

A Reflection Of Societal Norms In Mahesh Dattani's 'Tara'

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Abstract: Literature is said to hold a mirror up to society. The public and the personal aspects of one's life is woven with words into fabric that is exhibited to others in various forms –it could be prose, poetry, drama or novel. From the pre-Independence era, drama served as a platform to show case the social structural patterns, the beliefs, the injustices, concerns of a particular society in a particular time or era. Modern Indian drama plays two keys roles today. Firstly, it is closely related to modern Indian life-with people and society and secondly it keeps different regions, classes and castes united yet related. With the theory of socialistic feminism, an attempt has been made to showcase the injustices of the time in the name of customs or practices or social norms in Mahesh Dattani's Tara. The Siamese conjoined twins Chandan and Tara have a battle against society. Their desire is a life of normalcy and in the process a need for acceptance. But the attempt to acquire normalcy does not seem small and the efforts are many and far reaching and above all partial and sinister.

Key words: injustice, discrimination, gender choices, feminism

Introduction

The arena of Indian Drama is vast and intrinsic. From history, mythology, politics, realism to criticism of society, drama has been a constant replication of the changing times in India. Modern Indian drama presents the ordinary individual rather than the exalted, the course of events that emerge from mundane existence, caught in the vicissitudes of everyday life without theoretically attempting to impose a pattern on the course of conduct motivated by character. Mahesh Dattani is one such playwright who explores the relationships between men and women, distortions of everyday life, their courage, their frailties, their strength in adversity coupled with a desire for social reform.

Dipti Agawal in her book 'The plays of Mahesh Dattani' highlights the fact that

'...Contrary to traditional theatre, realistic plays in their presentational style, focus more on contemporary life. Their action is invented, their setting are urban or semi-urban...Domestic settings, love, marriage, parent-child conflicts, generational shifts and the pressures of urban life appear as the common subjects of his plays.'(p.39)

Mahesh Dattani frequently takes as his subject the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. His characters struggle for some kind of freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, cultural constructions of gender and repressed desire. His dramas are played out on multi-level sets where interior and exterior become one and geographical locations are collapsed-in short his settings are as fragmented as the families who inhabit them. In his plays Dattani takes on what he calls the 'invisible issues' of Indian society. An important aspect of socialist feminism is a rejection or an attempt to overthrow elements of patriarchy and capitalism. By pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre.

While commenting on the plays of Mahesh Dattani; John McRae calls him 'the voice of India' and says

'They are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concern for world drama.'(p.46)

'Family' is the most important theatrical space in his plays as most of Dattani's plays have family as their locale. In plays such as 'Where there is a Will', 'Bravely fought the queen' 'Dance like a Man' and 'Tara', tales of families go into the fabric and texture of his plays. Bipin Kumar Parmar says

'The dramatist depicts the battles being fought among the members of the same family at home.' (p.27)

Asha Chaudhuri in her book *Contemporary Indian Writers* talks about the theme of family in Mahesh Dattani's plays. She says

'...The setting for all of Dattani's plays then is necessarily embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class Indian family and this is the context from which he operates.'(p.24)

In the hands of Mahesh Dattani, Indian society with an absolute collapse of the edifice of constructed morality has become a potential tool for his plays. He explores the precariousness of human predicament with the clash of ideologies. In an interview, Mahesh Dattani says

'... the individual versus society, I guess is the theme that's in all my plays'(Dattani, interview,180)

The play 'Tara' centers on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandmother to favor the boy, Chandan over the girl, Tara. The play begins with a sense of anguish where the lead character Chandan is trying to write a script for a play. He has changed his name from Chandan to Dan is now living in a suburb in London. He is seen typing furiously. He stops and removes the paper. As he talks to the audience he is sharing his memories. He admits to having locked himself in a bedsitter in London thousands of miles away from home yet he feels that is distance is still not enough. There is an attempt to distance himself from the experience he is writing about. But it seems difficult. He seems to take the help of alcohol to recharge himself again and again.

He has been writing for quite some time but has not been very successful. He has written a couple of short stories on the British Raj but he says no publisher seems interested in the political side of India. Like every outsider looking at India, publishers in London too wanted stories about social practices that held society in chains-be it Sati, dowry death or child marriage-topics guaranteed to raise the interest of the average western intellectual. He says that he completely forgot he even had a twin sister till she was chosen to become his subject for his next literary attempt. However he immediately confesses that he didn't forget her in reality but she just lay so deep inside, almost out of reach.

The next glimpse on stage is that of the twins- Chandan and Tara. They both have a limp but on different legs. The audience gets to hear Tara say

'...we've always been inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out...And separated.'(p.325)

Having been conjoined twins at birth, they are now the centre of medical attention. The doctors seem happy with their progress as separated individuals and are mostly going to be mentioned in a medical journal. Though their case seems a success and could be of guidance to fellow doctors, their parents especially the mother Bharati wants to keep them away from the limelight and publicity.

The mother Bharati seems to be concerned about Tara losing weight. She is forcing Tara to drink more milk because the doctors noticed that she has lost half a pound in one week. She fears that in one month, she might lose a kilo which will not be acceptable by the doctors. Although he husband tries to console her saying both the children are fine, Bharathi still continues to worry about Tara's health.

From the very beginning of the play, there is a hint that the boy is preferred over the girl. Although the girl seems smarter in her conversation with others, in her skills even if it's a game of cards and every family member is aware of her smartness, the boy Chandan is still given the first preference over the girl Tara in the household.

'Patel: I was just thinking...It may be a good idea for you to come to the office with me.

Chandan: What for?

Patel: Just to get a feel of it.

Chandan: You can take Tara. She'll make a great business woman.

Patel (*firmly*): Chandan, I think I must insist that you come.

Chandan: We'll both come with you

Patel: No!

(*Tara looks at Patel, slightly hurt*)

(Softens) Yes. You may both come-if you want to'.

Tara proudly tells her friend Roopa that her brother Chandan loves writing stories and he was going to write stories about her-Strong, Healthy and Beautiful. Roopa immediately says that those adjectives do not describe Tara but it describes herself very well. However in defense Tara says

"I am strong. My mother has made me strong."(p.330)

The Siamese twins Tara and Chandan were conjoined from the breastbone down through the pelvic area. It was considered a miracle that they were born alive. Twins with a conjunction of such complexities are in most cases stillborn. The operation took place when the twins were as young as three months old. Surgery was the only chance of survival.

The girl Tara is in need of a kidney transplant and so her mother Bharati seems very anxious about her putting on weight by the time of the surgery. She also wants to see her daughter happy and takes all the efforts possible to see that she seems happy. The mother Bharati also goes to the extent of forcing Roopa to become friends with her daughter Tara, so that Tara would be happy.

'Bharati: ...Tara...She can be very good company and she has her talents. She can be very witty and of course she is intelligent. I have seen to it that she...more than makes up in some ways for what she ...doesn't have....If you promise to be her best friend-what I mean is if you would like to be her friend-I will be most grateful to you and I will show it...in whatever way you want me to....Just be my Tara's friend.'(P.340-341)

Bharati fears for her daughter's future more than her son's future. She feels that typical of the Indian society, it will be easier for the boy to be accepted by society despite his setback of having an artificial leg but it would be very difficult for the girl to be accepted.

'Bharati: It's alright 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!' (p. 348-349)

Typical of the Indian mindset and thinking, the boy is seen as the breadwinner of the family. From the very beginning she is not denied anything by the members of his family-be it food, facilities or even education. Both formally and informally events in the household must work towards the boy's training and learning a skill, failing which the whole household could be in utter chaos.

'Patel: What are you doing?

Chandan: Mummy's knitting and I'm helping her sort out her mistake.

Patel: Let Tara do it....Give it to her.

Patel: Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!

Patel (*to Bharati*): Can't you even look after the children? ...But you can think of turning him into a sissy-teaching him to knit. ...I am disappointed with you. From now on you are coming to the office with me. I can't see you rotting at home'(p.351)

Following the norms as expected of them to prefer the boy over the girl, the mother Bharati along with her father who is a very wealthy man, an industrialist and an MLA give a chance of a normal life to Chandan instead of Tara. The conjoined twins had one leg each, however there was one complication as there were three legs for both of them joined together. The 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.

However the grandfather and the mother had a private meeting with the doctor. It was decided that they would risk giving both legs to the boy. They knew it was unethical and unfair to the girl and they knew that the doctor would also consider it unethical but the doctor was silenced with a huge offer of a large nursing home –the largest in Bangalore. Three acres of prime land was granted in the heart of the city from the state. The grandfather's political influence was used and the doctor was successfully bribed.

A few days later the surgery was done. As planned by the mother and the grandfather, Chandan had two legs for two days. It didn't take very long for them to realise the grave mistake they had made. The leg was amputated. A piece of dead flesh which could have-might have-been Tara. With the unusual nature of the operation, it was easy to pass off as a natural rejection.

With the failure of this big operation, the guilt fell on the mother. She wanted to correct the situation by donating her own kidney to her daughter Tara. Despite finding a proper match and a donor, the mother insists on her donation of a kidney. She tries to tell herself that she is compensating for that wrong decision she made earlier in life. She tells her daughter these words time and time almost saying the words to herself

'Bharati: Tara! My beautiful baby! You are my most beautiful baby. I love you very much....I want you to remember that Tara. Everything will be alright. Now that I am giving you a part of me. ...Everything will be alright...Don't worry. You will be fine. After the operation, we will be happy together. And I will make up for...for...I will make up for all the things God hasn't given you.'(p.355)

Conclusion

As Jeremy Mortimer writes in the Introduction to the second volume of Dattani's Collected plays published in 2005,

'Mahesh Dattani does not seek to cut a path through the difficulties his characters encounter in his plays; instead he heads his audience to see just how caught up we all are in the complications and the contradictions of our values and assumptions.(p.6-7)

Much as in the case of the pitiable state of affairs in the household of the Patels, they were forced to behave the way they did or were made to take the decisions they took probably because of the norms laid down by society. Being influenced by the culture and practices of the time, they did what they thought was expected of them. Not wanting to be different from the others in society, they went with the flow of the time and the demands of the situation and the choices they made affected every member of the family in ways they could not imagine. Each of them is enveloped with guilt and shame not having done what was right. There's seems to be a longing, a cry of pain, a despair and sign of regret. The episode of their error is pasted so deeply in their minds that they were unable to erase that memory and every action that follows is an attempt to undo what they did in the past.

Beena Agawar in 'Contemporary Indian English Drama: Canons and Commitments' states

'A child often finds social environment hostile and imperfect lacking in harmony of social system and individual will' (p.89)

The children seem unhappy but are trying ways and means to cope with the situation. Although Tara is not interested in anything around her after her surgery she tells her brother she tries to laugh at her brother's jokes. But after a point she tells the truth of how she feels. She tried of putting on a show on behalf of the others.

'Tara: Right! Let's get the act going. Come on Chandu, let's hear some more of your gags. I promise to laugh at all of them even if I've heard them before.. I promise to be cheerful all the time...

Chandan: You don't have to do anything you don't want to.

Tara (*in tears*) : Very well. I don't want to go to college. I don't want to listen to your wisecracks. And I don't want to eat dinner...' (p.359)

The father tries to prove his loves to his daughter through words of assurance time and again but it looks like it will actually take a long time for Tara to believe the words of her father as she has never experienced his love for herself in all the fifteen years of her life. The mother Bharati does everything possible to cover up her guilt- from getting friend to Tara to donating one of her kidney's but she has a long way to go too and Chandan is made to bear the blame. He bears the blame since he is the male member whose needs were kept in mind by all others. Thus societal norms and unaltered mind set makes the world a difficult place to live in for this child-Tara who is a girl and more so differently abled.

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