

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: A Silent Scream of the Indian Girl Child

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Indian Drama' is the broad concept comprising entire Indian myths, and culture. Drama in India has a great tradition right from Vedic period with the book of 'Natyashashtra' by Bharat Muni. Indian English drama was established in India by British and western patrons of drama. Pre-Independence and post independence Indian English drama was remarkable in its quality as well as quantity. Though Indian English drama was a mere imitation of British dramatists, but it had a genuine feelings and cultural notions. So that at present few dramatists like Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan and Girish Karnad are achieving milestones of success in Indian theatre with great prospect in Indian theatre as well as world theatre.

Indian drama in English was introduced and came in practice after the arrival of British in India who set up English missionary schools for dual purpose i.e. preaching Christian religion and creating employees for British government. This induced Indian people to learn a new language – English and get the perception of Western world and their Literature. It poured new strength in the paralyzed Indian English Drama. As Krishna Kriplani points out- The modern English Drama "Owned its first flowering to foreign grafting". With the impact of western civilization on Indian life, a new renaissance dawned on Indian arts including drama. Furthermore English education gave an impetus and a momentum to the critical study of not only western drama but also classical Indian drama. English and Italian troupe toured India and performed many English plays, mainly Shakespeare's plays, in cities like Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta.

It took a century and a quarter for Indian drama to reach a respectable stage and it now challenges comparison with other forms of literature- poetry and fiction- in terms of quality if not quantity. The first play in English entitled "Is This Civilization?" was written in 1871 by Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Since then, many plays have been genuinely written in English by 'enterprising' Indian writers, in spite of the fact that drama in English fascinated only the super- sophisticated who live in the cities and the larger towns, in the universities or in certain government offices or business houses

Most of the Indian English dramatists of pre-Independence period followed the tradition of Elizabethan drama in general and Shakespeare in particular. By the end of the 19th century, there were pioneering efforts boldly employed by contemporary playwrights such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, T.P.Kailasam, Lobo Prabhu, Bharati Sarabhai and so on who contributed substantially to the growth and development of Indian English Drama. These dramatists tried their hand in different forms of drama- romance, opera, comedy, farce, tragedy, melodrama and historical and mythological plays.

The Post- Independence Indian English Drama developed with 'poetic drama' fashion by imitating western poetic drama tradition and following the path of- "The Tagore-Aurobindo-Kailasam tradition of poetic drama

continues, but with a difference in the hands of Manjeri Isvaran , G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb and Pritish Nandy. .Despite the growth of poetic drama in early post independence Indian English drama, Indian drama made genuine progress in all forms of drama. Dramatists like Nissim Ezekiel, Lakhan Deb, Gurucharan Das, Pratap Sharma, Asif Currimbhoy, Gieve Patel made significant contribution in uplifting the drama tradition in Indian English drama.

After a promising beginning of Indian English drama in post Independence period, suddenly there is a downfall and a total dearth of English plays. In 1970s, a new trend came forward in English plays in India which changed its face i.e. Translation method, which means translate the plays of contemporary notable regional playwrights into English and staged in theatre. It got huge success for its bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuosity within no time. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Mahashweta Devi are the most representative of the Contemporary Indian drama not only in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Kannada but also on the pan Indian level.

Recently Indian English drama has produced two brilliant playwrights like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani who elevate Indian English drama at its summit of success. Both of them raise English drama not only in Indian theatre but also in the world theatre in rich quality and thematic presentation. Manjula Padmanabhan is the first Indian to earn international fame with her play, 'Harvest' that deals with an impoverished family living in a single room in a chawl of Bombay, fading up by extreme hunger and unemployment , protagonist decided to sell his organs of body. The plays of Padmanabhan are intellectual but not suited for stage whereas Mahesh Dattani has been quite successful on the stage.

Mahesh Dattani, the creator of " Tara" the play that I am discussing in this paper, is a prolific theatre artist, dramatist, director, and a popular dancer. The plays of Mahesh Dattani emerged as 'fresh arrival' in the domain of Indian English drama in the last decade of twentieth century. He is the only English language playwright who won the Sahitya Akademi award for his play 'Final Solution' in 1998. His plays have been staged to critical acclaim all over the country and abroad. Alyque Padamsee says regarding him, "At last we have playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity." Mahesh Dattani used the contemporary sensational issues as a theme for his plays such as – Gender discrimination in 'Tara', Gay community in 'On muggy night in Mumbai', Status of eunuch in 'Seven steps around the fire', and Communalism in 'Final Solution'. "The most significant contribution of Dattani is perhaps his use of language. Dattani uses in his plays the kind of English spoken by people in India"

Staging of Tara

Tara was Dattani's third play staged in Bangalore the year it was written, and directed by Dattani himself. It was staged as Twinkle Tara. When it was staged next year in Mumbai, it was called Tara, and was directed by Alyque Padamasee. The play is a comment on the predicament of

women in the past, reflects the status of women in the present and dramatizes the complexities of the social setup. His play *Tara* is an exhortation to the society to shed the age old prejudices against women and have a progressive outlook.

Mahesh Dattani is a name that guided a faltering Indian English Drama on the path of reliability, steadfastness and distinct identity. Besides prolific and prominent Indian playwright writing in English, Mahesh Dattani is also well known as a stage director, screen writer and film maker with numerous scripts and productions to his credit. His plays have been anthologized in single volume called *Collected Plays* by Penguin. Most of his plays have been translated and performed in other regional languages of India and have been incorporated in the syllabus of several Indian and foreign universities and schools.

His film "*Morning Raga*" remained cynosure of the Cairo Film Festival in December 2004 and it registered the award for best artistic contribution. More importantly its script has been archived by The Academy of Motion Pictures, USA and it was accepted by Oscar Academy for nomination of the award. He has worked in partnership with various international theatre companies and his recent achievements are stage adaptation of Paulo Coelho's bestseller classic, *The Alchemist* and composing of the script of *Brief Candle*, directed by Lillete Dubey. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the East and the West he was recently also engaged in a multicultural project, called *Reorientations*, a workshop that lasted for a three week period at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre in China. This occupied an English director Michael Walling along with English actors, one Indian dancer, two actors from Sweden and four Chinese actors.

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* comes across as a play that deals with twin aspects that are two sides of the same coin. It also presents the conflict between illusion and reality as echoed by the multi-level set. The house of the Patels are kept as if in memory. The only realistic level is the part of the wall covered with faded wall paper that has the writer writing the play in which he appears to the audience. In this sense, the playwright presents metatheatrical aspects as he talks of distancing oneself from the experience and writing about it. The Doctor as portrayed in the set, stands in contrast as the omnipotent Author. It thereby underlines the clash between the subjective and objective author. Chandan discovers that even distancing himself physically "in a seedy suburb of London thousands of miles away from home" hasn't done the trick. He attempts as much as possible to alienate himself from the script, but suffers from a writer's block and everything remains stagnant on his paper just as his life is. Just as in his life, nothing changes but the dates. And the greatest irony is that Indo-Anglian literature isn't worth toilet paper in his own country. He neglects his own personal history to get over his guilt with what happened to *Tara*. Just as the lowest portion occupies a major portion of the stage, the memory of guilt haunts and dominates Chandan's personality. It is to deny this that he creates his alter-ego Dan. His being a Diaspora, this causes another divide in his self: the identity of the Diaspora caught between his native culture and foreign culture as signified by Chandan and Dan.

Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that's a great advantage and disadvantage a swell..(321)

The mysterious brown with the phoney accent. The last being the hardest to drop having spent two whole years in acquiring it. And what remains is what I intend making capital of. (324)

The Plot of Tara

Tara circles around the grave and traditional issues of gender bias. The son and daughter delivered from same womb are preferentially treated by no less than parents themselves in the intoxication of superstition and ancestral beliefs and the daughter is sacrificed for the short term benefit of the son. The play is contextual and relevant in the light of the increasing incidents of foeticide, infanticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. On the question of what gave him the idea for the play, *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani says in an interview:

“Well, basically, it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated, and, of course, they were invariably of the same sex and there was this thing about a fused leg and which had the qualities of both left and right so there had to be some careful consideration as to which twin was supplying the blood to the leg and the journal went into the detail because obviously it was a very unique operation and separation. Although that was the inspiration but I think by then having written *Dance Like a Man*, I was prepared to take on the gender issue head on, and I think that was a powerful metaphor. Again, you know, the play is misread and, you know, people tend to focus on the medical details but that's really not what the play is about. It's a metaphor either for being born equal as male and female and sharing so much more and with the surgical separation comes a cultural distinction and prejudices as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and female self...

In the play, Tara is the daughter of an educated higher middle class family in Bangalore. The story of the play is about the twins who are born with three legs and blood supply to the third leg is from the baby girl's body. Only one of the twins could have two legs, and the other had to survive with only one leg. It is decided to fix the third leg on to the male baby's body so as to make male baby complete. This decision was not on the basis of medical ground but due to gender discrimination in our society.

Mahesh Dattani has very deftly dealt with the fate awaiting the girl child. The social norms, economic standards and cultural factors have been responsible for the injustice against the girl child. All these factors combine to create the social system in which the girl child has to live and die. Tara is killed by this social system, which controls the minds and actions of the people. The trauma of coming to know the role her mother had played in her life, and the discrimination becomes too much for her. Tara's potentiality was sacrificed at the altar of gender

The Girl Child in the Indian Society

Even in the 21st century, even when in India girls repeatedly prove themselves in every field, the deep rooted gender discrimination continues among even the affluent and educated people living a so called modern life in the metro cities. Dattani deems the gender issues more prominent than the class discrimination, though both issues are prominent in today's society.

Ratan's Role

The childhood and Indian name of Dan is Chandan. Dan is both the narrator and character of the drama and spectators watch the drama from the points of view of Dan so it is called Dan's play. He is deemed as the Sutrathar of the play. All the actions and characterizations pertaining to drama are portrayed through revelation made by Dan and most of the actions in the drama are resulting from the flash back of Patel's family six years earlier. The play, Tara opens with Dan who remains busy in typing the text pertaining to his lifelong experience. Dan is undergoing mental pain and conflict caused by reverberation of some tragic incidents of the past. Dan and Tara had shared one body which is popularly and scientifically known as Siamese twins and in the terms of Dan they were like "two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb". He lives in London to keep sufficient distance between his bruised past and present. A play within the play is witnessed as Dan is writing a script of a drama known as "Twinkle Tara" which has comprehensive connotation as Tara is protagonist of the drama under discussion and also the literal meaning of the twinkling star.

The play suddenly takes the shape of flashback and action suddenly moves back towards Mumbai where Dan and Tara had passed their childhood lives. The scene of traditional, patriarchal and paradigmatic Indian family is observed wherein Bharati, the mother of Tara and Dan just finishes her worship and Patel, the father of the twin, is getting ready to join his duty. Both Bharati and Patel seem to be in the milieu of making Chandan a writer and Tara, as usual, strong, healthy and beautiful to be a belle bride of the future. Bharati and Patel belong to two different states, Karnataka and Gujarat respectively and they were not in good terms and always shown to be quarreling with each other owing to cultural gap and dominance and intervention of Bharati's father in the relationship of Bharati and Patel.

The Patriarchal Society and its Impact

Dr. Thakkar is bribed by Bharati's father to operate the Siamese Twin according to his wish and thus he earns notoriety to the name and fame of doctor who is deemed as next to godliness for healing the wounds and pains of the aggrieved and diseased. Father-in-law of Patel has played a villainous role in this play and he is responsible for the imbroglios, gender bias and class discrimination encountered by Patel's family. It is he who bribes Dr. Thakkar to carry out surgery in favour of Chandan. He is of belief that male should always be given golden opportunity and his penchant for male-chauvinism remains unabated when he left money for only his grandson, Chandan and nothing for Tara. . Dattani aptly demonstrates that how the interventions of in-laws into the family affairs destroy its smooth functioning, harmony and cordial atmosphere. Bharati's father is

responsible for bringing bitterness between her and her husband, Patel. Though it is another thing Patel should not have remained mute onlooker to the discrimination perpetuated on Tara by Bharati and her father. He is further an accomplice in the malicious acts of gender bias when he chalks out plans for a better education and career of Chandan.:

Death of Tara

The title 'Tara' is symbolic of a shooting star that is a temporary guest of a small fraction of time as the protagonist is. The idea also brings to mind the concept of the Binary star systems that consist of two stars that "are gravitationally bound, and generally move around each other in stable orbits. When two such stars have a relatively close orbit, their gravitational interaction can have a significant impact on their evolution." Just as the Siamese twins in this case have an interwoven identity; and has a great impact on each other, mentally and biologically in their evolution. They are spiritually inseparable. With the demise of Tara, Chandan experiences a sense of identity crisis. The inseparable twins very evocatively remind us of the celebrated pair Rahel and Estha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* who are forcibly separated by choice. Just as they emerge from a zygote they get back their revenge on society as they go into a taboo method of fusion towards the end of the novel. The twins in the prescribed play are born as 'inseparably fused'- hugging each other emblemizing their emotional coherence at the very outset. Chandan envisages their reconciliation towards the end of the play as they get together in a tight embrace, back to their former fused form. They stand for two sides of the same concept. For instance, gender. How man and woman compliment each other, and how one is incomplete without the other:

TARA: And me. Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out...(325)

Dattani sees *Tara* as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that favours always what is 'male'. The quality of being effeminate is a reason for shame in India. (320). The playwright also seeks to portray science and nature in a similar manner. How Science and Nature complement each other. However Science cannot conquer everything and has its own lapses as Nature does. This is signified by the twins with impaired legs as they form a mirror image of each other. The play depicts how Science cannot always conquer Nature as the leg attributed to the boy is rejected by the body in a brash attempt at disregarding both Nature and God. Dan hits the nail on the head when he asserts "Conflict is the crux of life. A duel to death between God and nature on one side and on other –the amazing Dr.Thakkar.(330)This explains the God-like stance of the Doctor, who is seated with a seeming omnipotent presence representing Advanced Technology. Behind, on a higher level, is a chair in which Dr.Thakkar remains seated throughout the play. Although he doesn't watch the action of the play, his connection is asserted by his Sheer God-like presence.(323)

The drama has two sides to it with respect to the time frame-the past and the present. It also reflects the virtual and the real. An utterance sometimes refers to two different time frames with respect to time, occasion and the statement applicable to different characters. The following lines hold true for both Bharati and Dan as they are distant in time and space: "If at all they must know, it will be from me. Not from you. "(345)

The twins, especially 'Tara', are repeatedly referred to as "freaks". The term 'freak' has been conventionally used to refer to person who has something unusual regarding their appearance or behaviour. The older usage of the word 'freaks' refers to the state of being physically deformed, or characterized by rare diseases and conditions. The word was utilized to suggest 'sideshow performers'. In such an instance, the word 'freak' represents the state of Women, who are marginalized. The female race who are not congenitally deformed but are so as society forces the handicap upon them. Just as it is presented in concrete terms in the play:Tara's leg is callously separated from her to render her twin brother normal, defying the tenets of Nature. It echoes Simone de Beauvoir's dictum:"One is not born a woman, one becomes one."

A natural freak refers to a genetic abnormality, while a made freak is a once normal person who experienced or initiated an alteration at some point in life (such as receiving surgical implants).Here both the terms can be used to describe Dan and Tara. But Tara is less of a natural freak; as Nature was more in her favour. "Freak" has also been employed to describe genetic mutations in plants and animals, i.e. "freaks of nature.""Freak" used in the verb form, implies: "to become stressed and upset". Here, the twins are in a state of depression owing to their predicament but utilize a curtain of sarcasm and wit to shield the same.

Man cannot accept the woman's intellect, and gets intimidated by her intelligence.Tara's victory at the card game is seen as thorough cheating and Chandan is ashamed to admit her victory. He sees her as a good business woman as she cheats at cards; not attributing it to her business acumen, but to her shrewdness. Tara gets hurt at the remark as it holds no truth value. Even Patel ignores her future prospects and the need to engage her in any meaningful endeavour. She is forced to conform to the stereotype of the Indian Woman-devoid of any intellect, deemed fit only to perform mechanical household chores. In other words, a domestic animal, which can be cared for, but not regarded with respect.

Tara quips at this: "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave."(328) She highlights the plight of women who were presumed to be suitable for the domestic domain only. The play as a whole thus depicts the relegation of the relevance of the Woman, and her upper edge whenever it does assert itself in a male-dominated society. This is why the Grandfather and the Mother who represent tradition prefer the male over the female; the Male is the archetypal successor or prototype of cultural progeny. This explains why the author names the play after the female child whose identity is demoted otherwise; in order to invert the dialectical pair male/female. The woman has always been hailed in philosophy, but in practice she is treated as an object

to be overlooked. As Virginia Woolf asserts in her *A Room of One's Own*: "Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history."

In the play, though Bharati dotes on her daughter Tara, she insensitively attributes a piece of her daughter to the son. The conflict between illusion and reality is yet again echoed here. What is actually a public display of attention on part of the mother is actually a screen to shield her guilt. The context also serves as a satire on the self-sufficient Indian male, for whom, to accept anything feminine is beneath his dignity, and an indelible question mark on his masculinity. Even Dan acknowledges the same, as he writes the play. Though the craft of the play is his, he has to borrow the material from Tara. In *Tara*, the deformity of the Woman is caused by the Man, and caused in order to complete the Man. The playwright utilizes the motif symbolically as well. This is the reason why Tara approaches her end more quickly, and it is not owing to her inferiority. The handicap also symbolizes the predicament of girls in Indian families who are made to forsake their chances of getting educated as the edification of the boy becomes a priority.

The death of Tara has a more powerful impact than her existence. Just as the death of the Star gives way to the Black Hole. The Black Hole stands for the God in the World of Physics, it being linked to the Male Gods in Hinduism like Shiva, Krishna, Ram. etc. who are black. Religion has also been predominantly patriarchal. Christianity professes: "Men are God's stars." (Genesis 15:15-18.) By naming his female protagonist as 'Tara', Mahesh Dattani puts it otherwise.

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