

# Gender Discrimination in *Tara*

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Mahesh Dattani happens to be one of the younger dramatists in Indian English known for his stark realism, contemporary themes and theatrical experimentation. In this respect he is easily comparable to Asif Currimbhoy, who dealt with burning problems of the Indian society and who experimented with dramatic language and technique. Dattani is privileged to be an actor, director and playwright. Having his own theatre called Play-Pen in Bangalore, he is able to write and experiment his plays in them thereby giving them a final shape. Many of his plays have been successfully staged in India and abroad and earned the admiration of spectators and critics.

*Tara*, which won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1996, happens to be a significant play in that it deals with a theme that is very relevant to our times. It is centred on the members of a family and exposes the politics of their emotions coloured by gender discrimination. Indirectly it pays homage to the high achievements in modern medical research. The theme is not presented in a simple chronological order, but in a zigzag of past alternating with present and of Mumbai alternating with London

This kind of theatrical experimentation is extremely new to the Indian English theatre and it easily brings to our mind similar experiments done by Arthur Miller.

The central thematic concern in *Tara* is the problem of separating the Siamese twins born in the family of Patels from Gujarat, living in Mumbai. The separation of these twins was indeed a very difficult, complicated and challenging task even for the expert doctors like Thakkar. The details of this complicated case are revealed in Dan's interview with Dr. Thakkar on the television:

Dan (mock cheerful): Good morning, viewers and welcome to another edition of 'Marvels in the World of Medicine'. We have with us this evening at our studio Dr. Umakant Thakkar who has been in the news lately for his outstanding work at the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital in Bombay. Dr. Thakkar has been associated with many major hospitals in the USA most notably the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. During his stay at the Queen Victoria Hospital, he was surgeon-in-chief to a most unique and complex surgery. The first of its kind in India Dr. Thakkar, could you tell us what was so special about this surgery? (p. 9).

Dr. Thakkar answers that the patients, i.e., Chandan and Tara were only three months old, that they were twins conjoined from chest down and that "conjoined twins are quite rare. I think one in every fifty thousand twin concepts could have a probability of containing this—defect" (p. 10). He explains how (if not why) such conjoinment happens, "Sometimes, we don't know why, a fertilized egg, destined to separate and develop into two different embryos, fails to do so fully. The result is a conjoinment—in this case from the breastbone down through the pelvic area. It is indeed a miracle that they were born alive. Twins with a conjunction of such complexity are, in most cases, still-born" (p. 10). He says that there are only seven recorded cases of twins, who have actually survived through birth. Dr. Thakkar expresses his sense of wonder at the Patel twins, as there is something remarkable and freakish about them. "Conjoined twins developing from one fertilized ovum are invariably of the same sex. Well, almost invariably. But here these two were obviously from different fertilized eggs.... The twins are of different sexes" (p. 10). The Patel



twins, far from being of the same sex, are of two different sexes, which is a freak among freaks.

Obviously the parents are disheartened by the dire situation and fear that the twins may not survive for long and that it may not be possible for doctors to separate them. But soon a ray of hope appears in the depressing situation of their life. As Dr. Thakkar explains it very clearly, "The parents were warned of the odds against survival. They were, understandably, totally disheartened in the beginning. But soon, even the remotest chance for survival was received with hope once they were made aware of the facilities offered by modern technology. I had a conference with the resident doctors at the Victoria Hospital. A very efficient and competent team of doctors. I was shown the test reports, X-rays, scan results from the Bangalore hospital. There were many points to be reconfirmed and further observations were necessary before any decision on surgery could be taken. The twins were flown in from Bangalore and were moved immediately to the intensive care unit for observation and tests. It was two weeks of exhaustive work. The results were encouraging. The twins did not share any vital organ. There were two hearts clearly indicated by two electrocardiograms. There were two livers, although joined. Each twin would have one kidney—all this meant that there was a very strong possibility of both twins surviving. What we needed to know more about was the pelvic region and the extent of conjoinment there—" (p. 21). In spite of the complicated conjoinment, the doctors feel that the separation is possible, though a very difficult at that. Dr. Thakkar explains it minutely, "Complications were expected. Our team of doctors was aware of that. The pelvic region as I had mentioned before was a problem. There was only one bladder and it belonged to the boy. So did the rectum. We would have to have an artificial one made for the girl. Later on, when she grows up, we can fashion one from her intestinal tissues. And the boy's lungs aren't fully developed. However, considering the magnitude of the work involved, this was a minor detail. The prognosis, on the whole, was favourable to both. Nature had done a near complete job. Medical science could finish it for her. Theoretically, the separation was possible" (p. 35).

As the process of separation was very risky and complicated, the doctors had to be extraordinarily careful in carrying out the



separation. "It took us further ten days just for planning. We couldn't afford to make any miscalculations. There would be separate teams for each twin. Two operation tables were to be joined together. When the separation was done, the tables would be pushed apart and each twin was to receive individual attention" (pp. 37-38). The difficulties of separating the pelvic conjoinment were great. "The separation itself was quite complicated. The pelvis had to be fractures in several places to facilitate separation. Cutting the two lives apart was an extremely delicate job. We had to be careful not to damage the bile ducts. We had had about six rehearsals with dummies to make sure that every detail was considered" (p. 43).

The main purpose of the separation of the twins was to save their life. But whether the twins would grow into full beings with a reproductive capacity was rather doubtful and left to chance. Dr. Thakkar talks very honestly about that. "...due to the complex conjoinment at the pelvis, it is very difficult to say how their reproductive organs will develop. A lot depends on the hormone levels their bodies will be able to produce. Imbalances are highly probable. But enough research has been made on this subject. With the necessary supplements it isn't unreasonable to expect them to have a fairly normal growth otherwise. Of course, it would be impossible for either of them to be able to reproduce. They are completely sterile" (p. 50).

What is admirable about the successful separation of the twins is that it has prevented the children from dying. It has miraculously offered the gift of survival to the otherwise unlucky children. It, obviously, holds a mirror to the triumph of human intelligence expressed in advanced and sophisticated medical research and the extraordinary expertise of doctors like Dr. Thakkar. This is the positive aspect of the theme.

But there is a negative aspect also which is to be seen in the politics of human relations in the family as well as in society. After braving the hazards of the surgical separation, the twins have to face other, i.e., emotional hazards of life. Like any twins Chandan and Tara have many similarities between them. Although physically separated from each other, they happen to be inseparable from each other emotionally. Both of them have a limp on the opposite legs. The peculiarity of their birth and survival is explained by one of



them, i.e., Chandan, "Tara. And Me. May be we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. They way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out..." (p. 3). The great miracle of their life is that they are still alive. Each one of them has an artificial Jaipur leg.

Their father (Patel) and mother (Bharati) have just come from Bangalore to Bombay on a transfer. Bharati is specially concerned about the young Tara's health. She wants to force her to eat and drink milk so that Tara may put on more weight. "She's much too thin! She—she must put on more weight. This morning at the clinic, Dr. Kapoor checked their charts. She's lost half a pound in one week.... In one month she will lose a kilo! (*Getting worked up.*) If I don't force her to eat, how will she gain weight? She will keep getting thinner till she's shriveled and she is only skin and bones!" (p. 4). But Patel wants to console Bharati by telling her that Dr. Kapoor was "pleased with their progress. Beyond everyone's expectations. He is going to mention them in a medical journal" (p. 5). One may easily see the contrast between Patel and Bharati. Whereas Bharati is very fussy and demonstrative about her affection for her daughter, Tara, Patel is quite controlled in his behaviour.

Patel wants his children to adjust themselves to Bombay life. Chandan is sixteen and Tara is twelve. Neither of them wants to be away from the other. Both of them have similar taste and habits. For example, both of them love Western music, although Chandan likes Brahms and Tara prefers Beethoven. Both of them like playing cards. Both of them discover the separateness of their identities as brother and sister and yet feel the emotional bondage. Although both of them have a few similarities, they also have a few gender differences between them. Whereas Chandan has an intellectual tendency and a desire to be a writer (especially a playwright) Tara happens to be an instinctive girl with a wild imagination.

Both Chandan and Tara are admirable because they do not suffer from any inferiority complex and despair. On the contrary they have a lot of gusto for life. For example, when Tara meets two ugly girls in the street, i.e., Prema and Nalini, she talks with them nicely and even shows them her artificial leg. "Then I showed it to them. The duckling couldn't believe her eyes. She stared at my leg. She felt it and knocked on it. Silly as well as ugly, I thought.



'The very best from Jaipur', I said. 'We get them in pairs. My brother wears the other one'" (p. 13). When Roopa comes to their house rather unexpectedly, they show their Jaipur legs to her and explain to her how they are twins, though they are not two peas in a pod.

Tara chums up with Roopa quickly as the latter also happens to be a Kannadiga from Tumkur in Karnataka. Tara tells Roopa about the love-cum-inter-caste marriage of her parents—that her father is a Gujarati and her mother, a Kannadiga. "My father had to leave his parents because of the marriage, if you really want to know.... My grandfather, my mother's father, was a very influential person. But my dad didn't take any help from him. Today my dad is the General Manager of Indo-Swede Pharmacia, the biggest pharmaceutical company in the country" (p. 16).

Tara's mother Bharati has a special affection for her, "Tara is a very nice girl" (p. 18). She gently persuades Roopa to be friends with Tara and spend some times with her everyday. "And you will be her friend?... 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. I have seen to it that she...more than make up in some ways for what she...doesn't have.... If you promise to be her 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" (p. 19). Bharati, like a typical mother wants that her daughter should not feel the absence of a natural leg. She, therefore, asks Roopa to be Tara's friend so that Tara may be quite jovial. She suggests that Roopa to promise her that she would be Tara's friend. Roopa thinks that Bharati is an odd type of a mother.

As Tara has a problem with her kidney, Patel has been trying to search for a donor. But Bharati does not allow that. She loves Tara so much that she herself wants to donate her kidney to her. But Patel does not approve or allow that. There is a difference of attitude between husband and wife about their children and their gender roles. Whereas Patel thinks of and plans for Chandan's future and higher education abroad, Bharati thinks of Tara's future and feels acute anxiety about her. She feels that Tara also must have her career. But Chandan is so attached to his sister that he wants



to skip one year of college education if Tara has to undergo kidney transplantation. "I don't want to go to college! (*Fighting his tears.*) Not without Tara! If she is going in for surgery, I'll miss a year too!" (p. 30). Bharati, who suffers from a streak of hysteria, accuses her husband of loving the son more than the daughter. But Patel declares that he has never discriminated between the son and the daughter. But he even counter-charges her of showing special love for her daughter, "Look at the way you treat Tara. As if she is made of glass. You cuddle her, you pet her, you spoil her. She's grown up feeling she doesn't need anyone but you!... You know she loves you. You're sure of that. Don't make her choose between us, for God's sake! You're ruining her life because you are sick" (p. 31). Patel feels that Bharati needs to be treated by a psychiatrist. He accuses Bharati of leading an unsociable and cloistered life. "Look at you. Do you ever go out? No. Have you made any friends? We've been here for two months and you haven't even talked to anyone. You just sit here rotting" (p. 31). Both husband and wife seem to have hidden some common secret within their hearts.

There seems to be a competition between Patel and Bharati for winning the love of their children to himself or herself. Tara does not understand the cause of the parental competition, accusation and anxiety. Quite often she falls unconscious and the parents are forced to revive her by calling the doctors.

Although a donor is available to donate his kidney to Tara, Bharati does not want to buy it from a stranger. On the contrary, she wants to donate one of her kidneys to her daughter, because of her special love for her. She tells her, "Now that I am giving you a part of me. Everything will be all right.... Don't worry. You will be fine. After the operation, we will all be happy together. And I will make up for... for... your father, and I will make up for all the things God hasn't give you" (p. 34). After the operation, Tara seems to be very cheerful, receives the bouquets offered by Chandan and Roopa and waves the bouquet with a flourish like an Oscar winner. She is surprised to note that her mother doesn't even come to say hullo to her. "Oh this is terrific. Mummy doesn't even come to say hullo" (p. 37). But the irony of it is such that her mother has been hospitalized since the time of kidney transplantation. Her father and brother have not told her the sad news lest she should be shocked. But, however, they tell her the news after some interval of



time. Of course, Tara gets used to the harsh reality of life. Both brother and sister are inseparable. Chandan does not wish to go to college without Tara. But Patel, who is worried about his son's career, wants to send him abroad for higher studies. "But this is certain, Chandan has to join. I have plans for him. Your Praful uncle will help him get into a good university in England" (p. 39). He also explains that Chandan has no need of a job as he can inherit his maternal grandfather's property at Bangalore. In spite of all the money and property, Chandan and Tara miss the mother, as she is away at the hospital.

Tara wants to visit her mother at the hospital, in spite of Patel's injunctions against it. Even when she goes to the hospital, the nurses do not allow her to see her mother alone. "The hospital staff. At the reception, they asked me to wait. One of the nurses passing by recognized me. She drew the receptionist aside and spoke to her in a low voice. She thought I couldn't hear what she was saying. But I heard! She told her that she had received strict instructions from our father that I shouldn't on any account be allowed to see mummy on my own" (p. 54). Chandan explains to Tara that her father prevents her from meeting her mother alone in the hospital lest the mother should tell the daughter some dark secret. Tara innocently thinks that the secret may be about her father. But the father knows that the secret is about her mother. Patel does not allow Chandan and Tara (especially the latter) because he does not wish to give Bharati the satisfaction of confessing. He also blames himself for not having the strength of stopping his wife's partiality to her own son and prejudice against her own daughter. In spite of being a woman professing special love for the daughter, i.e., twinkle Tara, she had decided to give two legs to Chandan and only one leg to her beloved daughter, although both the legs belonged to Tara biologically. Though Chandan is given two legs, only one leg belonged to him naturally and the other leg (which might have been Tara's) became useless as a piece of dead flesh and had to be amputated. Bharati, in spite of her deep love for Tara, had been unfair to her by being partial to her son, perhaps because of her deep-seated complicity to patriarchal frame of values. The doctor, who agreed to conspire with Bharati's unethical suggestion, was motivated by a selfish desire of getting a huge favour from Bharati's father, who was an influential MLA in Bangalore in



terms of sanction of a three acres of prime land in the heart of the city for his large Nursing Home. Patel became very helpless in the context of gender-discrimination by none other than the mother, political influence by the father-in-law by way of barter and the unethical complicity by the doctor. Patel has now realized the futility of the unethical and unfair decision taken by all the three persons, but it is unfortunately too late for him to rectify it now. "Your grandfather got involved personally in our discussions with the doctor. The separation will be done in Bombay, it was decided. Some tests had to be carried out immediately. There were problems, you know them. But there was one complication, which hadn't been discussed. There were three legs.... A scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the leg was provided by the girl. Your mother asked for a reconfirmation. The result was the same. The chances were slightly better that the leg would survive—on the girl. Your grandfather and your mother had a private meeting with Dr. Thakkar. I wasn't asked to come. The 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.... May be if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn't right and that even the doctor would realize it was unethical! The doctor had agreed, I was told. It was only later I came to know of his intention of starting a large nursing home—the largest in Bangalore. He had acquired three acres of prime land—in the heart of the city—from the State. Your grandfather's political influence had been used. A few days later the surgery was done. As planned by them, Chandan had two legs—for two days. 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's. Because of the unusual nature of the operation, it was easy to pass it off as a natural rejection. I—I was meaning to tell you both when you were older, but..." (p. 53). Bharati's complicity to patriarchy and her partiality for Chandan and against Tara happen to be the cause of tragedy of both brother and sister, especially the latter. Chandan is shocked by the revelation of the truth by his father. But he cannot change the course of his past life, as he has to undergo the consequences of his *karma*.

Now Chandan is in his early twenties. He has left India and been living in London. He has come to London for his higher education. It is through his telephonic conversation that we learn about the events that have happened in the interim period. Chandan does not want to remember his past tragedy. He has therefore changed his name from Chandan to Dan and assumed a new identity. Though he wants to forget the past, he is haunted by it. His father has written to him about his mother's being admitted to hospital again. Dan calls his father on phone and asks him about his mother's condition. The father tells him that the mother is dead. Dan is really shocked and relieved at the same time. "When was this? ... Oh was it sudden? ... I'm sorry, dad. But I can't help but feel—relieved that it's all over... No. No. I don't think I can come. I'm sorry. Look. I can understand how you feel and I know I should be with you now—but please dad, don't ask me to come back.... Well I'm in the middle of writing something, but that's not it, it is just that I don't think I can face life there anymore.... Why don't you come here? ... I just thought that now since you are all alone. You've got your brother over here. And me. Not that I would be able to give you much. I never was a giver.... You misunderstood dad, I never held you responsible for what happened.... How can you feel that it was your fault? No. Don't talk about her. It's not fair to me... Tara has been dead for six years and now that mummy has gone as well, there's nothing left for me to come back to...yes may be I'm hurting you deliberately, I don't know why, but I can't help the way I feel.... Either you come here or you live in Bombay all by yourself..." (p. 52). Dan is now away from the bitter reality both in space and in time. He has lost his sister Tara, who was inseparable from him first physically and then emotionally. Fate has been very cruel to Tara. Now he has lost his mother also. He has to close the chapter of his past and live the present life. It is a miracle that he is still alive, contrary to the expectation that conjoined twins do not survive for long.

The theme of the achievements of medical research and the unethical gender-discrimination are metadramatically connected with Dan's career as an Indian English dramatist. He has been living in London away from India and from his own past. He wants to remember his childhood experiences and convert his anguish into a play. At the very outset he makes an insightful



comment on the difference between the composition of poetry and the creation of drama. "In poetry even the most turbulent emotions can be recollected when one is half asleep. But in drama! Ah! Even tranquillity has to be recalled with emotion. Like touching a bare, live wire. Try distancing yourself from that experience and writing about it! A mere description will be hopelessly inadequate. And for me... I have to relive that charge over again and again..." (p. 1). Writing seems to have a cathartic effect on his emotions. He charges himself with liquor and tries to relive his past and articulate his anguish, anger and freakishness. "Yes. I have my memories. Locking myself in a bed-sitter in a seedy suburb of London, thousands of miles from home hasn't put enough distance between us. (*Holding up his glass.*) My battery charger helps on some occasions. But now I want them to come back. To masticate my memories in my mind and spit out the result to the world anger" (p. 2).

Although Dan wants to articulate his autobiographical vision of life, ironically enough, he does not make any progress in it. There seems to be an existential stagnation in his dramatic career. "My progress so far, I must admit, has been zero. But I persist with the comforting thought that things can't get any worse. I keep staring at my typewriter everyday, wondering how best to turn my anguish into drama. All I find everyday, without fail, is one typewritten sheet with the title of the play, my name and address and the date. Nothing changes—except the date. (*Reading from the sheet.*) 'Twinkle Tara. A drama in two acts by Chandan Patel, 93, Fishpond Road. Tooting, London SW17 7LJ.' Today I made some progress. I even typed my phone number" (p. 2). Obviously Dan is unable to do any progress in his play-writing task. Then he comments on the average Western intellectual's interest in the stereotypical themes of the Orient like *sati*, dowry deaths or child marriages and the publisher's unwillingness to publish anything other than that dealing with these themes. Similarly he makes an irreverent comment on Indian English Literature, "And back home, of course, Indo-Anglian literature isn't worth toilet paper" (p. 2).

Dan's decision to live in England was motivated by his desire to have higher education and make a good career for himself. But his diasporic condition has created new problems for him—i.e., of wearing different masks. But he wants to remove those masks and remain his true self, i.e., freakish self. "Tonight I drop everything



I've desperately wanted to be in my years in England. (*Miming, removing masks and throwing them away.*) The handicapped intellectual's mask. (*Removing another one.*) The desperate immigrant. (*Removing yet another.*) The mysterious Brown with the phoney accent. The last being the hardest to drop having spent two whole years in acquiring it. And what remains is what I intend making capital of. My freakishness. I am a freak" (p. 2). His play happens to be an expression of his freakishness—both of his writing and of his being. Dan collects material for his play through the activation of his memories. "Yes. The material is there. But the craft is yet to come. Like the amazing Dr. Thakkar, I must take something from Tara—and give it to myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world, in anger" (p. 59). But in spite of his effort to write a play about his sister, he has miserably failed. He confesses that his progress so far has been a zero. He, therefore, tears off the typed sheets.

Instead of writing his play due to his inability, he wants to leave his recorded voice in a tape-recorder to posterity. In that record he has sought the forgiveness of Tara. Until his death he just wants to move mechanically with others and not be doomed. "Someday, after I die, a stranger will find this recording and play it. The voice is all that will remain. No writing. No masterpiece. Only a voice—that once belonged to an object. An object like other objects in a cosmos, whose orbits are determined by those around. Moving in forced harmony. 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. (Pause) I no longer desire that freedom. I move. Just move. Without meaning. 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. But somewhere, sometime, I look up at a shooting star—and wish—I wish that a long forgotten person would forgive me. Wherever she is...Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (p. 60).

The play is interesting not only for its contemporary theme but also for its technical experimentation. In this respect Mahesh Dattani is quite different from the traditional Indian English dramatists, like Sri Aurobindo and T.P. Kailasam. In his technical



experimentation, he is easily comparable to Asif Currimbhoy and Partap Sharma. *Tara* is interesting in its technical experimentation in that it does not begin at the beginning and follow a chronological principle, but on the contrary it uses the flashback technique in a very clever manner. For example, it begins with Dan in London at the present and then goes on presenting his past experiences. Whenever the characters refer to their past, the past is shown through flashback. Thus present and past go on alternating in an interesting manner. We are easily reminded of Arthur Miller's similar technique. Such experimentation with the theatrical technique is something very rare but yet desirable and admirable in Indian English Drama.

#### Reference

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