

TRADITIONS AND VALUES REGARDING INDIAN WOMEN- A STUDY OF MAHESH DATTANI'S TARA

Dr. Alka Jain

English Faculty

Department of English

Rani Laxmibai Central Agricultural University, Jhansi, India

Abstract

The paper examines Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara*, and endeavours to trace the influence of ancient Indian traditions and values regarding women on his feminine sensibility. It attempts to examine the traditional light in which Dattani portrays his women and interprets their problems. The paper examines *Tara* as Dattani's lament on the disappearance of traditional values and virtues from contemporary society. The goal of this research paper is to examine the influence of ancient traditions and values regarding women, on Dattani's feminine sensibility. The research paper examines crisis of values as a disease of the modern civilization.

Keywords:feminism, Indian traditions, values, Dattani, sensibility.

Full Paper

Tara is a play on gender inequalities and gender discrimination by society. It is also a play on disability, and shows society's inability to assimilate individuals with disabilities. *Tara* shows the failure of modern Indian society to uphold its *Dharma*. *Dharma* as rights prevails over *adharma* or injustice. Ancient Indian philosophy took *Dharma* as a self regulatory discipline. It did not require legal sanction, and was guided by the conscience. *Tara* shows the extreme injustice meted out to women by family and society. A time has come in India, when like the western counterparts; justice needs to be secured through legal jurisprudence as it no longer stems from inner regulations. The traditional philosophy of *Dharma*, the path of righteousness is forgotten. As R.N Sharma says:

Dharma as Justice is then observance of truth in thought, word and deed. Truth is said to be always victorious, and is always convincing and thus satisfying to all. Truth rejects formalism, superstition, dogmatism and recommends change and reform for progressive realization of the goals of life by rising above false distinctions of caste, creed and colour etc. The so called injustices in human life can be seen as mere ‘untruths’, ‘sham’s and falsities of life.(“The Ideal”)

Tara shows the hollowness of modern relationships, the absence of faith and extreme form of emotional, psychological and physical violence. It sadly reminds of an erstwhile India known for “*Ahimsa Parmo Dharma*”. Violence in any form is condemned in Indian philosophy and religion, in the teachings of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and the like. *Tara* mourns the death of the rich Indian cultural heritage and sensibility. The tattered fabric of modernity and urbanism is exhibited boldly by Dattani. His families suffer due to westernization, materialism, selfish pleasure-seeking, and ignorance of the ideals of self-sacrifice, peaceful co- existence, and spiritual advancement which are the foundation stones of traditional Indian society. The research chapter seeks to examine this crisis of values as a disease of the modern civilization.

Dattani has written contemporary plays in real- life setting and explored the prevalent ills in society but the reaffirmation of faith in old values is visible in his plays. He attacks the oppressive social evils, stemming from the modern day materialistic philosophy, a far cry from the rich and unique Indian philosophy. Most of the research works available on Dattani’s plays trace the roots of oppression in the culture and traditions of India, regarding it as suppressive and debilitating. The research chapter puts forth the observation that the evolution of Indian Feminism is very different from the revolutionary Feminism of western countries. Western feminism primarily rose out of a need for political, social, and economic equality with men, while Indian feminism is concerned with the removal of social evils which invaded Indian society.

The oldest text in Sanskrit or in any Indo- European language, the Rigveda, regards women and men as equal. The Hindu texts advocated distribution of labour, and men and

women were designated different roles to facilitate harmonious living. With the advent of British rule, came the imposed Christian education system of Thomas Macaulay, who wanted to change Indians into a race that was, "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect" (Osborn). The Indologists intentionally misinterpreted the Vedic texts and made them look primitive for their own selfish gains. It is mainly due to this western education system, that we remain ignorant of the vast repositories of knowledge and high thinking, which guided every aspect of ancient Indian living.

Act 1 of the play *Tara* opens with Dan, in London. Dan confesses that he tried suppressing the memories of his twin sister Tara, who is inseparable from him, "the way we started life. Two lives in one body, in one comfortable womb." He calls himself a "freak" (Dattani 325, 324; act 1). In this long soliloquy, Dan or Chandan, bares the wounds inflicted by his past. He also relates that Tara and he were Siamese twins, those sharing one body by birth.

The action moves to Mumbai, and the past, in the home of Chandan's parents, Bharati and Patel. Dattani shows the tension in the parent's relationship and their concern for *Tara*.

Back to the realistic level, Dan is trying to focus on Tara while writing and says that nature has not been fair to both of them. Nature wanted to let them remain united but, "preserved in formaldehyde for future generations to study" (Dattani 330; act1). Dan decides to begin with Dr. Thakker's interview. The interview is related to Tara and Chandan, and Dattani takes the audience to another level in the past, resembling a T.V. interview. Dr. Thakker has taken on 'God and Nature'. He talks of operating upon them when they were three months old.

Act 11 begins with Bharati and Tara talking to each other. Bharati is finally going to donate a kidney to Tara in the operation to be conducted soon. Dr. Thakker tells us of the complications in separating the twins. Dr. Thakker explains that both the children would be sterile. He also informs that the operation was a success, and the greatest challenge was to keep the girl alive.

Patel rings up Dan in London and tells him about Bharati's death. Dan refuses to go back to Mumbai. Tara has been dead for six years. In the flashback, Tara is accusing Chandan of being indifferent to their mother and tells him that Patel is denying her access to Bharati. She thinks her mother has

something to disclose to her. Tara and Chandan defy Patel and decide to visit their mother. Patel then decides to tell his children the truth, and accepts that the three of them were to be blamed, his father-in-law, Bharati, and Patel himself. The twins had three legs between them and the third leg was fed by the girl's blood system. The chances of the survival of the third leg lay more with Tara but Bharati under her father's influence decided to give the leg to Chandan. Patel could not resist. Even the doctor was brought off by Bharati's influential father. The leg survived with Chandan for just two days. Tara is devastated by this revelation. The play ends with the images of Tara and Chandan with normal legs, hugging each other, far beyond the reach of nature and society.

When Dattani speaks of violence and disjointedness in families he mourns the absence of the glory that once existed. The essential philosophy of '*Grihastha ashrama*', an important stage in tradition Indian life, advocating marital and familial harmony is violated in *Tara* and a majority of Dattani's plays. He constantly shows what is missing in his character's life. Dattani's characters are modern, educated, urbanised men and women, having all the materialistic comforts. Then why do they suffer so much pain and agony? Dattani shows the mistrust in relationships, the distance between individuals, the violation of the moral and ethical codes as the root cause of unhappiness. Nowhere does he blame the quintessential Indian sensibility of the past for the present day turmoil. The chapter analyses *Tara* in this light. Act 1 begins with Dan's attempts to write a play. He admits:

DAN. Not to say that I have anything to show to the world yet, I do. For instance, these. (picks up a manuscript.) *Random Raj*. Short stories on the British Raj. Still hounding publishers. The publishers here ignore them because none of them deal with sati, dowry deaths or child- marriages- all subjects guaranteed to raise the interest of the average Western intellectual. And back home, of course Indo-Anglian literature isn't worth toilet paper. (Dattani 324; act 1)

Dan in these few words gives away the position of Indian English literature in the west. Critical studies on Indian English literature have shown how the western minds feed on images of a poor, filthy, hungry, superstitious, and crime infested India. The west takes pride

in bearing the 'white man's burden', and 'civilizing' the 'barbarians'. It is only by showing the colonial countries as uncultured that they have proven their own superiority, and sanctified their right to dominate.

Dattani reveals the grave reality that a large number of Indian authors are in fact commissioned by foreign publishers to write about an India which is shabby and diseased. This type of literature sells and gets awarded in the west. Through Dan, Dattani shows the predicament of an Indian English writer who fails to sell a work which does not boast about the 'darkness' of his country. These writers and their writings have tarnished the image of Indian culture and society.

A few enlightened visionaries and spokesmen upheld the flame of the glorious Indian heritage and showed the west the dark alleys of their own culture. Sri Vivekananda's address at The Parliament of Religions in Chicago, made the world sit up and take note of one of the richest culture and philosophy that ever existed in the world. Dattani therefore has the gullibility to expose the truth behind a majority of Indian English writings. Dattani's dramatic art becomes his weapon to fight the social evils, infiltrating modern Indian households and modern Indian minds. He shows how a society fooled by western thoughts and logic is searching for superficial happiness in materialistic pleasures and ignoring the call of morality and ethics. Young and promising individuals like Tara and Chandan struggle to breathe in the contaminated atmosphere. They finally give up.

Dan as Dattani's spokesman shows how Indians compromise with their individuality to fit into the foreign garb, and gain acceptance in the so called enlightened societies of the west. In order to merge, they give up everything native- culture, tradition, values, sensibility, even their accent without once calculating the worth of the western ideology in comparison to the centuries old Indian cultural heritage. What is acquired in exchange is artificial and 'phoney'. Dattani here mourns the death of traditional values in the name of advancement. Dattani depiction of Tara and Chandan (Dan) as inseparable, resonate with his Indian sensibility.

Hinduism believes that each man has a soul or *atman*. It is the body that dies and is born many times. The soul is eternal and never dies. The *Upanishads* clearly say that the soul is neither male nor female. Ancient Indian scriptures and philosophy do not differentiate between the sexes. It is society which segregates individuals as men and women. The country is known for worshipping and celebrating duality, in the *Ardhnarishwar* image of Shiva. It believes in the harmonious co-existence of the male and female principles in nature and society. The duality theory accepts the co-existence of pleasure and sorrow, good and evil, lack and abundance in all phases of life. If pleasure exists, sorrow cannot be far behind. One must learn to accept both with equanimity.

Chandan advocates Dattani's traditional philosophy. He believes that he and Tara are inseparable. They were born as one. They are not just conjoined twins, but share a unique male-female personality. Chandan represents the male side and Tara, the female, like Shiva the *Ardhnarishwar*. Together they make a force of love and communion though separately they are weak and dependent.

In a country where Gods are worshipped in duality, female oppression is not a tradition but a deviation from tradition, a social evil arising out of the myopic vision of the selfish guardians of prejudices. A person well versed with Indian philosophy and spirituality cannot perpetuate gender discrimination. Dan's views are representative of Dattani's feminine sensibility. He is the voice of conscience. *Tara* is a play on gender discrimination. The girl child Tara gets a raw deal as the leg she rightly deserves is given to her brother. This shocking incident reveals the distorted psyche of a heartless, evil infested society. Modern Indian society refuses to look back and reclaim the wisdom of the ancient culture which regarded women as precious gems and transmitters of moral values and culture.

Feminism as a movement grew in the west because of the absence of the principle of equality of women and men. Women in the west were deprived of equal rights and status as men and so their feminist movement was a revolutionary act. In India, Feminism is a movement of evolution, an attempt to remove the social evils of the past few hundred years. India cannot talk of feminism in the same tone as the west, because equality has always been an intrinsic value of Indian culture. This is a country which associates animals like cows, elephants and snakes to gods and religion, so that their protection becomes a matter of *Dharma* or duty. In India nature in the form of mountains, rivers and trees is worshipped, so that it can be

preserved. It is only due to senseless and ruthless race for industrialization and urbanization in imitation of western societies that rivers are being polluted and greenery is getting diminished.

There is no history of cultural, economic, political, or social inequality in India. Indian religions are wonderful guides and have contributed in making the Indian society one of the most liberal and egalitarian societies in the world. Feminism thus only relates to the removal of the rust of social evils from the Indian panorama.

Dan introspects on the injustice meted out to his sister. He refuses to go to college without Tara. He recognises that Tara has more strength than him and can do better. Chandan supports Tara in her crisis more than anyone else. A dialogue which surmises Chandan's love for Tara most aptly is, "No difference between you and me?" and then, "That's the nicest thing you have said to me" (Dattani 361; Act 2). These lines By Dan surmise Dattani's traditional sensibility and his belief in the Indian philosophy, which advocates that God created humanity as one, without the label of sex and gender.

Tara's dehumanisation agonise the readers/audience. Dattani shows traditional sensibility, when he depicts the chaos and devastation in the Patel household. It speaks volumes for the Indian traditional wisdom that in a home where women shed tears happiness cannot reside. Bharati, Patel and Chandan live in guilt, shame and unhappiness. The extreme dehumanisation of a three month old girl child by her own parents and the God- like doctor is inexplicable. Nature, parents and society all went against Tara. Dan, a man of strong character and moral ethics refuses to justify the game of gender politics. The effect of the separation is so profound on Chandan that he escapes to become Dan. His story cannot be completed unless he narrates Tara's story.

Indian customs regarding women were severely impacted by centuries of invasions and foreign occupation, when the careful protection of Hindu women became essential. Although the position of women declined in modern times most scholars agree that women in ancient India held a very high position. They were educated and participated with men in philosophical debates. The Vedas, Upanishads and other scriptures give examples of women philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators and saints. As the article, "Culture: Women's Status in Ancient India", quotes from the The Rig Veda, "The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore, both should join and take

equal parts in all works, religious and secular” (Laungani). It further mentions that Hinduism teaches, “the law of karma, which informs us that what we do to others will in turn be done to us—and that ahimsa, non-hurtfulness, must be the guiding precepts of our lives. Thus, Hinduism gives no justification for the mistreatment of others, whether on the basis of gender or for any other reason” (Laungani). Tara’s heart rending cry is thus for the restoration of her ancient rights.

A disturbing element in Dattani’s plays is the disjointed family structure. His families are either broken or on the verge disintegration and are a cause for all problems. In *Tara* it is the Patel household. Family is an indispensable social institution in India and a matter of concern in Indian English literature. In the modern world, where every conventional idea has undergone change, the idea of family, gender roles, and the politics of power within the family has also undergone metamorphosis.

Indian traditions exemplify the strength and dynamism of the unit of family, and also epitomize the concept of cultural inclusiveness in the form of the ideal concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum*, or the world as one family. It talks of a world in union, without supremacy of one over another. This ideal condition eludes the domestic and social space in most of Dattani’s plays. In *Tara* he depicts a society which has wandered away from the path of justice, the aim of *Dharma*. Ancient Indian society was governed by moral laws, not requiring external enforcement, in contrast to western societies where laws require legal and external enforcement. Individuals in society were guided by their *Dharma*, which preached the welfare of all. The joint family system ensured that vulnerable members lived a wholesome and dignified life. Ethics were engrained and social unity was considered more vital than individual desires. Old age homes were not heard of, as the elders were taken care of by the family. Nowadays the old, disabled and handicapped are considered a burden on the fast moving society. And though institutions are designed for these wretched people, dignity is denied. Tara’s life becomes a nightmare because of the myopic vision of society.

Indian tradition says that a married woman’s place is in her husband’s home. Men and women are like two wheels of a carriage and must work in harmony. Patel and Bharati’s relationship lacks harmony and understanding. Dattani shows how Bharati’s father’s interference in her family matter, cause chaos in her marriage. Marriages are based on mutual trust and sharing, and parents are expected to take responsible decisions for the welfare of the

family. Patel and Bharati behave recklessly, blinded by prejudices. They sacrifice their children's future and happiness. Patel could have asserted himself and prevented the operation, but he yields to the power of wealth.

Both Patel and Bharati failed to uphold the ancient tradition of protecting the daughter and expose her to extreme cruelty. This deviation from the Indian sensibility of non-violence and equality cause immense physical, psychological, and emotional harm to Tara as well as Chandan. Indian traditions revel in the glory of motherhood. Swami Vivekananda goes on to establish the position of Indian mothers in the famous quote which says:

In India the mother is the center of the family and our highest ideal. She is to us the representative of God, as God is the mother of the universe. It was a female sage who first found the unity of God, and laid down this doctrine in one of the first hymns of the Vedas. Our God is both personal and absolute, the absolute is male, the personal, female. And thus it comes that we now say: 'The first manifestation of God is the hand that rocks the cradle'. ("Thoughts on Women- Swami Vivekananda)

Bharati shatters the very notion of traditional motherhood. Dattani does not sympathise with Bharati, and exposes her distorted guilt ridden psyche. He makes the audience see through her pretences. Bharati is a modern self-centred individual who in a bid to fulfil her materialistic and selfish desires, uses love as a tool for exploitation. She is a disgrace to Indian womanhood. It is not Tara, but Bharati who is a disability and handicap for a flourishing society. Bharati represents the crisis of values in contemporary society.

The Indian family system is alive only because its women believe in it. Women in India have a capability to adjust to their new status after marriage. Adjustability is the dynamism of Indian women. There is no field of human relationships which can survive without adaptation. Individuals migrating to foreign countries try to acclimatise, youth pursuing high paying jobs reconcile to the workplace, but a lot of hue and cry is raised when a woman tries to adapt to her surroundings. Western Feminism sees it as the loss of her individuality, while Indian sensibility regards the submergence of individualism, as essential to social harmony. It calls for the sacrifice of ego at the altar of general and familial welfare. No society can have

social unity if members pamper their 'self'. This code was applicable to both men and women in Indian society.

It is because of these moral sanctions that Indian society and family stood the tests of time. By her sheer determination, the Indian woman has successfully kept the family system ticking for thousands of years. She has been able to give security to her children, and given them the strength to trust relationships. This is the character of families in India, unlike the western countries which are facing a complex struggle with divided families. The west sees emancipation only in the economic freedom of women. Thus Feminism has solid roots in the west where women's political and economic rights were exploited. India as a spiritual country did not run after materialism. The men earned just enough to fulfil the needs of the family and the women worked towards building values, or *sanskara's*.

It is only in recent times that women's economic growth is given more importance than contribution to the home. Due to the impact of the patriarchal Western philosophy, the role of a wife and mother, the transmitter of culture and values is considered is ridiculed and derided to such an extent that the hearth is now perceived as a place for subjugation. The Indian society has suffered the fragmentation of families and the disruption caused by a drastic change from an agrarian society to an industrial one. The highly materialistic modern Indian society is fast replacing the basic principles of selflessness, sacrifice and compassion with the policy of self- gratification and pleasure seeking.

Tara says in the play, "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go on hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani 328; act 1). This is not true for Indian culture. Women since ages have been working in fields in an essentially agrarian economy. They look after the cattle with love and care. A potter's wife moulds the clay and the fisherman's wife makes and repairs fishing nets of her husband. The West has a typical way of looking at things. They value a work only if it brings money directly in the hands of the worker. This is an essentially materialistic attitude. Working together, facilitating the partner's work is not 'productive' by western standards. Indian women have always contributed in the economy in addition to looking after their families.

The Indian youth dreams of settling in the 'democratic and liberal' United States. But the United States cannot boast of even one woman President. In fact their women got voting rights just recently.

Women in India have thirty- three percent presentations in governance. Tara's views reflect her immature vision. Brought up in an urban modern society, inculcating western education and ideas imposed by the British rulers, Tara, like the young generation she represents, is ignorant of the ancient values which are still keeping the family and social structure intact. Violence against women is on a rise in India, but the situation is grim in other countries as well. Statistics show Sweden, USA, Canada, England and India among the top ten countries with the highest rape cases. This shows that crime against women is a global issue and needs to be addressed with priority, as a social evil. It cannot and should not be blamed on the traditional Indian mindset. In India, the revival of the past glory of womanhood is imperative to fight existing evils, and to prove to the new generation that the strength to fight injustice comes from our own culture, not western movements.

An important focus of the play is Dr. Thakker who is shown to have a 'God-like' presence throughout the play. He operates upon Chandan and Tara, and Dattani gives him an ironical status in the play. In his desire to play god, Dr. Thakker does not remain even 'human'. He goes against nature, destiny, and professional ethics. He represents the materialistic gluttony which is a hurdle for the noble medical profession. Most people join the profession today, to make easy money by fooling patients, prescribing expensive tests, conducting unnecessary surgeries, and shamelessly involving in organ trade. The old traditions of honesty and integrity are obsolete today.

Dattani shows that human beings cannot challenge destiny. The leg snapped away from Tara does not survive with Chandan for more than three days. This is called Divine Justice. The play resonates with the Indian philosophy of the calm acceptance of destiny with equanimity. Happiness and sorrow need to be treated as transient and inevitable gifts of god. Only then can a person attain true knowledge and wisdom, and live a worthy life. Bharati and Patel should have accepted Chandan's disability and allowed the third leg to belong to Tara, the rightful heir. The evolvement of the children's individual identity and personality should have been the focus. The issue of the lack, the physical disability, is transformed into a huge social stigma, making Tara and Chandan just physical bodies to be separated and gathered, on operating tables. All turn blind to the writhing soul within. Dattani shows an intensely traditional sensibility, by portraying Chandan incomplete and hollow without his counterpart Tara.

The Rig Veda clearly says that women should be given the lead in ruling the nation and in society, and that they should have the same right as sons over the father's property. In Tara, Bharati's father gives his money to Chandan and only the house to Tara. Dattani depicts the short sightedness of people who fail to comprehend the power and energy of *Shakti*, the woman. The Indian society trusted the wisdom and intellect of women, and so it made women the preserver and propagator of values. As the article, "Culture: Women's Status in India" mentions from Rigveda 1.48.8:

The entire world of noble people bows to the glory of the glorious woman so that she enlightens us with knowledge and foresight. She is the leader of society and provides knowledge to everyone. She is symbol of prosperity and daughter of brilliance. May we respect her so that she destroys the tendencies of evil and hatred from the society. (Laungani)

Dattani's plays abound with messages of peace, harmony, compassion, brotherhood, equality, faith, love and non- violence. He takes inspiration from the noble virtues of Indian philosophy and questions the morals and ethics of contemporary society. Tara is a play about the disability and imperfections of modern society, wobbling on the artificial wooden legs of pretences and prejudices. Tara is Dattani's traditional woman suffering the prejudices of society and modernism. In Tara, Dattani shows the yearning of an innocent daughter for true love. Tara's blind love for her mother shows Dattani's affirmation for the virtues of selfless love. Her determination to fight for identity in a distorted society depicts her struggle for her traditional rights and dignity. Tara's sharp intellect and her ability to convince Chandan, when he is unwilling to join college without her, show her traditional wisdom. She understands the need for Chandan to move on without her.

By rebuking and ridiculing the likes of Roopa, Prema and Nalini, Tara asserts that a society which is not compassionate, caring, and broad minded is a society of 'freaks'. Through her Dattani criticizes the contemporary human society. By depicting Bharati and Patel as icons of injustice, Dattani condemns the harbingers of feminine violence. By enabling Chandan to interview Dr. Thakker, Dattani makes the doctor answerable for his unethical designs. Dattani rues the fact that modern society is faced with a crisis of values in the most respected profession on earth. He also grieves the hollowness in the most trusted role of motherhood. Through Chandan, Dattani gives a call to re-establish the glorious tradition of equality of

human beings. Chandan suffers more than Tara, because he has to live with the guilt. He realises his incompleteness without Tara. The siblings were born as one, but separated by modern technology and science. Dattani could not have used a better medium than the image of the operation tables being joined and then separated, to depict the Vedic concept of the oneness of souls. Chandan's redemption comes, only when he writes Tara's story.

In the end of Tara and Chandan unite once again, but in a different world. They are no longer limping. Dattani asserts that human beings can exist peacefully only if they liberate themselves from the artificial clutches of society, and turn back to their traditions for succour. The 'self' will keep wandering aimlessly in this materialistic society, without fulfilment. It is more important for women to find their old grandeur and strength, to deal with the pressures of society, and resist the pull of prejudices.

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