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Identity Crisis in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Mahesh Dattani, an Indian dramatist has occupied a global status in post-colonial Indian English drama and the first Indian English dramatist to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy award for his *Collected Plays* in 1998. He is an actor, writer, director all rolled into one always focusing on the upliftment of the weaker section of the society with a purpose to present the harsh truths of Indian society. His plays provide an insight to people about their own lives. Dattani exposes the experiences of men and women and alerts other to face these.

In Indian society women are worshipped as Durga, Kali and Saraswati. But this picture does not fit the recent past and present scenario where one finds them in shackles. The role of women is stereotyped and is expected to fulfil only the particular roles in which they are cast. A women's existence is suppressed over essence, free will is questioned and freedom of choice is neglected. Existential concerns related to identity of a woman are being discussed and debated energetically but solutions are yet to come. Women are pushed behind 'purdah' 'ghunghat' or in the kitchen for performing their expected duties. The inner self is crushed and destroyed and her individual identity is not defined. Fancy Paul says, "Identity can only be realised through discovery of one's self and not by the imposition or social expectations on the individual."¹ Indian society is yet in its formative stage and growth is too slow

to usher a change. This forces the marginalised group (women) to continuously search for their identity at home, in relationships, in community, and society. The plays by Mahesh Dattani are a reflection of the many problems prevailing in the society that require rectification.

Dattani's plays display his concern towards the marginalised section of society by disclosing the mean, ugly, and unhappy experiences of life in relation to the dishonest, partial attitudes of men and women in the society. He believes that plays are an effective medium to communicate messages across the society. His plays have transformed the face of urban theatre. The early theatre was mainly coarse in form and nature. It largely existed in traditional and folk theatre form. Badal Sircar came with a new form popularly called the 'third theatre' that imbibed ideas of both traditional and folk theatre form. His theatre group 'Satabdi' performed on the line of 'third theatre' where the characters moved freely from one place to the other, attired no differently than the audiences, no expensive sets and mainly enacted/performed for a social change. This form of theatre inspired Mahesh Dattani who actually gave it a proper structure and form that was enjoyed by the audiences. This form of a theatre could reach the people who were persuaded to think and reflect and the purpose of the dramatist was achieved. Mahesh Dattani became the proponent of this form in India who perfected 'third theatre' in Indian English drama. His plays are an expression of this form of theatre.

Dattani occupies a prominent place among the contemporary playwrights and deals with issues that often go unacknowledged in the marginalised group of the society. Most of the characters are in the search of their identity or struggling to form it. As already stated that identity can only be realised through the discovery of the self, the characters of Dattani are busy facing the predicaments of life trying to explore their selves. *Tara* is a similar such character of Dattani in his play *Tara*. *Tara* and Chandan are the Siamese twins joined from the breastbone to the pelvic region. The joint decision made by Bharati, their mother and Patel, their father to separate them three months after their birth initiated various problems in the life of *Tara*. This physical separation is made through surgery by Dr. Thakkar who operates on Chandan and *Tara*. The problems begin with this separation, as the very division is wrong. Bharati persuaded by her father, forces her to give the third leg to Chandan

being the male child, though the medical reports suggested the opposite. The chances of survival of the third leg was more with Tara still the patriarchal order of Indian society forces the parents to decide to give the third leg to Chandan. Their decision proved fatal since this leg does not survive with Chandan even for two days. Tara at a tender age begins to struggle for her identity. She suffers as a child and later as a woman and meets constant neglect. Bharati considering herself to be the reason of Tara's condition tries to patch up with all the love, affection and care. The deficiency in Tara is matched up by Bharati's love, "I plan to give her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It's what shedeserves. Love can make up for a lot." ²

Patel is hardly worried about Tara and mainly concerned about his son Chandan. The men generally believe that women should remain within the four walls and fulfil duties of a wife/daughter/sister. Even the need to educate them is not given weightage, as he does not want Tara to study. She is required to help the mother in the household activities and when Chandan tries to help his mother, Patel uses derogatory remark that shows his contempt towards girl the child:

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

Patel: Let Tara do it.

.....

Bharati: I can't think of things for them to do all the time!

Patel: But you can think of turning him into a sissy – teaching him to knit!

Chandan: Daddy, that's unfair. (29)

Tara, for no fault, is in a dilemma about what exactly she should do? She of reason is dragged in a fruitless conservation which leaves her startled and her identity is again questioned. She is unable to realise herself. However, Tara has adjusted to the unkind behaviour of her father. Tara does not mind being called 'one-legged' by Roopa and this is no handicap in her life. Tara's grandfather does injustice to her by not leaving any money and his act proves that Tara never existed for her. At this Chandan questions his father 'why?' he did so. Patel says, "It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it" (40). Chandan and Patel belong to two different ages and this is reflected in their discussion. Chandan's attitude is

of equality towards Tara and he respects her for what she is but her father has prejudices against her existence. Later in the play, when Tara needs a kidney transplant Bharati is eager to give her own but Patel resents at this decision. This call for Bharati was to set things right, done to the twins when they were separated. She wanted to have the satisfaction of doing good to her daughter while her husband is too rude, harsh and cruel towards Tara. He stands as a representative of the Indian patriarchal system. However, Tara soon dies and leaves Chandan and Bharati completely devastated. Bharati moves into depression and soon passes away. Chandan is compelled to leave India and move to London with a changed name Dan. Dan in London devotes himself to writing and wishes to write about Tara. While penning down the tale of Tara he realises his story as well. Indian society has always measured women's potential as low and discouraged them at every point of life. Since the Indian society is chiefly patriarchal, women's identity is crushed everytime. Thus, life is a tale of suffering and Tara reflects this efficiently. Dattani has captured the soul of women in the character of Tara.

The prevailing societal norms and influences made the poor girl suffer while she was still an infant. Tara could be somebody else if she had not suffered at the hands of her own father and mother. She had a promising future but this future was not to be hers. Physical separation was bearable but emotional separation caused by Patel was far from redressal. He was furious over Tara at all times and hated her. Tara was not allowed to study like Chandan as she was expected to help her mother in the kitchen. Being 'one-legged' was an encouragement for creating a place in the society. Patel was entirely against it and never allowed the 'star' to shine brightly ever. Tara's grandfather leaves all the money to Chandan and puts an official stamp over the identity of Tara's existence. She never existed for him and believed that it was the son who was important and for this very reason bribed Dr. Thakkar for giving the third leg to Chandan. Tara search for affection and care all around but could get only rejection except from Chandan who treated her as his equal. Bharati's love was a farce to hide her own guilt. This compels Tara to exclaims, "And who decides what's good for us to hear and what isn't" (54). This line expresses the anguish of Tara on the behaviour met by her.

Though she was mentally far better than Chandan, but she was seen as the inferior one because of being born a woman. She was

complete but the operation caused her lose that completeness and identity as well. One finds her in search of it and trying to forge identity. Chandan, the twin brother, appears as Dan in the novel. Chandan of no reason suffers at the hands of destiny. After being separated from Tara he acquires his identity but loses soon with the death of other half Tara. He learns a bitter lesson of life and moves out to London to escape this experience. He takes a new name Dan and tries to hide the old memories under it. His confession, "Forgive me Tara, forgive me for making my tragedy" is a proof of all the suffering he undergoes. Dan's escape to a foreign land was to stay away with the family, acquaintances and specially Tara and himself. While writing about Tara he writes about his own self. His act of writing is a way to disguise his true real identity. He suffers with identity crisis trying to forget the real Chandan and behave as Dan. Dan however fails to actually put an end to the old memories.

Bharati, on the other hand, could be blamed for the present condition of Tara. Under pressure from her father she decides for the twins' operation and the third leg to be given to Chandan. A woman acting cruelly against another woman is witnessed in this play. Science was completely neglected and societal prejudices overpowered the facts that verified that the third leg received full blood supply from the girl child. She could easily say no to this but she had said nothing and allowed the first injustice towards the girl. Tara for them was just a corner piece befitting the room. Bharati represents the women's plight often used, misused, compelled and tortured. Though her love is feigned yet she tries to rectify the wrong done. Bharati was verbally bullied by her husband Patel who disliked the way Tara was looked after. Bharati was aware of how a woman is treated in the Indian society. She knew Tara's physical disability will be a hurdle for her future life. She says, "It's all right while she is young. It is 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." (27) These lines express the helplessness of the protagonist's mother who understands this male dominated world. Bharati's search for an identity was suppressed in this patriarchal world and she somehow adjusted herself to the same.

Patel represents the patriarchal order of the Indian society. His anguish and disgust towards Tara, shows his attitude for the fairer

sex. He believes that a woman should remain at home and do all the household chores. His objection for not allowing Tara to join college along with Chandan speaks of the male chauvinism prevalent in the society. Woman is merely treated as a commodity, a product for show only. She suffers discrimination at all times and is exploited for no fault or reason. Patel does not care about the love and affection to be given to Tara and rather shouts at her all the time.

Dr. Thakkar represents that group which is entrusted with the job of saving the life of human kind. He stands as a representative of the technological advancement made by Science. He could have changed the situation for Tara and Chandan. His thirst for money changed the lives of Chandan and specially Tara. He is responsible for smothering the emotions of a mother and a girl child Tara.

The issues related to women have been portrayed by many Indian dramatists from the colonial writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Harendra Nath Chattopadhyay to the most recent Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad and Dina Mehta. Their plays talk about the condition of women in a patriarchal society. They have expressed their concern regarding the necessary changes required today. The stereotyped roles are rejected openly by women. Apart from the identity crisis in *Tara*, Dattani raises many other social evils through the play. Gender discrimination, religious prejudice, conflicting ideas are other themes discussed by Dattani. Tara struggles against the injustices stemming out of gender discrimination when her rightful leg is taken away and given to Chandan because she is a girl and the son is a priority in the Indian society. Nature was just to Tara but the cruel intentions of Bharati, Patel, grandfather, and Dr. Thakkar denied justice to Tara. The rightful love was denied to her, education was restricted and the life was put to stake while she was admitted in the hospital at the end of the play. Grandfather leaves his entire estate to Chandan the male child with not a penny for Tara. Patel gives more importance to Chandan's career than to Tara's. The conversation between Bharati and Chandan explains this clearly:

Bharati: I wish you father would pay more attention to Tara.

Chandan: He does. He doesn't like to show his affection.

Bharati: Don't tell me about your father. He is more worried about your career than hers. (26)

She fits herself into her roles in household activities with no future career. In order to perform various religious rituals a male

child is required to fulfil various rites. They are considered the inheritor of property and the 'chirag' of the family. The religion with its pressing demands compels Bharati and Patel to give preference to Chandan because of his belonging to the male sex.

The play also unveils the harsh realities of society by discussing other shortcomings. Tara appears as physically disabled but Bharati, Patel, Dr. Thakkar and the grandfather are mentally disabled. The behaviour met by women all over the Indian society is biased one. She is suppressed, rejected, ridiculed, exploited, and discriminated at every step of life. Tara's life is a message for all those who live in the patriarchal system. Her constant struggle against family, neighbours, friends and society force us to reflect on our beliefs and thoughts and bring about a change. One may often believe that sufferings are restricted only to rural regions. Dattani's *Tara* lives in a modern urban city, yet she suffers. The women belonging to urban cities face greater challenges since, the society is in a transitional state. She looks after the family children household chores and also goes out to work. Tara's thirst for a bright future remains unfulfilled and she dies un-noticed. Why has she had to undergo this? Her friend scolds and ridicules her at being physically disabled. Bharati's love is shallow; Patel's hatred is evident, all this leaves Tara devastated.

Tara's predicament is not just hers but of all the women, so she occupies more significance in today's scenario. Her agony is beyond comprehension and she's trying hard to establish her position in a male dominated society. The idea that each individual is born free and one should be free enough to conform to it is to be understood. The battle that started while she was still in womb, after separation with Chandan continues, and ends only with her life. Bipin Parmar says in his thesis:

The play *Tara* provides bitter commentary upon gender discrimination and forces of social apathy towards injustice done to even a girl babe under the cloak of gender dichotomy. So it is not just a story about gender identity nor is it a story of medical phenomenon. It presents how women are marginalised to the extent of distorting herself. The play is, in broader sense, a gruesome tale of injustice done to a woman by the patriarchal society. Despite the civilisation and development in the human field, we are same at the root of our mind.³

Thus, Tara's struggle for an identity continues. As the temperament of people changes the change could be expected to arrive soon but the time is not specified when finally it will happen.

Endnotes

1. Paul, Fancy, "Quest for Female Identity in Kamala Das's Poetry and Beyond" in *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* (ed.) G.S. Balarama Gupta, Vol. 40 (July 2012) : 12.
2. Dattani, Mahesh, *Tara*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1995: 45. This edition is used throughout. Further references to this text are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
3. Parmar, Bipin, "A Critical Study of Mahesh Dattani's Stage Plays", *A Critical Study of Dramatic Works of Mahesh Dattani*, 2011: 79-80. <http://ethesis.saurashtrauniversity.edu/id/eprint/132>.