



Research Paper

Re-Reading Mahesh Dattani's Tara

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She didn't notice the single Siamese soul (Roy 41)

ABSTRACT: Ample attention and analysis has been bestowed on Mahesh Dattani's Tara. The play is a masterpiece as far as stagecraft and the appropriation of English language to the Indian context is concerned. Mahesh Dattani does not shy away from owning up the English language. It is undoubtedly the language of the Indian upper middle class—a language used with sophistication and ease. It is also a marker of social mobility and acceptability in the close knit cliques of the city-scape. However, for those who due to one reason or another are not well versed with the language are put at a loss. They suffer from a handicap, undoubtedly different from the physical handicap that Tara suffers in the play, yet they suffer. Tara weds the question of language with the question of gender—the two grand constructs of the society that determine the kind of lives we live. The play has been analysed by critics and scholars over and over again yet the reading of Tara is incomplete unless and until the organic unity of the play is borne in mind. The aim of the present work is to foreground the form and content are dexterously interwoven and so is the working of the two major metanarratives—language and gender. It would be worthwhile to explore both the facets of the play vis-a-vis each other and the intriguing dialogue they offer.

KEYWORDS: Language, Gender, Constructs, Metanarratives, Organic Unity

Received 26 January, 2019; Accepted 09 February, 2019 © the Author(S) 2019.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Coming from a multilingual background, Mahesh Dattani has witnessed the crippling effect of losing one's mother-tongue at a very early age. Dattani received his education in English and as a consequence lost his mother tongue—Gujarati. However, the acclaimed actor, director, playwright, dancer and screenplay writer goes on articulating the crises within language and society through language best known to him, i.e., English. He is credited with an adept use Indian idiom and colloquialisms that is shorn of any trace of colonial anxiety of the past. Tara is a play about the Siamese twins—Tara and Chandan who represent the two aspects of the same self. They symbolically represent the 'male' and 'female' present in all of us. Human beings, (both males and females) constitute of the hormones of both the sexes in varied proportions. As the famous distinction by Toril Moi, female/ male is a biological term whereas feminine and masculine are cultural constructs. What is feminine and masculine is determined by the social norms and codes. With masculinity comes the prerogative of power and consequence of femininity is to submit to that power. Commenting on the play, Mahesh Dattani remarked: "I see Tara as a play about the male and the female self. The male self being preferred (if one is to subscribe to conventional categories of masculine traits and feminine traits) in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst" (Collected Plays 29). The Patel household is atypical of the Indian middleclass where patriarchy still has not loosened its grip. A "patriarchal bargain" comes into play which is defined as: ". . . set rules and script regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and negotiated. . . . However, women as a rule bargain from a weaker a weaker position" (qtd. in Jackson 111) Tara and her mother have internalised the values system of a society that is inherently unjust to women. They mouth platitudes which have been handed down to them over generations of subjugation. Tara as a young girl tells her brother that women have an instinctual power which is innate to them:

Tara: Women have an instinct for these things.

Chandan: Women, not girls.

Tara: It's innate! We are born with it! (Tara 15)

It is interesting to note that society constructs gender through language and by the usage of platitudes Tara unwittingly submits to the role assigned to her by the society. The roles of men and women are neatly defined and there is no scope of contestation of these roles. Tara describes a routine conversation at their home: "The men in the house . . . [are] deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave." (8) The primordial roles assigned to males and females do not fit in when applied to the modern world where men and women work abreast and form a part of the modern workforce. In the evolution of human race, men on account of being physically robust were assigned the role of hunting whereas women would stay back in the caves. The traces of such an atavistic psyche are never erased completely in a patriarchal setup. The patriarch of the Patel household assigns different roles for his son and daughter. He cannot bear the "feminine" aspect of his son where Chandan would prefer to stay back in cave and do his jigsaw puzzle or help his mother to undo her mistake while knitting (8 and 31). Patel wishes his son to continue his legacy—to make it to college and learn business whereas for Tara only financial security is sought. Bharati in the course of the narrative, dons the cloak of a progressive mother who wants her daughter to have a mind and room of her own: "It's time Tara decided what she wants to be. Women have to do that as well these days. She must have a career." (28) Yet, she has wronged Tara more than Patel by denying her a part of her own self. Bharati's obsession with her future is not empowering but crippling. She makes her excessively dependent on her, both literally and figuratively. Tara's handicap is a direct consequence of her mother denying her a limb that nature had bestowed her. The guilt of having wronged her daughter is displaced into obsession. No amount of love and attention showered on her could compensate for the grave injustice done to her. The pain of Tara is felt by the reader by a crisp exchange between her and Chandan:

Chandan: They are not the ugly ones. We are horrible one-legged creatures.

Tara (angrily). Yes, but you don't have to say it!

Chandan (moves to her): I'm sorry. You mustn't mind very much.

Tara: What makes you think I mind?

Chandan (softly): I feel your pain.

Tara: Yes, I do mind. I mind very much

This exchange is the only one which gives us a view of Tara's pained psyche—how it is to be little less of oneself. Bharati as a woman has internalized the norms of the society the way we internalize the rules of a language. She favours the boy-child over the girl-child the way society would have her to behave and still continues to toe the line/ language of the society:

It's all right while she is young. It's all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you—but not her! Oh, the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God! Oh God! (29)

The very quality of existence of Chandan and Tara is determined by their gender. The pair of Siamese twins are born with three legs and two of them have a major supply of blood coming from Tara. Biologically and naturally speaking, both the legs belong to Tara but she is put at a disadvantage on account of her gender and the leg is given to Chandan by corrupting the already corrupt Dr Thakkar. There is an interesting Nature/ Culture dichotomy in the play. Nature (like sex) operates through the laws of biology and is impartial whereas Culture (like gender and language) is a construct that favours the male over the female. Even though Dr Thakkar manipulates the truth through language yet nature has its way: "Our greatest challenge would be to keep the girl child alive. Nature wanted to kill her. We couldn't allow it." (56) Tara is presented to the world as a medical marvel and a news report that Chandan/ Dan has preserved speaks volumes about how a martyr is made out of Tara:

Patel Twins made medical history today by being the longest surviving pair of Siamese twins . . . Tara Patel, who underwent her seventh prosthesis and a kidney transplant in the same month, was smiling and jovial within hours of complex surgery . . . Tara Patel, whose recovery was nothing less than a miracle, states that her source of strength was her mother. Of course, her brother and father. Mrs Bharati Patel, however, was too indisposed to give an interview. A distraught Mr Patel explained that this has been a trying time for her. For, in spite of the brave façade put up by her, Tara has far too many complications to be completely out of danger. However, the will to survive has proved to work more miracles than the greatest of science . . . (36)

However, nature rejects what is imposed on it by the culture and the leg survives for just two days with Chandan. In the past the existence of a girl-child was annihilated by drowning her in milk but in the present, sex determination has made the job easy. Tara isn't amongst those aborted fetuses for whom the womb became the graveyard. She is allowed to be born but a life of dignity and equality is denied to her. The separation of Tara and Chandan is actually a severing of a unified and dignified self. Fragments of a once-upon-a-time-unified-self are left adrift forever. Self unlike gender is not a construct and the fragmentation of self leaves Chandan rudderless. He in the process of facing his fractured self becomes Dan.

Dan lives in a seedy suburb of London and tries to write about the tragedy of Tara. After Tara's death, the fractured and fragmented self grapples with the other part of 'its-self'. This is particularly a tedious exercise as Dan tries to make a literary attempt at narrating Tara's story. Here the power politics of gender again comes into play—Dan filters Tara's story through the male consciousness. With the power to narrate someone's tale comes the power to narrate it the way one wants it. Since, this "someone" is no other than the "other one." Chandan narrates the tale of his other self—Tara. We know Tara as we know her through Chandan's story.

In fact, Tara's identity is reduced to a hollow literary ambition of Dan: "To tell you the truth, I had even forgotten I had a twin sister . . . Until I thought of her as subject-matter for my next literary attempt. Or maybe I didn't forget her. She was lying deep inside, out of reach . . . (4-5). Or the even more revealing lines when Chandan compares himself with DrThakkar, the man whose "sheer God-like presence" (3) pulls the strings of tragedy for the Patel household:

Like the amazing DrThakkar, I must take something from Tara—and give it to myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy (Emphasis mine). To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world, in anger . . . (59)

Pretensions apart the whole literary attempt of Dan can be read as an apology too—a requiem to the twin-sister he lost to the brute norms of society. The play ends at a note of pathos as he seeks Tara's forgiveness: "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy." (60) The tragedy of Tara is complete and voiced by her disillusioned statement: "And she called me her star!" (58) Her very name—the signifier of her identity is rendered ironical.

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Dr Deeba" Re-Reading Mahesh Dattani's Tara" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* , vol. 07, no. 1, 2019, pp. 31-33