks volumes in terms of shanta rasa. The silence emphasizes emotional weight, making the audience introspect—a technique often used in Indian classical plays.

"Lights dim on the present and come up on the past." (Dattani, Tara)

Dattani uses lighting transitions to depict shifts in time and emotions. This aligns with chhaya rasa, the aesthetic of light and shadow play. Dattani's dialogues carry the weight of vakrokti (indirect expression) and dhvani (suggestion). Tara's words contain dhvani, an unspoken sacrifice, resonating with karuna rasa. The play primarily evokes karuna rasa (pathos) through Tara's struggles, hasya rasa (humor) in Chandan's wit, and shanta rasa in the introspective moments. Dattani's narrative structure ensures audience participation, aligning with the sahridaya (empathetic viewer) concept.

"A successful play resonates beyond its performance, lingering in the minds of its spectators." (Deshpande, The Spectator in Indian Theatre)

Mahesh Dattani's Tara serves as an exemplary text for studying Indian aesthetics, incorporating the principles of Natyashastra through its stage setting, characterization, dialogue, and performance. The play masterfully evokes karuna rasa, immersing the audience in Tara's poignant journey. The integration of abhinaya, dhvani, and rasa theory enriches the dramatic experience, demonstrating how Indian theatrical traditions continue to shape contemporary narratives. Ultimately, Tara transcends its immediate social critique, becoming a deeply aesthetic and philosophical exploration of human emotions and societal constructs.

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