



## A FEMINIST READING OF MAHESH DATTANI'S SELECTED PLAYS

**Dr. Bijender Singh**

English Lecturer

GSSS, Hatt, Jind, Haryana, India

### **Abstract:**

*Mahesh Dattani is a very renowned playwright in the galaxy of Indian English playwrights who has achieved remarkable success in Indian drama. He has bedecked his plays with the burning issues of the society. Present paper is also a piquant attempt to analyze Dattani's two plays Tara and Thirty Days in September from the feminist angle. Both the plays have touching and poignant themes related to women. In the first play, Tara is victim of gender discrimination since her birth. She wants to twinkle like a star in her life but she finds nothing except darkness and gloominess in her life and becomes a victim of gender discrimination. Another play Thirty Days in September also tells the anguish of a girl named Mala Khatri who is molested by her own maternal uncle, Vinay and to the great dismay, Mala's mother, Shanta knows everything about the physical and mental torture of her daughter but she remains silent. Mala's mother also has been the victim of rape by her same brother in her childhood but she remains silent but Mala emerges as a valiant girl and she breaks the age-old rotten systems of the society and teaches his maternal uncle a lesson to molest him. Thus, through this paper, gender discrimination and physical abuse of a girl have been the core themes of these plays and this paper has been structured to cover these twin themes.*

**Key-Words :** Dattani, Plays, Exploitation, Marginalization, Gender Discrimination, Physical Abuse.

*The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave.*

— (Dattani, Tara, 328)

Mahesh Dattani, an Indian actor, director, playwright and writer, was born in Bangalore on 07 august, 1958. He did his schooling from Baldwin High School. He studied in St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science in Bangalore where he lives presently. He worked as a copywriter in an advertising company. His theatre group 'Playpen' was formed in 1984 in Bangalore. He teaches theatre courses in Portland State University, Oregon, USA in summer sessions. He is winner of Sahitya Academy Award for his book *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. His work *Dance Like a Man* has won Best



Picture award in 1998. He has written many plays which highlight the problems of the society in different forms. His plays are *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993) *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Circles Round the Fire* (1998), *Thirty Days in September* (2001), *Brief Candle* (2009), *Where Did Leave My Purda* (2012) and *The Big Fat City* (2012).

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is a moving play which is based formidably on the theme of gender discrimination and search for identity in the patriarchal society. The difference between male and female has been beautifully portrayed in it by the playwright. This gender difference can be seen in Indian villages or cities equally. Tara's story is not the story of a single girl; it is story of almost every girl from any part of India, from nearby areas or far-flung places. Girls are considered 'others' assets' because parents have to bid adieu them with dowry and in this way they are considered a burden. The girls look weary and bedraggled in some societies and they are not allowed to go to attend schools. This theme is beautifully projected in Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli* when Sita is born to a servant, Khyali's home and he anticipates the birth of a girl child. He feels disappointed at the birth of a girl child and calls her a burden, "Why worry? God take care of all those He sends into the world. Girls are a burden, I admit but what one do once they are born. "(Mehta 6-7).

Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* is about a girl named Tara who wants to twinkle like a star in her life but she saw nothing but darkness in her life. The play tells the story of twins born from parents named Patel and Bharati. They are born with three legs and they are annexed together on their hips. One is male and the other one is a female child. They could be separated only by a surgical process. One was sure to deprive of one leg. The inseparable twins, Chandan and Tara, mentioned in this play can be compared with Rahel and Estha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Girls are considered a burden due to distorted system of patriarchal society. In Roy's novel, Ammu faces problem in her marriage because, "... her father did not have enough money to raise a suitable dowry, no proposals came Ammu's way" (Roy 38). In the play *Tara*, these twins also don't have a happy life as they have one body and two souls and they are inseparable:

Tara: And me. Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... (Dattani 325)



The blood supply to this third leg was from the girl's body. So, there was a dilemma that which baby should keep alive—male or female? The partiality and injustice germinate from here when it was decided that third leg should be fixed on the male baby's body. In this way, the parents themselves machinate and a heinous and macabre act is the result of this partiality. A boy is preferred by the parents themselves and he is considered superior by his family members and a girl is considered inferior in their eyes. The question is not only of inferiority-complex but of selfishness and narrow-mindedness because Tara's mother also prefers male baby to keep alive so that he may carry forward her family name. Tara's parents were educated and they took the favour of a male child. If Bharati has favoured male child, Tara's father should have favoured her daughter but he did not. This shows that there was no intimacy in their relationships. This shows Patel's hegemonic patriarchy also. In this way, the themes of child abuse and gender discrimination are prevalent in this play.

This play has two Acts and it is set in London. Chandan is the central character of this play who is a dramatist by profession. He is reminiscent of his childhood days and wants to pen down his agony in the form of a drama. Tara's mother, Bharati is responsible for the tragedy of Tara as she comes under the sway of her father and in this way Bharati's father can also be held responsible for this catastrophe. Tara's father, Patel also holds Bharati responsible for injustice for Tara and he escapes from his responsibilities. Bharati does this act under the influence of her father who changes her mentality by emotionally blackmailing her. Then 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! Oh!.....When she sees herself at eighteen or twenty, thirty is unthinkable and what about forty and fifty! Oh God! (Dattani 349)

Consequently, surgery is done and both are separated. But Tara suffers from infirmity throughout her life. She does not get happiness from her life. Though she is active, vibrant and energetic girl; yet her parents don't co-operate her just because she is a girl. She is considered a burden in her own home. Mala stops attending her physiotherapy classes and enrolls in a college. When she comes to know that it she is in this position due to her mother's unfair decision. Tara has utmost faith in her mother but this stark reality breaks her inwardly and she could not bear this truth.



Societal pressure and her repression, being a female, is like a death for her. She often thinks to sacrifice her life for a noble deed as she loses charms of her life:

I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those. ----starving naked millions everywhere. May be I can start an institution that will ---- do all that. Or I could join Mother Teresa and sacrifice myself to a great cause. That may give--- purpose to my ---existence.” (370)

Tara dies ultimately. With Tara’s demise, Chandan is filled with remorse and he is racked with guilt over Tara’s early death. He feels identity crisis without Tara. He moves from India to England to start his life afresh but he fails to forget the repressing memories of his sister. He tries to change his attitude and even changes his name to the Westernized moniker “Dan.” He writes his autobiography in a play and asks forgiveness from his sister, “Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy.”(Dattani 380)

In the play *Tara*, a physically-challenged girl Tara has to succumb to the oddities of life. Her brother, Dan (Chandan) tries to define his other half, Tara, “She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. May be God never wanted us separated. Destiny desires strange things— But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life.” (330). Chandan feels so desperate over the death of Tara and he finds his life an utter failure. He thinks that he has again achieved the status of a zero:

Dan: Give me a moment and the pain will subside. Then I can function again. [Pause, more controlled now] 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 myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. .... Slowly, as if in a trance, picks up the typed sheets and starts tearing them as he speaks). My progress so far, I must admit, has been zero... (Dattani 379)

Bharati, being a mother, has soft corner in her daughter Tara. When Chandan asks her what she has thought for Tara; she says, “Yes! I have plans for her happiness. I mean to give her all love and affection, which I can give. It’s what she deserves.”(Dattani 9) She also wants to shed her burden of guilt. She realizes her mistake and that’s why she showers her concerns towards her daughter and tries to do something by donating her kidney which is of no use for Tara.



Mr. Patel, Tara's father is not a good father for his daughter. He blames his wife Bharati totally for what happened with Tara. He has negative thoughts for her daughter but wants a bright future for his son. He provides all facilities for studies of his son and does injustice with his daughter.

Dr. Thakkar who operates Tara is known as a godly person. He knows well that the third leg will suit better to Tara but he takes bribe from Bharati's father. He should have turned down the proposal but he does not do so and becomes a co-conspirator in the bizarre act of severing the leg. Bharati's father is a successful politician and he is very close to be a Chief Minister. Thus, almost all male characters except Chandan and even Mala's mother also favour male-child and in this way it becomes the mentality of people.

Women are just considered as tools for having sex, products to give birth to children, to continue the progeny of their husbands. If a woman is issueless then society criticizes her and she is not considered a perfect woman. In the novel *The God of Small Things* Comrade Pillai asks in the first meeting from Rahel upon her return to Ayemenem:

Any issues?"

"No," Rahel said.

"Still in planning stages, I suppose? Or expecting?"

"No."

"One is a must. Boy girl. Anyone," Comrade Pillai said. "Two is of course your choice." (Roy 130)

Dattani's play *Tara* has evoked the feeling of hatred against prejudice on the name of gender. He has criticized the socio-political aspects also of Indian society. Khobragade has rightly said that, "Mahesh Dattani revealed the issue of gender discrimination in this play. The social norms, economic values and cultural elements have been answerable for the inequality against the girl child." (Khobragade 3)

Dattani has focus on the appalling realities and the social problems prevalent in Indian society. His themes stem from underprivileged, marginalized or suppressed sections of society. He strives through his pen and he has written for the HIV victims, underprivileged, downtrodden, marginalized, aggrieved, gays, eunuchs and exploited women. Dattani has projected the problems of





Indian society in his play *Tara*. He has criticized the gender-discrimination, social discrimination, economic prejudices, corrupt politics and rotten relationships in his play *Tara*.

Mahesh Dattani's another play *Thirty Days in September* is also about child abuse in which its central character, Mala Khatri is physically abused by her own maternal uncle, Vinay since she was only seven-year-old. Mala's mother, Shanta knows all about it but she does not dare to speak due to her submissive nature and her greediness also. Mala thinks that she could have been saved if her mother had wanted it. She says, "The only person who can, who could have prevented all this is my mother. Sometimes I wish she would just tell me to stop. She could have prevented a lot from happening." (Dattani 18)

Mala's mother does never listen to her daughter's complaints seriously. Whenever Mala tries to tell her that her own maternal uncle is molesting her, her mother tries to divert Mala's mind to other things. She soothes her by feeding her sumptuous dishes. She either feeds her with Mala's favourite alu-parathas or seeks help from Lord Krishna whenever Mala intends to share her woes of sexual exploitation:

Oh yes, you would remember that I always like alu-parathas because that's what I got whenever I came to you, hurt and crying. Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food. I couldn't speak because I was being fed all the time, and you know what? I began to like them. I thought that was the cure for my pain. That if I ate till I was stuffed, the pain would go away. Every time I came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. You knew. Otherwise you wouldn't have been so prepared. You knew all along what was happening to me (Dattani 24).

Mala is victim of exploitation and she tries to bring home the point to her mother that her maternal uncle, Vinay is molesting her during each summer vacation or any other occasion when they are together, "I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation when we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You were busy in either the *pooja* room or the kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could even tell him why I was crying he would tell me to go to you." (Dattani 25-26) Mala has strong grievances against her mother. She holds her responsible for the wrong deed done to him. She always thinks that her mother has never been cooperative to her:



If only you had looked into my eyes and seen the hurt, or asked me ‘beta, what’s wrong?’ Then may be, I would have told you . . . But ma, I did look to you for help, while you were praying, your eyes avoiding mine, and I knew, deep down I must have known, that you will never ask me that question. Because you already knew the answer. (Dattani 53)

When Mala’s mother Shanta finds herself in problem she goes to the pooja room and thinks that Lord Krishna will do everything well. But Mala becomes more irritated at this and she gets angry and says, “Tell me. No don’t look at your God, look at me, look me in the eye and tell me “Yes that is all that you are talking about.”” (Dattani 25)

The play deals with a horrible problem of exploitation of a family girl (Mala) by a family member (maternal uncle, Vinay) and with the involvement of another family member (mother). Mala does not like this sinful act done to her for a long time during each summer vacation. She is always resented with her mother and says:

Where were you when he locked the door to your bed room while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one or whatever. That’s how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life! (Dattani 53)

Mala’s mother thinks that she will suffer everything patiently like her. She thinks that Mala’s problems will end with her marriage. She advises her just to forget everything, “I forgot. I forgot everything. Be like me” (Dattani 29). Mala thinks that it is her mother who is responsible for the hellish life she has to live, “By staying silent doesn’t mean I can forget! This is my hell. . . . It is your creation, Ma! You created it for me. With your silence!! You didn’t forget anything, you only remained silent!” (Dattani 54) Shanta has to succumb in front of her daughter and she tells that her maternal uncle assists her with money for domestic expenditures. That’s why she remains silent and another reason is that she has no courage to go against the patriarchal society. Hearing this, Mala comes to know immediately that her maternal uncle’s financial help has made her mother silent. She says to her mother, “He bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter” (Dattani 52)!



There is a time of Mala's marriage and Mala's boy-friend, Deepak comes to know Mala's story of woe from her and he wants to liberate her from the cruel clutches. Shanta is shocked to learn that Mala herself has told everything about her exploitation. She used to say to Mala to marry Deepak without telling anything to him. At this Mala says, "How can I hide all this from him if I am to marry him, Ma? (Dattani 29)

Mala tells her mother that she feels no hesitation or shame in revealing the name of her maternal uncle. She says that she has done nothing wrong and it is the penetrator who should hide his face, not her. When Mala's mother feels that now the situation is out of her control, she tells a story which moved even her daughter, Mala also. She tells that she was also exploited in her childhood when she was only six years old by her same brother by whom Mala has molested.

Shanta (defeated): Yes, yes! I only remained silent. I am to blame. That is why God is punishing me today. I remained silent not because I wanted to speak. I-I cannot speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off....My tongue was cut years ago. (Dattani 54)

Now, she thinks that Deepak can do something and he can save Mala from her maternal uncle. She requests Deepak to save Mala from her present plight:

Mala: (To Deepak). Please save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself...?

(To Mala). You say I could not help you. Same as you could not help me. Did you ever see the pain in my eyes? No. Nobody said anything. Not my brothers, not my parents. Only (pointing to the Man) he spoke. Only he said, only he saw and he did (Dattani 54).

Shanta's story of physical exploitation numbed her daughter when she tells that her own brother has molested her too for ten years:

Shanta: I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen....and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years! (Pointing to the picture of God). I looked to him. I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel pain. I didn't feel pleasure. I lost myself in Him. He helped me. By taking away all feelings. No pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti Shanti. But my tongue is cut off. No. No. It just fell off somewhere. I didn't use it, no I cannot shout for help. I cannot say words of comfort. I cannot even speak about it. No I can't. I am dumb." (Dattani 54-55)





After this incidence, Mala finds her life purposeless and futile. She hurts herself on her mouth with a sharp piece of glass and jabs in her mouth. Mala tells Deepak that she cannot go with him as she is not in good mood. She says that she can marry with him only when she may be able to forget her uncle who is ingrained in her mind to such an extent that she cannot forget him. She wants to finish this relationship first before starting her life afresh with Deepak:

You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!! I cannot love you" because "I see this man [uncle, Vinay] everywhere. I can never be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone . . . else." (Dattani 54)

Binay Kumar Das contends:

In *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani portrays vividly the victims of incest through the characters of Mala and Shanta...Both the daughters and mothers were abused by the same man, Vinay (who is called 'Man' in the play), Mala's maternal uncle and Shanta's own brother. (Das 65)

To sum up, it can be said that Mahash Dattani's play *Tara* beautifully unmasks the real faces of many people through Tara's story. *Thirty Days in September* unravels the horrible exploitation in relationships. This play depicts a story of child-molestation and her protests. Dattani has to use euphemistic and embarrassing words to highlight the evils of society. He has portrayed stereotypical gender roles in both plays. Sometimes, even family members become the enemy of females. Thus, Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* exposes the bizarre reality of position of women and *Thirty Days in September* evocatively highlights gender-discrimination in patriarchal society. Simon De Beauvoir has rightly contends that a woman is not born with partially she is realized by patriarchal society that she is a woman, "One is *not born, but rather becomes, a woman*" (Beauvoir 267)

## Works-Cited

1. Mehta, Rama: *Inside the Haveli*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.
2. Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Indian Ink, 1997. Print.
3. Beauvoir, Simon De. *The Second Sex*. Trans & Ed. H. M. Parshley. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.
4. Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters* [1998]. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. Print.
5. Dattani, Mahesh, *Collected Plays*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2000. Print.
6. Jha, Vivekanad. "Discrimination of Class and Gender: Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*. 1.1.(2012): 1-8. Web.
7. Kapur, Manju. *A Married Women*. New Delhi: Indian Ink, 2002. Print.



8. Khobragade, Grishma Manikrao. "Gender Discrimination and Social Consciousness in the Play of Mahesh Dattani: *Tara*." *Golden Research Thoughts Journal*. 1.4. (2011): 1-3. Web.

## Bio Note

Dr. Bijender Singh (M.A., M. Phil. & Ph.D.) presently works as an English Lecturer and lives at Rohtak, Haryana. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal*. He has written a few essays, some short-stories, many Hindi poems and many research articles. Around a dozen of books are to his credit including *Late Night Poetry*, *Confusing Poetry*, *Love: A Sweet Poison*, *Gender Discourse in Indian Writings in English*, *Indian Writing in English: Critical Insights*, *Indian Dalit Literature: Critical Ruminations*, *Critical Essays on Indian Diaspora*, *Indian Dalit Autobiographies: Marginalized Voices*, *Indian Women Novelists: Feminist Reverberations*, *Dalit Women's Autobiographies: A Critical Appraisal*, *Race and Ethnicity: Afro-American Literature* and *Female Protagonists in Shashi Deshpande's Novels*.