



COVERT VIOLENCE AGAINST FEMALE GENDER IN MAHESH DATTANI'S "TARA"

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* is wonderful study of a new type of violence against the female gender in the modern age of technology. Whenever there is a story of any excess against woman we tend to associate it with illiteracy and socio-economic backwardness. Now, ironically, when the literacy graph of our society is going up the excesses against women have taken new form which is covert. To illustrate his point the playwright has taken up an interesting story dealing with an educated urban family that has given birth to conjoined twins who are joined together from their hips downward. The parents of the twins decide to operate upon them and separate the two with surgical intervention. But a mischief is played here: with the connivance of the father, mother, grandfather and the doctor, the operation is performed to the benefit of the male child and the common leg of the twins is left with the male child. Even if the common leg had been left with the girl, the operation could be successful leaving both the children quite normal. The doctor employs his medical knowledge to favour the male child as he is promised a plot for his clinic in Bombay. This situation puts a question mark on the so called scientific advancement which is going against the women. Had the twins been born in a slum, the girl child would have not been the victim of injustice. Awareness and scientific knowledge fail to protect her, rather it goes against her, holds the playwright

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Violence against female gender seems to be a common phenomenon in India. It takes place in various forms such as kidnapping, stripping, rape, dowry death, trafficking in women, bride burning and female infanticide etc. Such excesses committed on women are believed to be rooted in illiteracy, poverty and socio-economic backwardness of our society. Whenever any woman falls victim to the male chauvinism we associate it with illiteracy and tend to find a ray of hope in the economic prosperity of society. When men and women get educated and become aware of their rights and duties towards each other, we believe, it will bring

the sufferings of women to an end. It is also observed that higher literacy rate will lead to economic independence of women making them more empowered and bringing them at par with their male counterparts. Surprisingly, now when the graph of literacy has gone up in India and there is visible social and economic growth bringing about quality-improvement in the life of an average man, the question of the independent identity of woman still remains a distant dream. If Indian woman of today is more educated and empowered, is she no longer a victim of the male domination now? If she is, what is the nature of this violence? Mahesh

Dattani's play *Tara* seems to provide an answer to these questions.

With a view to establish his viewpoint the playwright picks up an educated middle class urban family - Mr. Patel, his wife Bharati and her politician father living in a metropolitan city. The educated couple gives birth to conjoined twins namely Tara, the female child from whose name the title of the play is derived, and Chandan the male one. As they are joined together from their hips downward, it is decided to separate the two with a surgical intervention. To the benefit of the male child, the common leg of the conjoined twins is left with the male. Had the common leg been left with the girl, the operation could be successful leaving the male child as a normal one. But the couple under the influence of the grandfather of the twins and due to its own patriarchal inner compulsions favours the male child in place of the female. As a critic rightly observes in the introduction of 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 grandfather to favour the boy (Chandan) over the girl Tara). Tara, a fiesty girl who isn't given the opportunities given to her brother at her birth (although she may be smarter) eventually wastes away and dies.¹

Metaphorically, it is a joint operation launched by a renowned London returned doctor (Dr Thakur) and the educated parents of Tara with the connivance of a politician grandfather. The doctor is bribed by the influential grandfather with a piece of land in Banglore so that the former may run his nursing home there. Throwing all the medical ethics to the wind, the learned doctor employs his knowledge against the female child knowing full well that the operation is ethically wrong as it aims to favour the male child at the cost the female. The expected happens i.e. the girl who was more intelligent and more energetic than her brother is left crippled after the operation. The post operational physical pain turns psychological when she learns that she is a victim of a conspiracy which hastens the process of her death. Unfortunately, none of the educated

coterie (the doctor, girl's grandfather and her father and mother) refuses to acknowledge the girl's right to equality vis-à-vis her brother. Even her mother, who is of her own gender, votes against her when there is a choice between the male and the female.

The Patel family becomes the microcosm of the modern Indian society where knowledge and wealth seems to have formed a nexus against the female gender and have threatened the very existence of the latter. Ironically, in *Tara* the wealth of the grandfather, the education of the couple, the medical knowledge of the doctor, all join hands against the girl child. In the past we have been attributing violence against the female sex to educational backwardness, but how should we view the preference of the male child over the female one by an educated couple? If the medical facility to know the health of the foetus lying in the womb of the mother is applied to sex determination which aims to kill the child before its very birth and the medical facility to separate the conjoined twins is used only against the female child, what can be the plight of the modern woman? In the era marked by the scientific and technological advancement, the female gender is all the more threatened!

After the operation is performed over the conjoined twins, the father of the child has no regrets for his handicapped daughter. Rather, he is more worried over the higher education of his son who is leading quite a normal life. About the role of Patel a critic holds:

He has been shown to believe in patriarchal values himself, treating Chandan differently from Tara, making plans for his future, trying to make a man of him. This leads to the question as to whether he wasn't complicit, in his lack of action, in what happened during the operation to separate the twins. He too believes in gender hierarchy and thus his protestations are ultimately hollow²

The covert violence against woman gets further highlighted when Mr. Patel refuses to permit his wife to donate her kidney to her ailing daughter. Though she is doing so only to shed off her burden of previous guilt (of being biased against her daughter at birth), Mr. Patel's behaviour is typically marked by male ego:

Patel: ...But I will not let you donate your kidney to her.

Bharti : (Crying) The tests showed that I could do that. There...there is nothing wrong in it.

Patel : Yes. It is wrong. Now that we have a donor. I will not let you do it (p.35)

He forbids her doing so not because of his love for her but for avoiding any family trouble that may arise after she donates her kidney and develops any subsequent ailment. In other words, the father is not at all willing to take any risk for the sake of his daughter (because her future is uncertain).

Viewed from another angle Bharti is also a victim to the court violence so she cannot take an independent decision as an individual. She does try on her part to help Tara by buying her a friend in Roopa, a nosey girl from the neighborhood, by promising her unlimited access to her VCR. But her sentiments are of no use to her husband who can dismiss her opinion without any explanation. Full of male ego, Patel orders her not to argue but to listen to him. The husband has ruled out the pangs of guilt from his heart of being unfair to Tara and has conveniently shifted the responsibility to Bharti and her father. He emerges winner when he succeeds in forbidding Bharti to donate her kidney to Tara. His authoritative attitude with which he silences her is another type of violence, As a critic observes: "Patel's summary dismissal of Bharti's opinion as inconsequential and not paying heed to her expostulation on behalf of Tara represents him as a typical over-riding patriarchal husband."³

That this violence is not new in Patels' family is revealed when Roopa, in the cross conversation outside, informs Tara that Patels in the old days would drown their baby daughters in milk. This is a dramatic device used by the playwright to juxtapose the status of the female gender in the past and in the present. There is another instance where the female becomes a sacrificial goat at the altar of patriarchy. Tara refuses to fill forms for college and Chandan follows suit. It is so unfortunate that Patel wants Tara to apply not for her own sake but for Chandan's sake which reveals that the violence on Tara is not new but is in total conformity with the age old male hierarchy. The girl child was treated unfairly because she couldn't

Speak for herself but what about her urbanized modern mother who could speak for herself but is forced to keep mum?

Here the playwright wants to suggest how even in the ostensible favour of the female is sometimes hidden the selfishness of man. Knowingly or unknowingly, woman too becomes instrumental in promoting male domination in our society. Hinting at the shift from the visible to the hidden psychological violence the modern woman is subjected to the playwright upholds that this new form of violence is more torturing as it perpetuates the agony of the victim (delaying her death).

Dattani believes in the equality of the two sexes that is why Tara is presented in no way inferior to her twin brother. She is a sensitive child of tender emotions who understands everything happening around her. She even understands her father's attitude towards her mother. She is aware that their father was denying her access to their mother and she conveys it to Chandan. As she was very lively and enthusiastic she had high aspirations which could not be accomplished because of the physical disability forced upon her. But the discrimination by none else than her parents breaks her from within. Thereon, she develops a feeling of hostility towards everything around her. Her wish for death transpires only out of this feeling of disappointment and she finds no utility in spending money on herself. There is a time when she starts hating all the males including her brother and father and she feels all alone, jilted by everyone.

Thus the play *Tara* not only pooh-poohs the idea of the rising literacy rate, of the so-called revolution in the medical science, but also hints at the emotional chaos we are heading towards due to the gender discrimination. The discriminatory attitude of the Patels ruins the entire family atmosphere. Initially Tara has an illusion that at least her mother is on her side. What breaks her from within is discovery of the fact that her father didn't want her mother to donate her kidney to her simply because he thought it was a useless exercise. Finding none else to share her grief with, she shares it with her brother, who as a result, feels morally responsible for her suffering.

The play mocks at the idea of education and awareness being viewed as a panacea for all the ills inflicted on women in our society by dramatizing that neither the grandfather nor the father nor even the doctor has any feeling of guilt for causing injustice to Tara. It is only Chandan who feels guilty for her and is ashamed of what his parents did to her. To get rid of the guilt he leaves India in disgust and gets settled in London for ever. He even changes his name (in an attempt to bury his past). He doesn't come back even to attend the last rites of his father. Thus Mr. Patel loses both - his daughter and his son. Dan decides not to see him again as he was his father but was not a good human being-nothing can be more tragic for the couple.

At the end we see both brother and sister clinging to each other which is quite metaphorical suggesting their mutual support to each other. In other words it suggests the mutual dependence and the relative importance of the two sexes to each other. This also implies the importance of both sexes for the well being of the family as a unit.

The common observation about the play is that it is about the girl child who fails to get her due in the male dominated society. More significantly the play seems to highlight the fact that the male is always favoured when there is a question of choice between the two :

Dattani sees *Tara* as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is 'male': but many people in India see it as a play-about the girl child.⁴

Thus Mahesh Dattani appears to hold the view that scientific advancement has not been able to bring any substantial change in the plight of modern woman. The violence inflicted on her has acquired a new form which is less visible but more horrendous. Instead of inflicting physical violence on her the modern man with a view to perpetuate his supremacy has adopted other hidden psychological devices. Hence, it is so difficult now to point out the hand behind the violence. In other words, the playwright seems to endorse the idea that social prosperity and technological advancement has not

done much to abolish gender discrimination. Had *Tara* been born to some illiterate couple in a slum area she could, at least, have not been the victim of this gender bias. Dattani also upholds that the violence against the female gender is not only perpetual but has also changed its form for the worse. Implicitly, the play mocks at the much orchestrated laws like 'Ban on Sex Determination' and the 'Law of Domestic Violence', formulated in defense of women but have been rendered meaningless in the face of the daunting demon of patriarchy. Nothing can shield woman against the suppression and oppression of man unless there is a change in our mindset accepting woman as an equivalent of man.

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