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Fragmented Bodies, Fragmented Identities: Patriarchy, Medical Ethics, and Trauma in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*.

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, in his play Tara, gives a deep critique of patriarchy, gender discrimination and systematic marginalisation of women in the modern Indian society. This is the story of Siamese twins Tara and Chandan, which illustrates how patriarchal norms operate at the most fundamental stages of life, influencing bodily integrity, social identity, and family relationships. The paper uses a feminist approach to analyse the intersection of gender, disability, and institutional power in the play, showing how political influence, capitalist interests, and internalised maternal compliance have come together to oppress Tara. Psychological and emotional implications of these structures on both Tara and Chandan also form part of the analysis, which highlights how patriarchy causes trauma and fragmented identities to women and men. Placing this play in the context of modern urban families and the Indian culture, the paper tries to examine how the critical attitude, used by Dattani, is pertinent in modern society, particularly in the context of modern gender prejudice and bias, the ethics in the medical profession, and the favoring family of the male child. Lastly, the paper argues that Tara reveals the compounded nature of patriarchal operation and that the medical ethics, maternal complicity and cultural anticipation according to which it operates can be found in a stimulating literary analysis and a discursive commentary on gender inequality that can be applicable even to contemporary India.

Keywords: *Fragmented identities, medical ethics, internalised motherhood, feminism, gendered roles, patriarchal society*

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1. Introduction

Arguably one of the most influential writers of Indian English theatre in the late twentieth century, Dattani broadened the subject matter of the modern theatre by prefiguring issues that had long been pushed to the margins: gender discrimination, sexual marginalisation, disability,

communal conflict and politics of domestic power.

He had an important breakthrough in the history of Indian English theatre as a respectable writing form in national literary life, and won the dubious distinction of being the first Indian English playwright to win the coveted Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998. However, what is more important

about Dattani is not the accolades he gained in institutions but rather his lifelong questioning of the power dynamics of daily relationships. His plays continually reveal the reproduction of patriarchy subtly in the urban, supposedly progressive space to prove that modernity does not break the chain of command but frequently reorganises it. *Tara* is the most significant play, which sharply analyses the gendered injustice. First performed as *Twinkle Tara* in Bangalore by his company, Playpen, is a story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, who underwent a surgical separation as children. At first, it seemed like a medical anomaly, but it eventually revealed itself as a deep critique of patriarchal logic. With political influence, the third leg was given to Chandan, favouring the male child, although medical reasons favoured Tara. This act, conditioned by the property interest and anxiety over the male lineage, alters the whole life of Tara, permanently, and gives her brother a momentary physical gain. Dattani, using this act as a tool to unfold the multiple layers of patriarchy, unveils the truth that it is not merely confined to domestic order, but also expands its roots to medical institutions, twisting ethical judgment into a gendered preference machine. Notably, Tara does not want to narrow down patriarchy to blatant manhood. The problems of maternal complicity, institutional corruption, and gendered expectations are mutually reinforced, which makes ethical dichotomies further complicated in the play. The fact that Bharati agreed to the operation is a

testimony to how even motherhood is ideologically determined, with a cultural economy that is committed to rewarding sons as the heirs of the legacy and property. Further, the manipulation of professional ethics by the political and capitalist power of the father is depicted in the morally irresponsible behaviour of the surgeon. The female body in this grid falls under negotiating terrain, which is susceptible to familial ambition, economic reckoning and claims of patriarchy. This gendered economy of power further elaborates the play in putting disability into context. Tara has a body disability that is not just a biological aspect but the immediate effect of a socially mediated choice. Disability is therefore produced structurally, highlighting the realisation of gender prejudice on the very body. The psychological impact of this injustice echoes through the broken adult identity of Chandan, who tries to rebuild the memory of his sister by writing. With this temporal stratification, Dattani illustrates that, besides creating physical marginalisation, patriarchy creates traumatic experiences that do not end.

The ethical choice made in the very centre of the play is not simply a subjective choice, but a symptomatic choice which throws light upon a broader system of socio-cultural organisation in which the female embodiment is traded. Placing disability in the context of this power matrix makes the play challenging to read in conventional feminist ways and previews the material writing of gender bias onto the body. The present paper

claims the idea of Tara exposing a multifaceted and institutionalised system of patriarchy that is mastered via gendered medical ethics, internalised motherhood, disability politics, and psychological trauma. This view of things helps reveal the complex drama that is not simply a domestic tragedy but also a critical commentary on how gendered power might be an important agent of subjectivity, embodiment and memory in contemporary India. In such a way, Tara is still a very significant source to learn how the body, power, and institutional authority are entangled in modern India

2. Feminist Theoretical Framework

It is then important to incorporate the universal and the Indian socio-cultural perspectives into the systemic oppression shown in Tara. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* envisions women as the Other, who is placed in contrast to the male instead of being individuals. Beauvoir believes that this construction places women in the second category, as they are systematically deprived of complete agency and subjectivity. Beauvoir believes that this arrangement places women in the second rank, denying individuality and agency in society. In Tara, this system explains the treatment of the body of the female twin as expendable and the propensity of Chandan to his needs despite medical proof to the contrary. Tara is Othered since her birth, and this is what Beauvoir is against regarding culture; her potential, mobility, and even her own body are subordinated to male privilege.

Judith Butler says that gender performativity is not natural in essence but rather built up on repetitive acts deeply incorporated in social interaction. The decisions made by the family, the medical procedure, and even social beliefs about marriage and family line replicate the male-dominated order in the play. The privilege that Chandan enjoys is not merely a biological fact, but an imposition, a performance that parents impose, the doctor and the broader societal expectations. The marginalisation of Tara, in turn, is generated and reinforced by recurrent episodes of disregard and favouritism towards her brother. With the concept of gender being socially constructed, the theory by Butler points out the structural and behavioural processes by which the structure of patriarchy is created and reproduced in the intimate spaces, such as the family unit. Nivedita Menon provides significant ground to understand the context for these dynamics to work within the boundaries of Indian society. Menon states that patriarchy in India is perpetuated not only by direct control but also by social, economic and cultural institutions that prioritise male heirs and regulate the bodies of females. The provision of land to the surgeon in the play Tara by the grandfather guarantees that the third leg goes to Chandan, an example of what Menon observes: property, politics and kinship together systematically disadvantage women. Furthermore, the ingrained compliance in Bharati shows how even women themselves may become agents of patriarchal power, which Menon highlights as a major mechanism of its continuity

in India. Collectively, this study will draw upon these theorists to form a consistent framework for the analysis of play, Tara. Beauvoir gives the existential analysis of the subordination of women, Butler describes how gender hierarchy is produced performatively, and Menon brings these processes to the Indian socio-cultural and institutional context. The following parts of this paper build upon this theoretical background to engage the text in greater depth and trace the connection between gender, disability, and family relationships and their interplay, which results in complex modes of oppression.

3. Gender, Disability, and the Politics of the Body

The physical state of the twins in Tara serves as a powerful image of the gendered social structures. At birth, Tara and Chandan are separated because Tara was born with three legs and the third leg was removed and given to Chandan. Although it could have been easier with Tara, since the medical evidence indicated that the third leg would have been viable. Tara's body has been submissive to male privilege right from her birth, creating a lifelong order that embodies the systemic societal hierarchy of giving boys an advantage in comparison to girls. Her agony starts even before she can demand herself, showing how the bias of patriarchy is at work on the first line of existence. Her body becomes the site of dominance and sacrifice in the patriarchal society. The surgical procedure literally cuts her physical

integrity to give her brother a perfect and complete life, a representation of how the lives of women are usually instrumentalised to meet the demands of males. Bharati, her mother, even though she loves Tara, becomes the instrument of gendered politics and provides consent for unfair operation. She was convinced that the male heir should be the centre, thus protected at any cost. This submissiveness of the mother highlights the importance of the internalisation of patriarchy that can make women behave contrary to the needs of other women to maintain systemic discrimination. Bharti subsequently admits her regrets, though her character develops into a tragic heroine who is a victim of being driven by gendered demands, shattering Tara's sense of wholeness on a familial level. Tara is betrayed by the woman, who was meant to take care of her. Gender and disability are further joined and thus result in further fragmentation that leaves her socially and literally crippled. Social marginalisation and lack of movement, which are subjected to Tara, echo against the general fragmentation of female identities in society. Since her childhood, she has had to deal not only with the physical impairment but also with a social scowl, especially in terms of marriage and social validation. The questions like “who will accept a one-legged daughter” indicate the social pressure worsening her pain, and highlight that disability cannot exist without the gender restriction imposed on women. The disability in this case cannot be perceived in isolation from gender; it becomes a prism of

patriarchal control in this context, which corresponds to the ideas of Judith Butler about the body as a “political instrument, in her view, which is conditioned by the societal norms. The restricted life of Tara is a reflection of the limited agency of women, her single leg a vivid sign of halving in society. These hierarchies are further supported through medical authority. The grandfather’s offer of land to the surgeon to ensure Chandan’s leg operation, blending patriarchal power with institutional and political influence, to dominate the female. The surgeon, Dr Thakkar, declared this bias as fair despite its moral and ethical void. Tara’s marginalisation is therefore organised, approved, and endorsed by the family and the society. Her body, which is bound by social and medical force, represents the effects of gendered power, revealing the mechanism by which patriarchy controls and shapes the physical and social realities of women as the second sex. The play *Tara* highlights a frightening image of gendered politics of the body. The play demonstrates that patriarchal privilege is issued at birth, it is practised and supported by the social norms, and institutionalised by the authorities. Being incomplete in her body and marginalised as the person of the opposite sex, Tara forms a critique of the systemic suppression of women, and the play can be discussed as a potent feminist analysis of the relations of gender, disability, and familial authority.

4. Patriarchy, Motherhood, and Medical Ethics

Tara also reveals the fact that patriarchy is not only a complex of domestic family attitudes, but a system that is institutionalised and functions through family, medicine, law, and culture to influence the lives of women since birth. The hospital, expected to be a neutral, transformed into a place that is dominated by patriarchal power, economic interest and social hierarchy. The part of the medical decision of the twins' separation is never purely clinical but is determined by the capitalistic power of the grandfather, the promise of land and the idea that the life of a man is more precious. This demonstrates how patriarchy operates as a structural force: it is replicated in the everyday decisions of fathers, doctors and even the state itself, in which all these decisions assume that the male body must be given priority, protection, and wholeness. Bharati, the mother, holds a complex and painful position and role in this patriarchal system. Her true affection towards Tara, as portrayed by her constant readiness to give her own body, even to the extent of donating a kidney, demonstrates that her emotions are not conditioned by indifference but by internalised norms. She has internalised the message that the son must be put at the core and protected, even if it costs the physical wholeness of the female child. By doing so, Bharati turns out to be a perpetrator of patriarchal oppression, despite being oppressed under the same system. The fact that she is obedient to the surgery is not out of cruelty, but rather, it is a result of a strong inner sense of what is required of her as a good mother in a patriarchal

family. Even medical ethics are too compromised by becoming gendered instead of being neutral. Dr Thakkar proceeds to give Chandan the third leg, despite the medical advice showing that the leg would only work on Tara; this clearly shows that monetary benefit and social status can ruin professional ethics. His words- the boy needs it more, this is fair, this is to the family- are hiding a very gendered value judgment under the cloak of clinical neutrality. Mr Patel reveals-

A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl... 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... I couldn't believe what she told me- that they would risk giving both legs to the boy... The doctor had agreed... It was later that 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 the city from the state. Your grandfather's political influence had been used... Chandan had two legs for two days. It didn't take them very long to realise what a great mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead fish, which could have been Tara (Tara 378)

This is indicative of a broader mindset in Indian society, legislations such as the PCPNDT Act (1994) were brought into force to prevent sex –

selection but still demonstrate how patriarchal preferences can poison the application of medical practice and technology. The unethical conduct of a surgeon shows that medical establishments do not neutrally treat bodies, but judge and prioritise them in a gendered manner. However, Tara is impaired, not just biologically but socially, through gendered medical ethics that make the loss of the female body a normalised profit to the male. The layered critique in the play aligns with a multifaceted patriarchy that is institutionalised, and mastered by gendered medical ethics, internalised maternity, disability politics and psychological trauma. Patriarchy is not just in the order of the father, or the bribe of the grandfather; it is also in the ambivalent love of the mother, in the clinical language of the doctor, and even in the partial opposition of the law to sex-biased action. These forces combined make it sure that Tara's body is controlled, fragmented, and marginalised; while Chandan's is maintained, centred, and supported. Through this, Dattani incriminates the institutions that pretend to be neutral, demonstrating how they, in reality, cement gender inequity and divide the identity of women even at the very inception of life.

5. Trauma, Masculinity, and Fragmented Identity

Although the main focus of the play is on female oppression, the play also shows the impact of patriarchy on male identity and the psychosomatic effects. Chandan, after receiving the third leg,

leads a life full of guilt and anxiety about what happened to his sister, which means that male privilege will have emotional repercussions. This feeling of responsibility for the death of Tara is further built upon the understanding that social and family systems, particularly the exercise of patriarchal power, the internalisation of motherhood and the gendering of medical ethics, have facilitated her oppression. In this manner, the play criticises a system where women, as well as men, are bound by gendered expectations, albeit in varying forms, and that psychological trauma is as much a result of social structure as it is of personal experience. The inability to come to terms with his past and the present also creates a further fragment in Chandan's identity. He, in London, feverishly writes a play, which he calls *Twinkle Tara*, as a tribute to his sister, but he finds it hard to express his memories and feelings. This writing turns out to be a failed effort at healing, a desperate reenactment of memory that only serves to reveal the level of his unresolved trauma. He says-

Give me a moment, and the pain will subside. Then I can function again. [pause, more controlled now] Yes. The material is there. But the craft is yet to come. Like the amazing Dr Thakkar, I must take something from Tara and give it myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world, in anger. [Slowly, as if in a trance, he picks up the typed sheets and starts tearing them as he speaks]. My progress so far, I must admit, has been zero (Tara 379)

This fragmentation is further strengthened by the flashbacks used in the play, whereby the time is crumbled to reveal that childhood choices, based on disability politics and medical complicity, still percolate into his adult mind. Chandan represents a type of masculinity that is framed by social expectations and cultural privilege, yet it is beset by the wrongs that privilege has brought about, making his identity incomplete and fragile. The fact that Tara is no longer in the present, as reflected by the memories of Chandan, highlights that patriarchy has direct and indirect destructive effects on women and men. Her death and the loss of her potential trigger Chandan into a lifelong psychological trauma and opens up the many-fold aspects of how patriarchal privilege causes both moral and emotional conflicts. Dattani challenges the notion of patriarchy marginalising women, highlighting the fact that gendered social systems, working through family, medicine, and everyday conventions, harm the human psyche across identities. Not only is Chandan constantly troubled with insomnia and obsessively writing, but he also feels withdrawn emotionally, and all of this is an indication that his trauma is not necessarily an individual phenomenon but a social phenomenon. The physical distance between the twins works as a metaphor for the fragmented identity of males under systematic injustice, as they attempt to give wholeness to Chandan by stealing what is supposed to belong to Tara. The trauma Chandan experienced cannot be isolated without the ethical compromises that influenced and shaped his early

life, the consent of Bharati, which was given reluctantly, the bribe given by the grandfather and the choice of the surgeon to go by the patriarchal logic rather than the medical ethics. In this regard, the play connects psychological fragmentation to structural oppression directly, demonstrating that trauma is personal as well as social, and that boys who are provided with wholeness by the system are still rendered existentially fragmented. Finally, Tara indicates that patriarchy is complex and mutually harmful. Whereas Tara experiences both physical and social harm in terms of disability, social marginalisation and medical injustice, Chandan carries the emotional burden of her oppression. His fragmented identity, his guilt, and his failure to memorialise his sister underline the fact that the social and family structures that suppress women are also restrictive to men, generating a traumatic cycle that goes beyond female experiences. The play, therefore, offers a complete feminist account wherein gendered power structures harm the human psyche and shape identity across generations in an institutionalised system of patriarchy mastered through gendered medical ethics, internalised maternity, disability politics and psychological trauma.

6. Contemporary Relevance and Conclusion

Tara is still exceptionally relevant even 30 years after its initial performance, as it throws light on the way in which patriarchal traditions, gender discrimination, and institutional bias perpetuate

life in contemporary India. The main critique of the play, which is that female bodies are subservient to male privilege, is reflected in the modern-day issue of sex-selective actions, gendered access to healthcare services, and the social preference of male offspring. Even in the presence of legal mechanisms, such as the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act to criminalise sex-selective abortions, patriarchal notions run deep, such that no law is sufficient to overturn the structural and cultural processes that undermine the value of girls. The play also builds on existing discussions of gendered medical ethics and bodily autonomy. Tara's surgical subjugation thus becomes a disturbing mirror for ongoing practices in which female bodies are medically regulated, legally marginalised, and socially discounted. It also foresees existing arguments about gendered medical ethics and bodily autonomy. The choice to amputate Tara's third leg and give it to Chandan foreshadows the way medical authority, family pressure and economic power can override the ethical and clinical considerations with varying results across gender lines. In modern India, literature remains vocal on the fact that disparities in healthcare access and quality remain chronically high among girls and women, which dictates that gender, coupled with class and institutional power, creates vastly unequal life opportunities. The narrative by Dattani is therefore both a critique of the injustices that had prevailed in the past and a prism through which to perceive current practices

in which women and their bodies are still very much places of control, negotiation, and sacrifice. Meanwhile, the play powerfully foreshadows the psychological effects of patriarchal privilege. Chandan is guilty, insomniac and disjointed, which indicates the moral and emotional price of social regimes that privilege men at the cost of female well-being. His obsessive reworking of *Twinkle Tara* is a figurative effort to make amends for the damage that gendered medical ethics and internalised maternity have wrought. In modern India, both men and women are still negotiating about strict gender roles- sons to be heirs, daughters to be liabilities, mothers to be negotiators of patriarchal requirements, and discloses that patriarchal systems are self-enforcing and multi-generational. Dattani reveals the twofold oppression of these structures by projecting Chandan's trauma and the physical and social inferiority of Tara, who is marginalised whilst men are forced to live in guilt, complicity and fragmented identity.

To sum up, *Tara* by Mahesh Dattani is a monumental piece of feminist literature as it reveals the convergence of gendering, disability, family authority and official power. The play is condemnatory of the mechanism of patriarchy at a variety of levels: at the level of internalised obedience of the mother and the political and economic advantage of the grandfather, at the level of betrayal of ethics by the doctor, and at the level of the degradation of disabled women in society. The fact that Tara has a fragmented body

and a limited social identity demonstrates that the effects of patriarchal control are much broader than the physical; they define marital opportunities, agency of individuals, and their self-worth, and thus indicate the strong interrelation of body, societal, and power. Tara gives a classic perspective on gender inequality by pre-empting such processes. Although legal, political and social environments in India have been changing, patriarchal structural and cultural forces are still dominant. The timelessness of the play highlights the sense of urgency to feminist critique and intervention, particularly in the fields of medical ethics, disability politics, motherhood, and psychological trauma. Through this, Tara reveals more than just a complex and institutionalised form of patriarchy, but also makes the readers question how various actors, including women and men, families and institutions, complicity contributed to it.

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