

## Homogenizing Gender and Disability: Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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### **Abstract**

Like race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, gender and disability are one of identity categories. These are social, cultural, and political constructions. Gender theorists reject the view that gender is natural or essential to body. Liberal thinkers believe in the categorization for instance; male and female, masculinity and femininity. They expect from them separate roles and behaviours. To them anatomical and physiological differences are guiding principles. By contrary, gender critics distinguish sex and gender to expose the baseless assumptions and associations about gender. They distinguish gender from sex. Likewise, disability critics raise their fingers against all those forces which help conditioning disability natural and there is no hope for them who are with certain physical deformities. In this paper, I shall try to explore how Dattani as a serious playwright in his play *Tara* clubs gender and disability to examine and evaluate unjustly operation of social, cultural, political, and economic machinery.

*Keywords:* Gender; disability; identity.

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Gender is biological determinant of male or female whereas the former "is widely held to be a product of the prevailing mores, expectations, and stereotypes of a particular culture" (Murfin & Ray 139). Gender critics contest values, meanings, assumptions, and representations identified with women promoting gender as a natural phenomenon. Gender is a socio-cultural construction. Gender is almost like a life-long training workshop wherein all male and female are trained politically. Gender critics fight against forces that help the naturalization of gender

possible. They try to make sure on the face of mainstream that women are independent and differently equipped with talents and abilities. And therefore, they must be treated at par with males. Their different expectations, aspirations, requirements, services, and capabilities must be recognized, valued, and honored. They should not be pitied and sympathized for all those qualities lodged with them. Instead, should have opportunities for the betterment of future.

Critical disability critics widely hold disability like gender critics, a socio-cultural construct. To prove their assumptions, they make *prima facie* the distinction between impairment and disability. The impairment is innate; it may be physical or mental. Whereas disability is produced by identifying with various undesirable values, meanings, representations, and references in a particular social, cultural, historic, political, and economic space. The idea of disability as available in various narratives is not natural. These critics scrutinize such narratives in order to stop naturalization of disability. They even question the view of ableism and normalcy. They help persons with certain deformity not to feel themselves as the bearer of unfortunate, stigmatized, devalued, and unrecognized bodies. They argue that their differences must be recognized, accommodated, and appreciated in mainstream course of socio-cultural life. Many persons with certain impairments overcome their so-called disabilities and proved they can be at par or ahead to other so-called able-bodied persons. Such persons prefer themselves to be designated and addressed as differently-abled. For certain anatomical differences, persons must not be made the target of exclusion, oppression, continuous abuses at the hands of fellow beings. Critical Disability Theory reviews the normative ideologies with the purpose to mete out justice to those people with stigmatized, devalued and unrecognized mind and body. Distinction of body is to be encouraged positively not for negation at all. Persons with disabilities are differential anatomically; hence they should be expected to render their services differently. It is no way promising to live out expectations and aspirations of others. A person's one or two aspects may be encouraging for someone at a given point of time but all aspects of his/her life may not be necessarily encouraging and inspiring transcending limits of time and space.

Let me mull for the time being about the idea of identity. Identity discourses do not allow anyone to go ahead its line of boundary. They fix norms for the building of identity by spreading a number of contexts and practices imbued with politically motivated significations,

values, and meanings. By contrary, identity is not a fix phenomenon. It keeps changing. It is set and reset till the end of life.

Mahesh Dattani in the play *Tara* successfully handled the theme of gendered disability by exposing and making Tara and Chandan as the victims of the patriarchal marginalization and discrimination. In the play we shall see how on the basis of mere assumptions Tara and Chandan are victimized. Are Tara and Chandan really freaks, ugly, and horrible? Do they really need compassion and sympathy of others? Is Roopa a normal girl? Does she have rights to be abusive to Tara and Chandan? Are Bharati and Patel really above gender discrimination? These are some of the queries I would attempt to answer in this paper with critical bent of mind.

*Tara* is a two-act stage play of Mahesh Dattani. It was first performed as *Twinkle Tara* on 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1990 at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore by Playpen Performing Arts Group. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 1991, it was performed as *Tara* at Sophia Bhabha Hall by Theatre Group, Bombay.

The play opens in the one-room apartment of the older Chandan “in a seedy suburb of London.” In London, he changed his name Chandan to Dan simply. The play is about Mr. Patel's family. The older Chandan came to London looking for career in writing. He wrote a book titled *Random Raj* and many short stories on the British Raj but failed to get them published. *Tara* is a memory play as all the events and happenings that took place in the Patel household are recorded in the memory of Dan. Here in London Dan even being thousands of miles away is not able to forget injustice done to the life of his twin sister Tara. Dan thinks himself guilty and answerable for that. He wants to turn his feelings of anguish and agony into drama ‘to masticate memories in the mind and spit out the result to the world in anger’ (CP 324). In such state of mind Dan even begins to think himself ‘a freak’. Critical disability critics ask to overcome the feelings of inferiority and stop the course of naturalization. Dan for the aforesaid purpose made Tara as the subject matter for his next literary attempt. For this he “doesn't have to look very far for inspiration.” Tara “was lying deep inside, out of reach...” (CP 324). In the play past and present interact happily.

Chandan and Tara are Siamese twins- “Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb.” They “were conjoined from the chest down.” To the surprise of doctors, they were of different sexes. Dr. Thakkar calls this phenomenon “Very, very rare.” Dan like so-called able-bodied people calls it “A freak among freaks.” (CP 332) Their parents belong to different

community and region. Their father Mr. Patel is a Gujarati and mother Bharati is Kannadiga. The former is the general manager of a pharmaceutical company Indo-Swede Pharmacia; the latter is only daughter to a rich, powerful industrialist turned to politician. Patel was disinherited for his inter-caste and inter-region marriage. As a result, Bharati's father plays major roles in the Patel household especially while making decisions. In the beginning they were very happy. They 'were all overjoyed when they came to know Bharati would have twins. Until certain tests revealed the... complications' (CP 377).

Bharati bore twins looking 'like two babies hugging each other.' The father of Bharati contacted Dr. Thakkar who had come to Bombay from abroad having completed his research on such cases. He involved personally and decided the separation surgery would be done in Bombay by Dr Thakkar. They remain conjoined for three months having three legs. It was the point of making crucial decision. Who will be given the third leg? "A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl." (CP 378) At the request of Bharati a fresh scanning was carried out but the same result came out. 'The chances for the survival of third leg were with girl.' That unfortunate time came and it was decided by Bharati's father convincing Bharati vaguely and promised Dr. Thakkar "three acres of prime land- in the heart of the city-from the state" (CP 378). Dr. Thakkar came around him and got ready to carry out unethical business. He did operation and thus Chandan got the third leg but that leg could survive only for two days. That leg might have survived with Tara. But the destiny has preserved something else for the Patel family. It was the terrible act accomplished under the leadership of Bharati's father which decided and affected the future course of the Patel household. His bloody patriarchal thinking completely devastated and distanced the family from happiness. In the accomplishment of this act neither the Patel couple nor the grandfather (Bharati's father) of twins can be exonerated anyway. Dr. Thakkar definitely carried out his job like a bloody professional or machine but failed to satisfy humanity. Would that he had risen above his profession. If he had done justice to humanity, he would have saved not only himself but his profession also from being stigmatized. Thus, Tara underwent the first stroke of gender discrimination.

Aftermath their separation surgery, Bharati became a little bitter and irritating. Mr. Patel got acrimonious towards her. There took place drastic change in Bharati's attitude towards Tara. She develops great obsession for Tara. She cajoles her, fondles her. It was her

belief that “love can make up for a lot” (CP 349). Actually, it was too late for her to make up for the loss. Later on, the grandfather passed away. Bharati felt that she was solely responsible for the injustice done to Tara. She always worries about her health. Tara underwent a number of operations and surgeries- “Surgery for us is like brushing our teeth” (CP 355).

Patel as a patriarch tries to naturalize different male and female roles “as natural, pre-ordained and unalterable.” (Nayar 90) He thinks biological differences defining factors rather than socio-cultural and economic ones. Tara frankly asserts:

...The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. (CP 328)

Patel asks Chandan to come to the office simply to get a feel of it. But Chandan denies going there alone. He insists that he will go along with his sister Tara. Patel wants Chandan “to be big and sturdy.” (CP 333) And moreover, he has a lot of plans for him. He wants to send Chandan to England for the further education. Once Bharati was knitting and Chandan was just helping her sort out mistakes. Patel tells him to let Tara do it. It is not his business. He can't see him rotting at home. He even blames Bharati that she is trying to turn Chandan into a sissy. This all verifies how Patel is trying to naturalize and enforce gender conditioning. To blanket his prejudices against Tara, he frequently claims that Bharati does not leave a moment's time to think about the future of Tara. Patel says to Bharati, “Yes! Look at the way you treat Tara. As if she is made of glass. You coddle her, you pet her, you spoil her. She's grown up feeling she doesn't need anyone but you!” (CP 352) “You're ruining her life.” Out of anger and frustration, Patel asks Bharati to call him ‘a liar, a wife-beater, a child abuser.’ He even blames Bharati for turning Chandan and Tara against him. It seems as if he had divided the family into two camps- male and female. Patel is political patriarch. The Patel family completely lost its harmony.

Despite her poor health, Tara often calls herself ‘strong, healthy, and beautiful’ and gives credit to her mother's extraordinary care and love. The older Chandan (Dan) thinks about her placing in the Patel family:

Kind, gentle, strong, her mother has given her strength. And Daddy? Silent? Angry? And – mummy.... This isn't fair to Tara. She deserves something better. She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. Maybe God

never wanted us to be separated. Destiny desires strange things. We were meant to die and our mortal remains preserved in formaldehyde for future generations to study. Our purpose in life was maybe that. Only that. But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life. A duel to the death between God and nature on one side and on the other - the amazing Dr. Thakkar. (CP 330)

Bharati claims that Mr. Patel is more concerned about Chandan's career. It was she who declares that Tara "must have a career." "She can't be... aimless all her life." (CP 348) Bharati sheds light on the discriminatory attitude of so-called able-bodied people towards persons with disabilities. It was perhaps the reason she wants Tara to become more social. She says:

She...she must make more friends. Chandan is all right - he has his writing, but she... He is different, he is sort of self-contained, but Tara... She can be very good company and she has her talents. She can be very witty and of course she is intelligent. (CP 340)

A little later, she further explains to Chandan:

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! (CP 348-49)

Bharati develops depression. Patel looks for kidney donor. Tara has to have kidney transplantation. Bharati keeps insisting on giving Tara her kidney but Patel rejects instantaneously every time. Even she gets hospitalized. She wishes to give her part but Patel points out that she is not in condition of making important decisions. Meanwhile, Patel took an appointment from Dr. Thakkar to get Tara kidney transplanted. Consequently, she has to drop school. Chandan is advised to classes regularly but he denies. Tara in her way tries to convince him to go to school. While talking with Chandan, she says that all she wants is to stay with mummy at the hospital. Patel negates immediately. Tara went to the hospital. What she

came to know there, Tara shared with Chandan. She says that the hospital staff has been strictly advised not to allow Tara to meet her in alone. And henceforth she hates him. In this way Patel even denies Bharati an opportunity to confess before Tara. Bharati is prevented from having the satisfaction of confession. She might have recovered if she had given a chance to confess before Tara. It proves Patel's deep-seeded cruel nature. Thus, we see that Tara and Bharati both suffered pains of gender discrimination.

Roopa, the ogler is very important character from disability studies' point of view. At the request of Bharati, Roopa did friendship with Tara. She visits the Patel family every day. Like Bharati's father, Prema and Nalini are not seen in the play taking part but these mere referential characters are very significant. Prema and Nalini are friends to Roopa. They live in front of Tara's apartment. One day Tara came across Prema and Nalini whom she calls "the ugliest girls in the whole world" (CP 335). Tara took their behavior to her heart. She narrates the story:

They live in the building opposite. They had a friend with them. Equally ugly.... When they saw me get off the car, they stopped. They stopped running and they stopped laughing. And they waited, watching me get off and walk across the footpath towards them. Embarrassing me, making me go slower than I would. When I reached them, they grinned. Nalini whispered something to her ugly friend... She stared at my leg. She felt it and knocked on it. silly as well as ugly, I thought. (CP 335)

Roopa tells Tara that Prema and Nalini are real bitches. Chandan calls Nalini, Prema, Roopa the oglers. They talk behind. They think of all kinds of humiliating names. She even warns Tara cunningly to keep herself away from them because they are very nasty to you. It was she who told Tara about old practice of drowning girl child in the milk to get killed prevalent then the Patel communities. Tara like a well sensitive adult thinks such practices quite absurd and great waste of milk. Roopa briefs everything to Prema and Nalini. She says as if talking to Prema, "I tell you that whole family is crazy. And I always know that mother of hers was bonkers. They say she had a nervous breakdown. I think she has finally gone completely loony. Stark naked mad." (CP 358) Roopa while joking with Chandan insults calling him "horrible thing", "creepy thing". Even she suggests him Freni Narangiwalla, a mentally retarded girl as his match.

Tara is a sharp girl. She knows very well how to hit back. She even tells Roopa that knowing one's secret often proves very useful. It is of no use to hurt someone. Out of anger Roopa calls Tara "one-legged thing". Tara retorts excellently- "I'd sooner be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than be an imbecile like you. An imbecile with uneven tits." (CP 369) She further asks her to request Prema and Nalini to come here. "They will love it. They are going to look at your tits the same way they looked at my leg! Let me see how you can face them ogling at you! You won't be able to come out of your house, you horrible creature! You are ugly and I don't want ugly people in my house! So get lost!" (CP 369) Chandan says, "They are not the ugly ones. We are. Horrible one-legged creatures." At this Tara warns him not to say it. She is also fed up with the society of so-called able-bodied. She even thinks the expenditure that her father is going to meet on her kidney transplantation just a waste of money. She gives an emotional outburst:

It cannot matter whether I live or die. There are thousands of poor sick people on the roads who could be given care and attention, and I think I know what I will make of myself. I will be a carer for those people. I ... I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those ... starving naked millions everyone is talking about. (CP 370)

Tara even asserts that women are "more sensitive, more intelligent, more compassionate human beings than creeps like you [Chandan] and ... and [Patel]..." (CP 371). She is thousands of times better than those people who are born only to learn and propagate the philosophy of discrimination and exploitation of poor people.

Tara dies and six years later Bharati also dies. Mr. Patel informed Dan [older Chandan] living in London about the demise of Bharati. Dan rather took this sad news indifferently and told his father that there was no point to come back to India. He asks him whether he would like to live with him or think better to stay alone in Bombay. It is all up to him.

## **Conclusion**

At this point, let us think over again the life and career of Tara, Chandan, Patel, and Bharati in totality. Tara and Chandan were persons with disability but they got treated differently inside the family and outside as well. She firstly suffered double-fold gender



discrimination in her own family by her own mother and grandfather and secondly, she was made victim of humiliation at the hands of so-called able-persons of her society. In this way she suffered double-fold discrimination. On the other hand, Chandan is also a person with disability but he suffers only social humiliation. Patel who throughout his life tried this way or that way to keep hidden his prejudiced attitude towards women finally failed to support him. At the end, he is bound to live a life of desolation and dejection. Bharati suffered too much. She tried every possible way to expiate for her mistake she committed along with her bloody patriarchal father but she failed and succumbed on the face of death. Her involvement in discriminating Tara with her own father verifies the social average scenario that behind every instance of degrading or downplaying of female individuality and wellbeing, a female often colludes with male. It is seen and heard that the birth of female babies, women identify as an occasion of sorrow and mistreat the mother of female baby for giving birth. It is perhaps for the rampant patriarchal utilitarian orientation and choice. This philosophy victimizes men, animals, plants, and even vegetables. In women emancipation, women shall have to come forward with positive vision. It gets very clear that male and female disables are treated differently and unequally in our society whether it is lower-class, middle-class, or upper-class. Tara is bold, intellectual, and sensitive enough. She doesn't want people to have compassion and sympathy for her. Her character is a fine example for those who are born with disabilities. Discrimination is at the centre of gender and disability discourses. Tara is differently-abled rather than a disabled figure. Dan in voice-over exposes the reality of the world:

Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. (CP 379)

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### Author's bio-note

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