



Gender Marginality in Mahesh Dattani's Plays *Tara* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

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Abstract— Mahesh Dattani occupies a very high place among the contemporary Indian English dramatists. His plays are the authentic portrayal of the sufferings of the marginalized sections of society. He enlarged the scope of Indian English drama by writing plays on the controversial social issues. The issue of gender marginality emerges as the main theme in most of his plays. It is a practice by which individuals of certain genders are deliberately pushed to the margins of society. They are denied equal participation in the important spheres of life. In Indian social structure the position of women and third genders is marginalized. They are not allowed to enjoy equal rights. The position of third genders in society is worse than untouchables. In spite of some legal decisions in favor of the transsexuals the community is not accepted by majority of population. The social stigma associated with the third genders is the main cause of their rejection. Through his plays *Tara* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* Mahesh Dattani raises his voice against this unjust treatment of women and third genders in society. He wants every individual to enjoy equal rights without any kind of discrimination. This research article aims to explore the marginalized status of the women and eunuchs in Indian social hierarchy through critical analysis of Dattani's play *Tara* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.



Keywords— Gender, Marginality, Patriarchy, Stigma, Third gender, Social Hierarchy

Introduction

The plays of Dattani reflect his deep concern for the changing values, moral conflicts and the challenges faced by the post-colonial Indians. His plays won universal recognition for their different subject matters. The subjects which were considered taboo by the previous authors, hold prime place in the dramatic world of Mahesh Dattani. In 1998 he received the most prestigious literary award-Sahitya Academy award for his collection of plays entitled *Final Solutions and Other plays*. His innovative themes and techniques brought revolutionary changes in Indian English drama. The issue of gender marginality emerges as the core theme in most of his plays. Through his *plays Where There is a Will, Tara, Bravely Fought the Queen* Mahesh Dattani raises his voice against the unjust treatment of women in patriarchal Indian social structure. His play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is an authentic

representation of the marginalized social status of hijra community.

Objectives of the study are

1. To explore the marginalized social status of women in Indian social hierarchy.
2. To explore how the heteronormative norms of gender cause marginality of third gender.
3. To explore the impact of marginality on individual psyche.
4. To explore the role of Dattani in modifying people's attitude for the marginalized sections of society.

Methodology

The research methodology utilized in the study is the critical analysis of Dattani's play *Tara* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* in the light of the theory of marginality.

Marginality of Female Gender in *Tara*

The issue of gender inequality is the main social issue focused in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara*. The play highlights Dattani's belief that the practice of gender discrimination is harmful for the proper growth of both males and females. In a patriarchal society like India the rights and happiness of male members are given priority over the rights and happiness of its female members. This evil is deeply rooted in social stereotypes. In a gender oriented society both men and women are expected to behave according to certain rules assigned to them by the society. In the current Indian social structure the position of male is always central where as women are always pushed to the margins. They are supposed as weak and miserable creatures. They hold no separate identity or wish. Their identity seems to be included in the identity of the male members of their family. Falvia Agnes reveals the life-long subjugation of Indian women within the patriarchal social set up:

It is socially acceptable that within the family man is the master and the women is inferior and subordinate partner. Social pressures force women to maintain the 'status quo'. A woman who does not accept the traditional role of submissiveness into accepting this position, and any means including violence is justified (Agnes 151).

Dattani's play *Tara* is a sorrowful tale of the subjugation of a disabled girl- Tara. The play is the portrayal of the predicament of a girl child within the complexities of typical Indian family setup. The play reveals the hypocrisy of a modern educated family which pretend to give equal opportunity to both its male and female members but in reality the female members of the family become victims of gender discrimination. Through this play Dattani highlights the biases and prejudices which still ruin the lives of several girl children even amongst the highly educated urban families like the family of Patel's in the play *Tara*. Talking about the theme of the play Erin Mee says:

Tara centres 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) (Mee 319).

These words of Erin Mee clearly reveal that the parental patriarchal inclination is mainly responsible for the all the troubles of Tara's life. The practice of discriminating girls and boys on the basis of their gender spoils the lives of many girls or women in the prevalent patriarchal structure. Thus the suffering of Tara is more social than physical. The play deals with the lives of Siamese children-

Chandan and Tara who were born with all the important organs except three lower limbs. These children are conjoined from the chest. After observing the medical reports of the twins Dr. Thakkar declares that the chances of the survival of the third leg on the girl child were more than the boy child. But Tara's mother Bharati and her maternal grand-father ask Dr. Thakkar to graft the third leg on to the body of boy child to provide perfection to the male heir of their family. Thus the leg which naturally belonged to Tara was given to the boy child Chandan to give him perfection but the leg did not survive on Chandan's body for long. It was amputated as a piece of dead flesh only three days after the surgery. Thus both Chandan and Tara are left to survive only on one leg. The failure of the operation fills the heart of Bharati with utmost guilt and grief. She regards herself responsible for the misfortune of her both the children specially Tara. To compensate Tara of the wrong done to her Bharati shows utmost care to her. Even in her teenage Bharati pampers Tara as a little child. Mr. Patel often rebukes Bharati for her giving excessive care to Tara: "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).

Tara becomes a victim of gender discrimination since the very beginning of her life. The preference for male child is the root cause of the injustice done to female child- Tara. The manipulation of the surgery in the favour of the male heir of the family ruins the lives of both Chandan and Tara. The female protagonist of the play Tara is deprived of a happy life by her own family members. Sangeeta Das rightly observes:

Tara is neither Chandan's tragedy nor it is really Tara's. Tara is sacrificed because she was a girl and had no right to have a better life than her brother. The idea of a complete girl child and an incomplete boy male child is so shocking that sacrifice of the girl child is acceptable than a handicapped male child. The tragic events depicted in the play are tragic actions belonging to everyday life (Das 115).

This decision of the family reveals the patriarchal leanings of Patels. Roopa, a common friend of Chandan and Tara, gives a hint of the age old beliefs and practices prevailing in the family of Patels, "The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies—you know dowry and things like that—so they used to drown them in milk" (CP 349). On many occasions the attitude of Mr. Patel to his wife and daughter seems negative. As a father he is more concerned about the future and well-being of his son Chandan. Bharati also expresses the fondness of Mr. Patel for his son Chandan, "Don't tell me about your father. He

is more worried about your career than hers" (CP 348). He has many plans for his son Chandan. He wants Chandan to join a foreign university for his higher education. He gets angry when he sees Chandan helping Bharati in knitting sweater because he thinks that such type of tasks are not meant for male gender. He has no plans for his disabled daughter Tara. On the other hand, Bharati (Tara's mother) is very much worried about Tara's happiness. She says, "I plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give" (CP 349). As a mother Bharati is very much concerned about Tara's happiness.

To get rid of her guilty conscience Bharati decides to donate her kidney to Tara but again she is not able to make a free choice. Her husband, Mr. Patel, arranges another donor for her because he does not want Bharati to feel the satisfaction by donating her kidney to Tara. He tells Bharati, "Because I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it" (CP 344). Imposing his authority he declares, "You will have to obey me. It's my turn now" (CP 344). As a patriarchal head Mr. Patel completely dominates his wife. When Bharati decides to tell Chandan and Tara the truth behind the manipulation of the surgery, Mr. Patel does not let her do so. He says, "If at all they must know, it will be from me. Not from you" (CP 345). Thus the position of Bharati in her own home is completely marginalized. She cannot take any decision independently either about her own life or about the life of her own kids. She feels completely helpless. The dominating attitude of Mr. Patel is responsible for Bharati's insanity.

Both Bharati and Tara become victims of gender discrimination. The whole life of Bharati is dominated by the male members of her family. Her maternal instinct is suppressed by the patriarchal norms of society. Under the influence of her father Bharati takes the wrong decision of imparting the third leg to Chandan and suffers silently throughout her life for taking active involvement in doing wrong to her own daughter. Because of the burden of guilt Bharati becomes insane. She is ready to do anything for the happiness of Tara. She requests the neighbourhood girl Roopa to make friendship with Tara and feels relaxed when Roopa gives her consent. She always wants to see Tara happy.

The practice of gender discrimination makes a very negative impact on the life of the male child Chandan as well. Chandan regards himself responsible for the misfortune caused to Tara. To escape the horrors of the reality behind Tara's untimely death Chandan shifts to London. He changes his identity with a new name from Chandan to Dan. He completely withdraws from the external world because it seems very difficult for him to

forget the days which he spent in the company of his twin sister Tara. Tara seems to him his another half. Erin Mee rightly comments:

Tara and Chandan are the two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities and that Dan in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara's story. Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected half of himself, as a means of becoming whole (CP 320).

Marginality of Third Gender in *Seven Steps Around the Fire*

Marginality of third genders is the main issue focussed in Dattani's play *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. The play was first broadcast as *Seven Circles Around the Fire* by BBC Radio 4 on 9 January 1999. The play was reproduced on stage in collaboration of MTC Production and the Madras Players on 6th August 1999 as *Seven Steps Around the Fire*. Through this play Mahesh Dattani tries to sensitize the heterosexual community to treat the third gender individuals with love and compassion because he believes that love is the only remedy which can lessen the suffering of this marginalized community. The play is the portrayal of the plight of transgender women in Indian society. Dattani is against gender based discrimination. He believes in what Butler says that gender is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 520).

Uma, the wife of Suresh Rao- Chief Superintendent of Police, in the play appears as an instrument of awakening. It is she who tries to articulate the mute voices of eunuchs in the centre. She also exposes the community of elitists that drags them to the margin. The play is an attempt to uncover the eternal struggles and hardships faced by the third gender individuals in their everyday life. Through this play Dattani shows that the presence of third genders is deemed auspicious only on two occasions i.e. child birth and wedding but they themselves are deprived of the rights of marriage and childbirth by Nature and also by society.

The play begins as a murder mystery dealing with the murder of a beautiful transgender woman Kamla who is burnt alive to death because she tried to achieve something prohibited. Uma Rao, a teacher and researcher in the department of Sociology, comes to know about this case while her research work on the topic 'Class and Gender Related Violence'. She visits Bangalore Central jail to meet Anarkali- another transwoman imprisoned in the jail on the charge of murdering her own companion Kamla. In the jail Uma is assisted by Munswamy a constable appointed by her husband Suresh Rao to protect her from any kind of harm. Unlike the other heterosexuals Uma has

a sense of respect for the third genders. Out of her feeling of respect she uses the pronoun 'she' to address Anarkali. When Uma asks Munswamy "Will she talk to me?" (CP 233), Munswamy immediately replies, "She! Of course it will talk to you. We will beat it up if it doesn't" (CP 233). These words of Munswamy highlight the marginalized position of eunuchs in society. Munswamy's use of the pronoun 'it' for Anarkali which is used to refer to animals and goods show his sense of superiority and hatred against eunuchs. He refuses to accept the human identity of eunuchs.

Munswamy does not want Uma to waste her time in solving a case related to third genders because he believes that the cases related to heterosexual world are more important. He does not want Uma to meet Anarkali because he believes that Anarkali will never tell her the truth. Addressing Uma he says, "It will only tell you lies" (CP 234). This statement of Munswamy reveals the general belief about the third genders that they are liars.

In the jail Anarkali is kept with male prisoners though she feels herself like a female. Many times she is beaten severely by her fellow prisoners. The empathy and rude behaviour of the heterosexuals make Anarkali aggressive and revengeful. She agrees to talk to Uma only when she comes to know that she is the wife of Chief Superintendent of police. With her love and sympathy Uma succeeds to win her confidence. In her first meeting with Uma Anarkali tells her, "I didn't kill her. She was my sister!" (CP 236). She also asks Uma "Would you kill your sister?" (CP 236). Anarkali's emphasis on the word 'sister' shows her craving for human touch and interpersonal relationship. Anarkali wants to develop sister like bond with Uma. She says to her "If you were a hijra I would have made you my sister" (CP 242). At the same time she is also aware of the class difference that exists between her and Uma. Uma says to Anarkali, "Of course we can be sisters!" (CP 242). Anarkali immediately replies "Where are you and where am I?" (CP 242). These words of Anarkali reflect her class consciousness. Being a hijra Anarkali knows well that society will never accept her any kind of relationship with Uma, a person belonging to heterosexual world. She is well aware of the fact that her own companion Kamla was murdered brutally because she tried to establish relations with heterosexual world. The hijras live as invisible minority in society. The position of transgender women is more marginalized. Most of the eunuchs earn their living by singing badhais at weddings and child birth. Anarkali also accepts "I sing with other hijras at weddings and when a child is born" (CP 241). This statement of Anarkali reveals the deprivation of eunuchs of respectable employments which is greatly

responsible for their poverty and marginalized social status.

Unlike Uma her husband Suresh has no sympathy for these marginalized creatures. He calls them "castrated degenerate men" (CP 238). When Uma asks him the reason of putting Anarkali- a transwoman in male prison, he gives a very contemptuous reply "They are as strong as horses" (CP 237). These words of Suresh highlight his indifferent attitude to eunuchs. He asks Uma not to develop any kind of sympathy for Anarkali. Like Munswamy Suresh too regards the eunuchs as liars. He warns Uma "Don't believe a word of anything it says. They are all liars" (CP 237).

Again and again Uma contemplates about the origin of this community but she fails to find any satisfactory answer. She visits Shivajinagar to meet Champa, the guru of Anarkali, to give her the money required for Anarkali's bail from prison. When Uma tells Champa that she is a social worker, Champa asks surprisingly, "I did not know that...you see us also as society, no? (CP 254)". These words of Champa highlight the apathy of society for the hijra community. Champa also tells, "We cannot speak...When we want to speak nobody listens. When we cannot speak..." (CP 259). These words of Anarkali very well reflect what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak declares in her critical essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Here Champa shows that how society deprives these marginalized creatures of their freedom of speech. Their voice is either silenced or ignored by the powerful elitists like the government minister Mr. Sharma. Champa also tells that a eunuch holds no identity and respect outside their own community, "There is no world for a hijra other than the one we make for ourselves" (CP 261). This observation in the play marks the insensitive attitude of the heterosexual world for the eunuchs. The mainstream society does not let them feel the warmth of life with the involvement in personal relationship.

The action of the play moves forward in the form of investigation. Uma interrogates Champa to know about the real murderer of Kamla. She first thinks that the rivalry between Kamla and Anarkali was the reason behind the murder of Kamla. When Uma suspects Champa as a murderer of Kamla, she says, "You don't know how much we all loved her! You will not understand. I loved her more than you can love your daughter" (CP 262). Through this utterance of Champa, Dattani tries to highlight the intensity and warmth of love that the transgenders possess for one-another. Kamla- a homeless transgender was loved as a daughter by her guru Champa. Their love is no way different from the depth of love among human beings. This conversation between Uma and Anarkali is

interrupted by the arrival of Salim, the driver of Mr. Sharma. He comes there to search for a photograph. When Champa tells Uma that Salim often visit the place for Kamla, Uma's investigation moves towards Salim. With the constable Munswamy Uma visits the house of Mr. Sharma, the government officer, to know more about Salim. During this visit she meets Mr. Sharma and also his son Subbu.

Mr. Sharma informs Uma about Subbu's wedding but Subbu seems disturbed. He says "I hate weddings. I don't want all this. I don't wish to go ahead with this" (CP 267). The play questions the role of societal institutions like family, police and judiciary in reinforcing the marginalized status of eunuchs. In the play the family of Subbu plays a significant role in ruining his life. Subbu challenges the strong patriarchal norms by secretly marrying Kamla- a transgender woman. Subbu's relationship with the eunuch Kamla seems a sickness to his parents that needs to be cured. Mr. Sharma exerts his political power to erase Kamla from his son's life. He then forces his son into a heterosexual marriage. For the sake of his political career Mr. Sharma does not hesitate to sacrifice the happiness of his own son. In the play the senior police officers like Suresh Rao are portrayed as protectors of wealthy and corrupt ministers like Mr. Sharma. The physical torture inflicted on Anarkali in the police custody reveals the inhuman attitude of police for the socially neglected community of eunuchs. When Anarkali says to Uma, "One hijra less in the world does not matter to your husband" (CP 272) . This statement of Anarkali clearly highlights the indifferent attitude of police for this sexually barren community. The absence of Kamla- the main character, from the stage throughout the play also symbolizes the invisibility of eunuchs for the mainstream society.

In the play Dattani also portrays the systematic neglect of eunuchs in healthcare facilities. When Anarkali comes out of prison, she is severely injured. Champa visits many doctors for the treatment of Anarkali but they all refuse to treat her. At last Anarkali gives some brandy to Anarkali to lessen her pain. She also sings a lullaby to make Anarkali feel relaxed. Such behaviour on the part of Champa shows her care and concern for all her disciples. She treats all of them as her children. The hijras also give proper respect to Champa. She stands as a mother figure to them.

The last scene of the play- the scene of Subbu's wedding is emotionally very powerful. In this scene Uma reaches to attend Subbu's wedding with her husband Suresh. Champa, the head hijra, also comes with Anarkali and other eunuchs to sing badhai at Subbu's wedding. The very moment Champa and Anarkali start dancing, the

memories of dead Kamla becomes alive in front of Subbu. In a moment of excitement and tension Subbu snatches Suresh's gun. He first aims the gun at his father holding him responsible for the murder of Kamla. Then he shoots himself. The suicide of Subbu at the altar of his own wedding reveals his helplessness against the shackles of heterosexual norms of society. Subbu makes it clear that his own father is responsible for Kamla's murder but the whole incident was reported as an accident.

The issue of gender marginality thus remains a potent issue in the plays of Mahesh Dattani. Dattani believes that in the patriarchal Indian social structure women are the most neglected creatures. Through his plays *Tara* and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* he tries to reveal the deep rooted evils of gender marginality operating within the familial structure of Indian society. The society portrayed in the plays of Dattani is a world which accepts only those who are fit and conform to the prevailing heteronormative norms. Those who go against the accepted social values are either ignored or systematically silenced. In the patriarchal set up of Indian society the rights and happiness of women are always sacrificed to give perfection to its male members. The life of Tara, a disabled girl, is sacrificed to give meaning and completeness to her brother Chandan. Similarly the play *Seven Steps Around the Fire* is a realistic portrayal of the subaltern status of the third gender community. The constant craving of Anarkali for the human relationship shows how the social exclusion of individuals and communities cause great mental unrest. As a dramatist Dattani is not only confined to reveal the social alienation of the eunuchs but he also reveals their mental agitation. The last words of Uma, "All I want is that they want...to move on. To love. To live" (CP 282) clearly emphasize Dattani's philosophy of life.

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