

Tara, Star or Victim: A Study of Gender as a Culture Construct in Mahesh Dattani's Tara

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An anthropological definition of culture renders the complex meaning of the concept simple – it is the way of life of a community or a social group of people or a clan et al, their shared values and practices. Members of the same culture realise and interpret the world around them in practically the same way, that is, they make sense of the world or interpret it in almost a similar way. But needless to say, there will be a huge diversity of feelings, concepts and ideas within the purview of a single culture itself and it is quite likely for them to be open to interpretations. But the concept of culture is that it organises and regulates the social practices, and influence radically the conduct of its participants, moulding them in accordance with its terms and dictates. It is one's interpretation of things that bestow it with specific meanings. We give things their meanings by the way we represent them, the values we place on them, and the way we conceptualise and classify them. Participants of the same culture fall within the same cultural circuit and thus share the same cultural codes. These cultural codes often intervene in our construction or conceptualization of a thing that exists in the real world and thus in its representation by us as well. In this connection, one can quote Stuart Hall's pertinent observation in his book *Representation*:

Representation, here, is closely tied up with both identity and knowledge. Indeed, it is difficult to know what 'being English', or indeed French, German, South African or Japanese, *means* outside all the ways in which our ideas of national identity or national cultures have been represented. Without these 'signifying' systems, we could not take on such identities (or indeed reject them) and consequently could not build up or sustain that common 'life world' which we call a culture. (Hall xxi)

Thus representation is instrumental in constructing meanings wherein the culture and its peripheral paraphernalia are a constitutive part. Thus as soon as one begins to use representation in any social situation it immediately takes up an ambivalent role, both as a means of communicating, as well as of contesting what

it communicates. Mahesh Dattani's importance lies not alone in the fact that he writes about or represents the invisible issues related to gender and culture in Indian society, but also in problematizing the same. As Erin Mee writes in *A Note on the Play of Tara*, "by pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of 'India' and 'Indian' as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre" (Dattani 319).

The gender issue in India is a complex and complicated phenomenon. An interminable and sustained concept of the woman is that she is frail and weak, and most importantly one who is incapable of earning a living for herself or for her family. Along with it is the nettling process of rearing up a girl-child, providing her with education and then giving her off in marriage, both of which entails a considerable amount of expense, which in the case of a boy-child would otherwise be considered as an investment, the brunt of giving dowry as opposed to the thrill of receiving it. A picture of the entrenched patriarchy unabashedly comes out of the text as Roopa (the neighbour's daughter), reluctantly refers to the abominable practice of the Patels who used to drown their 'girl-child' in milk to shirk the burden of dowry. This also directs towards the fact that her position as a weakling in society is greatly due to her putative economic sterility. But if this diacritic of the economic instability is prised, this invidious feminine deference towards the moneyed masculine undergoes a complete volte-face. It is the Economy that determines Patriarchy and not the Gender. The richer the woman, the lesser a victim is she. And not just only that, she then tries to colonise her husband, the otherwise putative representative of patriarchy. In *Tara* this is how the Indian concept of feminism has been problematized and questioned, and Dattani is found adding dimensions to the common, so-called general notions of feminism.

Apparently the father appears aggressive, cold and the very epitome of the merciless patriarchal power. He is bumptious and overweening, with a serrated tongue and attitude that highlights his arrogance and immediately establishes him as a representative of the patriarchy, the curmudgeon with the bludgeon. He has been portrayed almost as a villain who restrains his daughter from meeting her sick mother in the hospital. While on the other hand, Bharati, the mother, is the very embodiment of love, tenderness, kindness and maternal affection. She has been projected as the very typical, innocuous, warm, concerned 'Indian'

mother whose sole intention is to see to the welfare of her daughter: “Bharati (over him): In one month she will lose a kilo! (Getting worked up) If I don’t force her to eat, how will she gain weight? She will keep getting thinner till she is all shrivelled and she is only...skin and bones!” (Dattani 326)

The brusque cold father and the delinquent tender mother are very typical Indian cultural constructs. And it is here that Dattani breaks the binaries and the contradictions in human nature. As the play unfolds, we understand it was the father who was the victim of familial patriarchy. The conjoined twins were born with an incommensurable condition, conjoined from the chest down and their only chance of survival was a surgery, and a complicated surgery to that.

Dr Thakkar: The separation itself was quite complicated. The pelvis had to be fractured in several places to facilitate separation... (Dattani363)

However, there was an adjunct to the whole process. There was a third leg. It was Tara, the girl-child, who was supplying blood to the leg, and thus had the fair chance to lead a tolerably decent and normal life, if decisions were taken in favour of her. But to the surprise of the readers/ the audience and Chandan, Patel unravels the sad truth, the infringement that was coldly and insensibly planned by Bharati (the mother) and her father (the grandfather of the twins), a rich, politically influential man of the state, with the doctor,

Everything will be done as planned. Except – I couldn’t believe what she told me – that they would risk giving both legs to the boy... Maybe if I had protested more strongly! I tried to reason with her that it wasn’t right and that even the doctor would realise it was unethical! The doctor had agreed I was told. It was only later I came to know of his intention of starting a large nursing home – the largest in Bangalore. (Dattani 378)

What we find finally is that the father is pro-motherly. His exhortatory restraints towards his daughter from meeting her mother was only with the tender intention of saving Tara from the shock of confronting the unpalatable truth coming out from the guilt-stricken, psychologically perturbed mother, Bharati. It is the mother that monsters the daughter and the father that mothers the daughter. This is where the gender issue is

being critiqued by Dattani, for in feminist theory things are more generalised and such individual and unique aberrations are not acknowledged or addressed.

The male characters who are, from a feminist stance, often considered the very repository of bile and rancour, essay quite contrarily in Dattani's *Tara*, an atypical portraiture of the male characters. Chandan is shown to be a highly sensitive individual. He tries to exorcise the ghost of his murderous guilt that bedevils his existence, by writing a play about Tara, his twin sister who, though born with greater acuity of mind than him, was cheated of her fair chance to live, because of the selfish cravenness of their mother who prioritised the male child over the female one. He tries to physically exorcise himself by giving himself a new name - 'Dan', by geographically relocating himself in London – all of which can be rendered as forms of expiation, are here to be found in Tara's father Patel as long as Tara lived, and Tara's brother Chandan, after her death. While on the other hand, Tara has been pictured as the blinding refulgence of charm and wit, and the cretin darkness of jealousy and violence. She is almost vile and cruel and has an inherent potentiality of excessive violence. Her altercations with Roopa, which were always triggered by an insatiable urge to avenge herself of the ignominy of a 'cripple', can be readily cited as an apt instance of the rancour and venom she had in her. Thus, one can safely say that, in Dattani, the generalised concepts of feminism is not only being critiqued and interrogated, it is even being re-written. Dattani's portrayal of the gender is thus a vehement contradiction of what Pramod Nayar would specify as a feminist aspect:

Literary and cultural texts operate on the lines of power struggle: that between men and women. The 'text' (meaning, cinema, poetry, theatre, advertisements) naturalizes the oppression of women through its stereotypical representation of women as weak/vulnerable, seductress, obstacle, sexual object of the male's desire, a procreating device and so on. That is, such 'texts' reproduce patriarchal social biases that see the woman as only the 'other' of the male. (Nayar 71)

Men/ Women incarcerated within a specific trope – a sustained motif in feminist discourses is thus being revisited and revisioned by Dattani in *Tara*. However, one cannot but recognise the quintessential resemblance between Dattani's Tara and Bali's wife Tara in *Ramayana*. Both are defined by a strong personality and an acuity of mind, and both are victims of their 'woman-ness'. The very ideation of

womanhood is, as it were, a punitive implant on an existence, which otherwise is no less/more human than its counterpart, the man – both of which are culturally constructed and conceptualised. Both the Taras defied the conformed accepted cultural concept of a woman- a benign tender goddess – a Devi. They have contorted the vehement imposed cultural and social identity of being a woman. They are strong, had a mind of their own, violent and pregnant with constructive possibilities – things that one may ideally associate with a man. As opposed to a Devi, they are the *Rakshashis*, the demoness, the convoluted image of womanhood as constructed by the culture. In this regard, though in a different context, Sutapa Chaudhuri in her essay ‘Devi/Rakshashis’ very pertly observes,

The phenomenon of the demoness or Rakshashi represents the ultimate threat a patriarchal society feels regarding female power. While physically and magically empowered superhuman female characters reflect a long tradition of worshipping the feminine, their demonization reveals societal ambivalence toward strong women and the potential danger that such women pose to the integrity of the patrilineal kinship structure. Even more significant than the portrayal of the assertive, aggressive woman as the fearsome demoness is the ritual killing of the demonic soul of the Rakshashi by the young Prince at the very end of the tale. (Chaudhuri 13)

Thus, Dattani’s pro-feminist literary text calibrates the idea of the demoness, the strong and powerful woman, celebrates it, and finally kills it. And yet, the Rakshashis’s death is not rejoiced, it is not reckoned as a retrenchment of good over evil, but just the other way round. This somewhat unsettles or challenges the artificial cultural concept of a woman – an abnegation of the traditional understanding of womanhood which represents the ideal woman/ Devi as exceedingly passive and docile. The Devi/ Rakshashi binary is also a human construct and the Rakshashi is always associated with evil. But patriarchal cultural theory would always like to malign the potentially intellectual and intelligent woman as a Rakshashi even though she is not evil, as we find in the way *Ramayana’s* Tara has been objectified and denied a human will. Similar is the case with Dattani’s Tara, much more intellectually alive than her peers, but to Bharati and her father, she is a potential threat and is therefore denied her second leg which most unethically is amputated and given over to Chandan who ultimately fails to utilize it. It is here that Dattani stresses the great sense of loss and waste;

the greater the sense of waste, the intenser the tragedy. Here the terrible irony in the play comes to the fore. Bharati is another name for the goddess of India or *Bharat Mata*, yet how deeply the notion of Bharati is patriarchalised, is realised with a shock by the end of the play. Tara, the second deity of the *Dasha Mahavidyas* is worshipped and at the same time so easily sacrificed. The irony operates even on a secondary level where the sacrificee or priest is not a man, but her own mother, Bharati.

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