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UNHEARD ECHOES: EXPLORING FEMALE SUBALTERNITY IN THE POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES OF *TARA*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, one of the most prominent dramatists of the contemporary era, is known for his profound exploration of marginalized and less-privileged communities. As a dramatist, actor, and director, Dattani addresses pressing and often taboo issues such as homosexuality, gay relationships, gender inequality, and the plight of the minority community. In his play *Tara*, Dattani critiques the prevailing socio-cultural system in India, which imposes various limitations, constraints, and injustices on female children. Women are often denied the freedom to think and act independently. Tara, a disabled girl and the protagonist of the play, becomes a tragic victim of this oppressive system, enduring prolonged suffering, humiliation, and ultimately, death. Through *Tara*, Dattani advocates for the rights and dignity of women, emphasizing the need for gender equality and social justice.

Through his narratives, Dattani portrays the struggles and revolts of the subaltern as they strive to reclaim their identity and dignity.

Keywords: Postcolonial, subaltern, patriarchy, and gender discrimination.

Mahesh Dattani represents a new and unconventional voice in contemporary drama. His works primarily focus on identifying and uplifting marginalized sections of society. His plays, such as *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, and *Where There's a Will*, often address the pervasive discrimination between one gender over another. In *Tara*, Dattani critiques the societal norms and regulations that dictate a girl's life based solely on her gender. He explores how the dynamics of society differ drastically for men and women, including young girls, being compelled to conform to patriarchal ideologies and accept male domination. These socio-cultural standards perpetuate the inferiority of the girl child, creating a system in which her existence is undervalued, and her survival is precarious.

Dattani highlights the societal belief that girls are treated as inferior eventually leading to neglect and discrimination. Simone de Beauvoir refers in her seminal work *The Second Sex*: "The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth" (196). In *Tara*, he underscores the illusion of equality in birth and upbringing. The story revolves around, conjoined twins surgically separated after birth. The twins share three legs, with the third leg receiving most of its blood supply from Tara. However, under the influence of her patriarchal grandfather, their mother insists on grafting the leg onto Chandan, despite medical advice that refused it. The leg is ultimately rejected the unnatural surgery, leaving both children with prosthetic legs.

This unjust decision has far-reaching consequences. Tara, weakened and neglected, succumbs to her condition, and her death leads to the eventual demise of her mother.

Chandan, who shared a close bond with Tara, becomes haunted by guilt and lives a self-condemned life in London, burdened by the cruelty and selfishness of his parents. Through *Tara*, Dattani poignantly portrays the deep-rooted gender biases that shape societal values, emphasizing the need for equality and justice.

Through his plays, Mahesh Dattani echoes these principles by advocating for individual's rights to live according to their own choices and dignity. *Tara* delves into the tragic lives of two subaltern women, Tara and her mother, Bharathi. Tara, a spirited and vibrant young girl, was full of aspirations and zest for life. However, her dreams were shattered by her biased parents, while her brother, Chandan, adapted comfortably to his own limitations. The decision to graft the third leg onto Chandan, which biologically belonged to Tara, not only left her physically handicapped but also endangered her life, ultimately lead her soul to break. Had the leg remained with Tara, she might have led a happy and successful life. Despite the undeniable role of women in the sustenance of society, they continue to face systematic partiality and discrimination. The pervasive gender bias is so deeply ingrained that it manifests in cruel practices such as female infanticide and selective abortion, depriving women and girls of their very existence before birth. As de Beauvoir condemns, "her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly" (731).

Within her own family, Tara endures blatant gender discrimination. Not only is she deprived of her rightful limb, but she is also excluded from the inheritance left by her grandfather, a wealthy and politically influential man. While he leaves a substantial fortune to Chandan, Tara receives nothing. His will exemplifies the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset in Indian society, where girls are systematically marginalized and undervalued.

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. (*CP* 360)

Through Tara, Dattani exposes the harsh realities of gender inequality and challenges the societal norms that perpetuate such injustices, highlighting the need for systemic change. This injustice fosters a deep resentment in Tara toward her father, who is notably less affectionate toward her than he is toward Chandan. As a businessman, he considers Chandan as his successor take care of his business, but he has no plan for Tara.

Feminism in *Tara* aligns closely with postcolonialism, as both challenge traditional norms and advocate for the development of new, progressive discourses. Both movements expose societies where significant social and political hegemonic shifts are underway. Analyzing, *Tara* reveals that the play embodies many characteristics of postcolonial literature. In light of contemporary views on equality and democracy, women in Dattani's works are not passive victims of patriarchal oppression. Almost all the female characters in his plays resist the injustices inflicted upon them. This spirit of defiance is evident in Tara's voice and her refusal to be manipulated by the malice and hypocrisy of those around her. When Patel compels Tara to attend college for Chandan's sake, she stubbornly refuses, asserting her independence.

PATEL: (*to Chandan*). You filled up your forms?

CHANDAN: Tara?

TARA: Of course not. There's no point in my going to college if I have to drop out halfway through or stay away for days not knowing when . . . No!

PATEL: I understand. (*Goes to Tara.*) But we have a problem here. Chandan refuses to join college without you.

TARA: Look, I'm not going to go to college for his sake. So tell him not to not go to college for my sake.

CHANDAN: Don't be ridiculous. I just don't feel like joining without you. I'm not doing anything for your sake.

TARA: Oh, for God's sake!

PATEL: You two are old enough to sort this out amongst yourselves. I won't interfere. But this is certain, Chandan has to join. I have plans for him... (CP 363)

Feeling neglected and unloved, she cries out: "How do you expect me, to feel anything for anyone if they don't give me any feeling to begin with? ...Why are you asking me to do something that nobody has done for me?" (CP 371) This statement reflects her inner turmoil and growing resentment toward a world that shows her little compassion. She questions why she cannot be selfish or indifferent when surrounded by apathy. It is tragic that such a spirited and resilient young woman is denied the chance to live fully, merely because she is a disabled girl.

PATEL: ...Anyway, she will be glad she won't have to go for her dialysis after the surgery. Don't worry, doctor, she is a very high-spirited girl.

Knowing her, she will probably joke about it. And her brother gives her enough moral support. (CP 346)

Among the male characters in *Tara*, Patel and Bharati's father are equally oppressive and domineering, reflecting their perception of women as subordinate. The only difference is Patel is soft in his patriarchal approach, while Bharati's father is not. They uphold patriarchal ideals that devalue women and reinforce gender inequality. Dr. Thakkar, on the other hand, uses his intelligence and expertise for materialistic gain, embodying the corrupt opportunism

of modern society. Chandan, however, stands apart from others, he respects and upholds Tara's dignity and her individuality as a girl.

The theme of multiculturalism, a hallmark of postcolonial literature, is evident in *Tara*. Chandan and Tara, for instance, prefer watching television and listening to music rather than engaging in traditional Indian games. References to Western musicians such as Brahms and Beethoven further highlight this cultural blending. Additionally, the separation of the Siamese twins through advanced medical technology exemplifies the influence of Western scientific innovation. Through these elements, Dattani interweaves themes of multiculturalism, modernity, and postcolonial critique, highlighting the intersections of tradition, modern influence, and the evolving roles of individuals within a patriarchal society.

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." (*CP* 379)

Bharati has inherited a sense of acceptability that men must be prioritised over women. Dattani suggests that if Bharati and Patel had fostered mutual understanding and equality in their relationship, Bharati might have not taken the decision to give the third leg to the boy, and Tara's tragic death could have been avoided. Through *Tara*, Dattani envisions a society that naturally balancing the reclamation of cultural heritage with a forward-looking attitude. Simultaneously, he calls for the rejection of oppressive norms and advocates for a dignified position for women in both private and public spheres. When the truth was revealed to Tara that her own parents betrayed her and prioritises Chandan even though biologically the leg belongs to her.

PATEL: A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl... That same evening, your mother told me of her decision.

Everything will be done as planned. Except —I couldn't believe what she told me—that they would risk giving both legs to the boy . . . Your grandfather's political influence had been used... It didn't take them very long to realize what a grave mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have—might have—been Tara. Because of the unusual, nature of the operation, it was easy to pass it off as a natural rejection. (*CP* 382)

Dattani's appropriation of imperial cultural discourse does not dismiss the value of his own culture; instead, it integrates intellectual and artistic traditions as interwoven aspects of the human experience. He critiques the binary oppositions perpetuated by traditional Western culture, which associate men with reason, logic, and objectivity, while relegating women to the realm of the body, emotion, and an absence of reason. By transcending both Western and native traditions, Dattani seeks to redefine societal values and restore dignity of women.

Ultimately, it is not just individual actions but the collective mindset of society that bears the most responsibility for Tara's demise. The issue of subalternity of women being perpetuated by fellow women is a significant theme in Mahesh Dattani's play, *Tara*. This concept finds a poignant and shocking manifestation in Bharati's decision, in collusion with her father, to ensure that the "third leg" is attached to Chandan instead of Tara. This decision underscores the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset that even women internalize, ultimately perpetuating the subjugation and marginalization of other women. Bharati's actions highlight how societal norms and cultural expectations often influence women to become complicit in reinforcing the very structures that oppress them. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri in her *Mahesh Dattani an Introduction: Contemporary Indian Writers in English* (2005) opines:

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)

Tara, on the other hand, symbolizes the potential for resistance and change within a patriarchal framework. Despite being marginalized and treated as inferior from birth, Tara's character exudes profundity and receptivity. Her aspirations and individuality challenge the societal expectation that women should lead mundane, subordinate lives. Through *Tara*, Dattani underscores his belief in the unconventional and transformative role of women, suggesting that their resilience and self-awareness can become tools for subverting oppressive traditions. Ultimately, *Tara* serves as a critique of patriarchal systems and a call to recognize the strength, depth, and aspirations of women. Dattani's unwavering faith in women is evident in his portrayal of Tara's defiance and Bharati's complex emotional journey.

Similarly, Bharati's subalternity is tied to her dual role as both a victim and an enforcer of patriarchal values. Her inability to confess her guilt or donate her kidney to Tara further emphasizes her constrained existence, leaving her trapped in guilt and subservience. In contrast to Tara and Bharati, Dan represents a complex exploration of selfhood tied to guilt, loss, and memory. Dan's selfhood is inextricably linked to Tara, as she represents an inseparable part of his identity. The separation of the conjoined twins not only physically divides them but also creates a psychological void in Dan.

DAN: I forget Tara. I forget that I had a sister—with whom I had shared a body. In one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... and separated... and wish. I wish that a long-forgotten person would forgive me. Wherever she is. (*CP* 384)

Tara's death becomes a turning point that dooms Dan, as he is unable to reconcile his guilt over her fate. His decision to rewrite his story, focusing on Tara, reflects his longing to reconnect with his lost self and the sense of togetherness they once shared. Similarly, Tara, though relegated to the margins, refuses to accept her fate passively. Her wit, intelligence, and receptivity challenge societal expectations of women as inferior or secondary. Dattani employs nuanced strategies to highlight how women appropriate dominant discourses to carve out spaces for themselves.

The play emphasizes that women's voices are not completely erased, even under the dominance of men. Instead, women employ subtle strategies to redefine their roles and assert their independence. This reclamation of identity aligns with postcolonial attempts to resist Eurocentric narratives by reclaiming indigenous voices. Just as postcolonialism seeks to dismantle colonial discourse, Dattani's play challenges the male-centric ideology that marginalizes women. The women in *Tara* embody a form of voice consciousness, where they redefine themselves not as passive recipients of male decisions but as individuals striving for recognition.

In *Tara*, Dattani critiques the subaltern position of women and provides a platform for their voices to be heard, albeit through nuanced and often constrained forms of resistance. The symbolism of the Siamese twins serves as a reminder of the natural interdependence of man and woman, emphasizing that gender should not be a basis for discrimination or domination. By advocating for the dismantling of male-chauvinistic discourse, Dattani aligns with postcolonial efforts to challenge oppressive systems and reclaim suppressed voices. The

play ultimately affirms that, even within the constraints of patriarchy, the subaltern can indeed speak, using strategies of appropriation and redefinition to assert agency and resist domination.

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