



# A study of the struggles of women in Mahesh Dattani's Tara, Thirty days in September and Beneath the Rubble

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## ABSTRACT

The image of motherhood is depicted as loving nurturer, caregiver and protector. This image is subjected to celebration and valorization in many societies, particularly Indian society where the image is deeply entrenched within notions of culture and tradition. A mother is depicted as one who is always there for her children who willingly endures any amount of pain and hardship for the sake of the family, who willingly makes the sacrifices to ensure her children's well being and happiness. Such an image becomes problematic. It confers a status on the idea of mother thereby denying legitimacy to the individual experiences that shape a woman's perception and her responses to reality. It does not provide space for weakness and vulnerability and most importantly it mystifies woman's rights to signify as individuals. Motherhood is iconized and this is a major device of patriarchal control to which a girl child is exposed from early childhood. Mahesh Dattani in his representation of the mothers in Tara and Thirty days in September projects fractured images that subvert the conventional portrayal of motherhood enabling women to appear like living breathing beings as much prone to weakness and frailty as everyone else.

Keywords : Patriarchy, socio economic factors, individual destiny, constraints, gender bias and female consciousness.

## Introduction

The present study attempts to unravel the socio-cultural ramifications that underlie the depiction of motherhood and female consciousness in the selective plays variously depicted as loving nurturer, caregiver and protector, tenderness, patience, selfless love, sacrifice and nurturing are some of the adjectives used for a mother.

The image of mother is subjected to celebration in many societies in India. Such an image becomes problematic for three reasons. Firstly it confers a monolithic status on the idea of mother, thereby denying legitimacy to the individual experiences that shape a woman's perception and her responses to reality. Secondly, it does not provide space for weakness and vulnerability. Thirdly it obfuscates women's rights to signify as individuals. Iconization of motherhood is a major device of patriarchal control, to which a girl is exposed. The representation of Shantha, Bharathi and Fathima project fractured images that subvert the conventional portrayal of motherhood enabling the woman to appear like living breathing being as much prone to weakness and frailty as everyone else.

Patriarchal traditions have been carried out in India by men and women for several generations. Gender discrimination is viewed as a system of social practices which involve differences and inequalities. This question of why did Bharathi, Tara's mother choose Chandan over Tara seems to haunt us throughout the play. Why did she decide to give the third leg to Chandan? Is it because he is a boy and Tara is a girl?

Though the constitution of India does grant women equal rights like men, gender discrimination /patriarchy persists, which are shaped by customs and traditions which are centuries old. A daughter is always viewed as a burden to be married off, a liability as her marriage will be very expensive. Girl children are bound to be ill-treated in comparison to the boy child. Dowries, abuse, lack of education, nutrition are some of the examples of unfair treatment meted out to female children.

This is clearly depicted in the lives of Bharathi and Patel. Though Tara finds herself in an insensitive society she still acquits herself as a bright shining star " Twinkling Tara" which is what her mother fondly calls her. She is called the 'luminous star' a ray of hope which is ironical in a society where the girl child is seen as unwanted. Tara has courage, confidence and a zest for life which is rare. She is proud of the love she receives from her mother. She

is extremely intelligent and witty. Even though she undergoes a kidney transplant and her seventh prosthesis in the same month she still carries herself in an enthusiastic and jovial manner, ‘surgery for us is like brushing our teeth’ (Tara 355) But her life span is short.

Bharathi and her father’s decision to favor the boy child over the girl child is no less than the female foeticide, the twins are three months old and the result of the surgery is forcible crippling of Tara. Their decision to give the third leg to the boy instead of the girl is a clear case of gender discrimination rampant in a patriarchal society. It's a fact that though literacy rates are high the child sex ratio continues to be disproportionate.

Simone de Beauvoir has argued in the *Second Sex* that men regard women as the ‘other’. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. Bharathi is that characteristic of motherhood that she can cripple the girl child to ensure a healthy life for the son. Tara and Chandan were joined from chest down from the breast bone down through the pelvic area sharing the same liver with only two kidneys, three legs, one bladder and one rectum. The physical crippling of Tara’s body runs parallel to her mother’s psychological rippling.

There is a reference to the old custom of drowning a new born girl child in milk. ‘The Patel’s in old days were unhappy with getting baby girls-so they used to drown them in milk...so when people asked about how the baby died, they could say that she choked while drinking milk’ (Tara 345), As years pass by, Bharathi lavishes care and attention on Tara but she is driven by guilt. “I mean to give her all the love and affection which I can give. It’s what she deserves. Love can make you for a lot Tara! My beautiful baby !’ (Tara 365) Bharathi’s emotional and psychological breakdown started on the day Dr. Thakkar performed the surgery.

A woman in India is blessed to be the mother of a hundred sons and giving birth to a son elevates her status, the son in turn will take the role of a provider and protector. This is the social cultural pressure which weighs upon an Indian woman’s psyche. This could be the reason why Bharathi though educated, financially secure and socially empowered takes a gender biased decision. Bharathi is governed by the thought that she would rather be the mother of a disabled daughter than a disabled son. She thought, having a healthy, whole and perfect male child would be a better option than a perfect daughter because she wants the son to take on her husband’s name and business.

The name 'Bharathi is a reminder of Indian womanhood hinting at the canter that is conveyed down the generations of Indian motherhood. It is because of this canter that women in India are burnt as brides .pushed into flesh trade, provided inadequate food to the female child and deny them the basic human right. This portrays the message of the bane of disempowered motherhood. The play conveys about the mother daughter relationship Mother whether mother Indian or a human mother –must allow her daughter to avail themselves of her bounty equally without discrimination or bias of any kind.

Empowerment is not bestowed upon Indian women. When they grapple for their rights to live normal lives it is indeed a fight for empowerment. True empowerment emerges from the strength of the spirit; it cannot either be bestowed or snatched away. Is Bharathi empowered? She doesn't make a wise decision but she does make an ethical choice. Though her conscious decision was for Chandan's normal physical well being over riding the biological claims that Tara had over her limb, yet the play brings about the distinctive bonding between Tara and Bharathi.

Though she takes the crucial decision she also merges her own will with Tara's because she thinks that Tara would willingly give away her limb to Chandan. She presumes that Tara will be complacent and unquestioningly submit. This sacrificing syndrome has further complicated the issue of gender equality, expecting the woman to passively accept or sacrifice. Patel, Tara's father seems to be a stern man who indirectly aids gender discrimination. He remains inactive and passive when his wife makes the decision. This is because he has his hopes pinned on Chandan and wants his to acquire masculine traits. He gets upset when he sees Chandan helping his mother with knitting which according to him is a womanly chore.

Though he loves Tara, he has nothing to say to her apart from urging her for physiotherapy sessions. Her wit intelligence sense of humor, and courage find no response from him. All that remains in the emotional ruins of a nuclear family is the torment he can give his wife and the psychological satisfaction he can get by denying her the relief of donating her kidney to Tara in order to atone for her sins. He establishes his male superiority in his home by resorting to physical strength. His slapping of Bharathi exhibits brute force.

Bharathi has a nervous breakdown after the kidney transplant operation and is hospitalized. Patel refuses to allow his children to visit their mother and Tara's insistence to see Bharathi provokes Patel's revelation about his

wife's complicity in Tara's surgery, thus shattering Tara's fragile existence and thus leading to her death. Bharathi's tragic dilemma as a mother and her stifled streams wailing for her lost children reverberate long after the play ends. The play touched a raw nerve, an unspoken whisper in the wind focusing on the girl child's right to life, nurture and sustenance and a healthy wholesome family and social environment. It is wake up call for women empowerment.

*Thirty Days in September* addresses the evils of child abuse, a silenced subject in Indian socio cultural domain. In the Indian framework pedophilia is rendered more dangerous than in less conservative societies because of our tendency to view ourselves as culturally superior to the rest of the world particularly the West.

What distinguishes child abuse from rape is that in the former the victims are pre-pubescent ranging in age from three to thirteen and the oppressor is almost always someone familiar a guardian, teacher, blood relative, neighbor –very often one who occupies a position of trust and authority. The child is too young to understand or articulate what is happening. It experiences pain and fear, it instinctively feels that what is happening is not right, yet the inability to comprehend leaves the child bewildered and confused.

The fact that the oppressor is very often a close friend or member of the family add to the bewilderment as the child cannot understand the contradictory patterns and does not know how to tackle them. The guardians and parents are often unaware of what is happening. The end result is a sense of fear and self loathing which can destroy the victim's sense of autonomy and his/her ability to form meaningful relationships later on in life. Dattani structures the play around the subject doubling the impact by making both the female protagonists victims of child sexual abuse.

Shanta the mother in the play appears weak submissive and unsure of herself. Bullied and cowed by everyone including her daughter, she is very different from the idealized image of motherhood. She is not a figure of authority. Infact she is more a slave than mistress of her home, as she herself recognizes. Her role as homemaker is limited to performing household chores. She leads a shrunken existence incapable of having even normal everyday conversation with the daughter. The mother daughter relationship subverts the norm -here it is not Shanta but the daughter Mala who is assertive. It is through the defense, submissive an evasive Shanta that the play exposes the evil of child sexual abuse and the patriarchal social structuring that facilitates its occurrence.

Vinay the pedophile in the play is Shanta's eldest brother and Mala's uncle. Vinay is the preferential pedophile not a circumstantial one. The former type has specific sexual preferences. Vinay for instance targets between the ages of six and seven and continues to abuse them till they reach puberty. He begins to abuse Shanta at the age of six, Mala at the age of seven. Vinay's reference to their ancestral home, his brothers and their childhood relates an aura of tradition and culture. 'She is my sister and I do have very fond memories of us growing up in our ancestral home. I am the oldest in my family and Shanta the youngest so I feel it is my responsibility ...' (Thirty Days in September, 35)

Though it sounds that they provide an instance of affectionate reminiscing of a cherished memory it also highlights the familial set up that makes the abuse possible. Vinay is the symbol of trust as an uncle, but he exploits to satiate his perverted needs. Shanta belongs to a generation where a girl is trained from childhood to obey the dictate of the male members of the family –father, brother and husband. Mala's words to her mother that her father left them because Shanta was frigid provide a clue to decipher Shanta's behavior. Frigidity, the inability to have normal heterosexual relationship is a common after effect of child sexual abuse particularly when the abuse scars the victims psychologically.

Again Mala's reference to her mother sleeping in her room and her muttered references to Sudarshan Chakra enable the spectator to infer that once Mala is born Shanta feels she has fulfilled her role as wife and employs her role as mother and care giver to avoid sexual intercourse with her husband. While the prolonged abuse alters Shanta's sex map, the absence of a means to voice her fear and pain leaves her emotionally stunted, incapable of developing a sense of autonomy.

The manner in which she goes about performing chores like offering food ,switching off lights ,ironing and cooking for her brother when he visits her throws light on the ritualistic enactment of life roles. The ease with which she accepts Vinay's criticism of Mala makes the spectator/reader wonder how a mother could be so callous and insensitive. It indicates towards her mental state. The reality is so horrible that she would rather accept the accusation that her daughter is bold and wayward than face the fact that her daughter too was subjected to abuse. Shanta's helplessness is further underlined by the act that she is compelled to accept financial help from the man who destroyed her life.



Significantly it is not fear of exposure that prompts Vinay to offer help. The act symbolizes not guilt but the power that patriarchy confers on the male subject, a power that verges on audacity. It is an instance of internalization of the ideology of male authority. Shanta's outburst towards the end of the play –her only attempt to come out of the protective cocoon of forgetfulness and religiosity, forced out of her by Mala's declaration that she cannot ever be free from the trauma of abuse-reveals the full extent of the horror she lived through.

'I did not save her. I did not know how know how to save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself? ...did you ever see the pain in my eyes? No. Nobody saw anything. Nobody said anything. Not my brothers...not my parents...I was six and he was thirteen...and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! (Pointing to the picture of God) I looked at Him. I didn't feel anything...He helped me by taking away my feeling. No pain, no pleasure, only silence...my tongue was cut off...I didn't use it, no. I cannot shout for help, I cannot say a word of comfort, I cannot even speak about it' (Thirty Days in September 55.)

The words are a powerful expression of the silence of the abused child. The admission is so traumatic that Shanta goes into frenzy and tries to cut off the 'guilty tongue' that refused to speak out. It is significant that even at that moment the guilt is turned inward, not at the oppressor. Shanta's words highlight the politics of patriarchal conditioning where women plead guilty even when they are innocent.

*Beneath the Rubble* examines communal marginalization, focusing on the manner in which it affected the relief operations in post earthquake ravaged Gujarat. It offers two images of motherhood-the first is of a woman who croons a lullaby as she rocks an empty cradle unable to come to terms with reality of her child's death. The second is Fathima. Fathima is very different from Shantha. While Shantha belongs to the urban upper class Fathima is of the rural poor. Shantha's upper middle class background protects her from experiences that Fathima views as natural and inevitable. Ironically it is the same privileged background that stops Shantha from seeking strength from within herself to confront her circumstances. As a result the emotional scarring suffered during her childhood and adolescence remains the single defining experience that shapes her being. However economics alone does not shape an individual's response to circumstances. Fathima's most identifiable quality is her resilience. Unlike Shantha she is a survivor actively engaged in the struggle to remain alive, a struggle that begins in childhood. As a wife of a poor cobbler she works hard to make both ends meet: becomes a laborer at the construction site, leaves her third child –

born after her husband's death-with its grandmother to go to work. She then works at the Patel's house as a servant. Her earnings are the family's main source of income. This economic status confers Fathima greater freedom than Shantha. Interestingly unlike Shantha or Mala she makes no reference to her childhood. Her narrative is rooted in the present. According to her, her life began after her marriage to the cobbler and more importantly after the birth of her three children.

Fathima 's voice is first heard from amidst the debris of the collapsed hospital, after the Azan prayer expressing relief- 'the mosque is all right, Oh! We are fortunate! ...God gives us problems and He gives us strength. '(73) This is followed by the thoughts of her children. She calls out to Saira who was with her when the earthquake happened. Sobs curses directed at those who built the hospital, calls Mumtaz and Slim, follow one another in quick succession, verbalizing her thought processes. As the realization of her situation sinks in her mood undergoes a change. Except the occasional outburst of anger which is triggered by the memory of loss/hurt she accepts the inevitability of death and prepares to meet her maker and clear her account with him. ' At Allah's mercy. I must seek my pardon. Now I have to present my case before you all my children'(74). The words reveal an intrinsic feature of Fathima's character –her religion and faith are part of her being and permeate her every thought and word. The need to confess inevitability re- directs her thoughts to Mumtaz, her second child, whom she exploited the most and therefore ,she must seek her forgiveness first.

It is this head on confrontation of circumstances that makes Fathima different from Shantha. Both women are battered – Shantha sexually, Fathima materially but for both women suffering begins from childhood. The sexual abuse cripples Shantha emotionally for life compared to which the material circumstances that doom Fathima to life of toil, seem less damaging. But the focus here is not on the nature of the persecution /exploitation but the manner in which the women respond to it. Shanth makes no attempt to overcome the childhood trauma: instead she escapes into the cocoon of rituals and domestic chores to evade reality. Fathima is very different she is trapped beneath the rubble of the collapsed hospital unable to move her limbs; her mind takes over her thoughts revolving around her daughters Mumtaza and Saira and her son Salim.

She acknowledges the fact that her chances of being rescued alive are bleak. She accepts the reality that death is inevitable, thus examines and evaluates her life or rather her decisions and actions as mother to her three children,



an examination and evaluation that are rooted in her religion. She addresses Mumtaz first. 'I never asked you to do anything I would not do myself. Wash vessels buy vegetable, fetch water, light the firewood. I do what every mother does with their daughters. I taught you to wok'(74).Her words perform the multiple functions of creating a vivid picture of the young Mumtaz ,even as they explain her own actions. Fathima puts her daughter to work for two reasons- she sees her own image in her and second, because she is a girl. 'Very naughty and playful ...I had to break you...'(74).describe not just Mumtaz's life but Fathima's as well. Forced to work from a young age of seven, Mumtaz begins by performing household chores while her mother goes to work. Fathima's words to Salim reveal the full extent of her sense of pain and regret. Her confession that it was Mumtaz she loved the most is compelled by a need: 'to let Mumtaz be at peace' (77). Interestingly her thoughts linger the least on Saira her youngest, because Saira suffered the least. Except for her sickly constitution she is better off than Mumtaz. Fathima therefore has no regrets regarding Saira not even guilty for leaving the baby in the grandmother's care while she went to work, for the so-called abandonment ensured a happy and carefree childhood for Saira. Fathima can therefore feel only relief, that Saira is no longer in pain.

It is through these words we learn about the family and the socio-cultural milieu that they inhabit: their hopes, lives and deaths. Significantly, unlike Shantha or Mala, Fathima does not see herself as a victim. Her words reveal strength, resilience and an unflinching readiness to confront the truth. She is filled with anguish made more intense and poignant by her truthful acknowledge that the family's financial situation was such that even if she had known about the incident ,she would still have persuaded Mumtaz to continue to work at the hospital. 'the day you told me you did not want to work there anymore ,I should a\have asked you why. That is the greatest sin I will take with me' (75).

If the words to Mumtaz express strength and resilience, those addresses to Saira reveal a blend of practicality and lack of sophistication that is heartwarming without being sentimental. 'When you meet your grandmother again, I hope you will thank her and your sister Mumtaz. 'You were lucky to have a sister like her...please please salute your sister when you meet her' (76)

Interestingly Fathims's words make no reference to the central theme of the play .the communal divide which make its impact felt even on relief work in the earthquake hit zone, is significantly in her scheme of things which

centers on her children and the daily grind of living. There is no place for self pity or vulnerability in her mind. Neither can she afford the luxury of sparing any thoughts for herself or her feelings. Fathima's words reveal her affirmative approach to life, which is in sharp contrast to the conservative, traditional and passive attitude of her husband.

Unlike Shantha, Fathima dares to dream. Her decision to send Salim to school is prompted by various factors. As she admits with brutal honesty her husband's traditional occupation would be of no use to Salim. 'in this land where people do not have sandals on their feet, how will he find work mending them?' (74). Here it is important to remember that she is not discounting her husband's significance, she is merely stating a fact. She sends Salim to school to ensure a better future for him – a well paid job, better financial position for the family and a better marriage for Mumtaz. All her actions are directed towards realizing that goal. However it is her choice of instrument for realizing the goal that makes her actions and decisions subversive. It makes her as much a victim of patriarchal doctrinisation as Shantha.

It is unfortunate that the tremendous will and determination of Fathima exhibits –she goes against the dictates of patriarchy when she goes to work at the construction site flouts caste norms when she sends her son to school – are directed towards a goal that is still circumscribed by patriarchal discourse. It is Salim whom she sends to school, not Mumtaz, Again her dream of a better future is centered around her son, who she hopes will grow up and take responsibility. Her words reveal her inability to conceive a future outside the patriarchal mould. That she does not waste time lamenting the rupturing of her dreams or the pointlessness of all the toil, make the psychological enslavement all the more pathetic and tragic. The traits that define Fathima are determination, resilience and honesty.

' You should be proud of your faith and your father. I never wanted you to feel otherwise. I only wanted a better life for us...May be I was wrong. May be I should have been happy with what Allah wanted to give us. I do not know.'(77)

In another context she says 'I will know his plans soon enough'(73).The fatalism underlines the words is nullified by her willingness to face the consequences. It is significant that caught in the trap of personal experiences,

Shantha and Mala become symbols of victimization while Fathima spares no thought for herself exudes individuality. Her resilience, her belief, that hard work can ensure a better future and an honorable life help her survive the disaster.

Her determination prevents her from going under, whatever the circumstance. Saleem's words at the end of the play reveal that inspite of losing a limb she not only survives but manages to get compensation from the government. The compensation is important not for economic reasons alone. As Saleem says: 'We (the ghosts), stay on because our lives and deaths haven't been acknowledged. Now that my mother has proof that we lived...I need not stay on.'

In the case of Fathima, her personality as well as her material circumstances enable her to circumvent the norms of patriarchal control with greater ease. Fathima is a fighter, a survivor whose will power enables her to endure and survive a series of struggles-material, physical and psychological. Her words reveal her inability to conceive a future outside the patriarchal mould. The future she dreams of intrinsically linked to the male identity. The empowerment that she achieves is therefore a byproduct, that occurs inspite of patriarchy, as part of her attempt to negotiate the socio-economic reality.

Even when she goes against patriarchal and culture specific norms, her attitude is non judgmental; this reveals that her response is situation specific rather than ideological. Fathima's affirmative approach to life which is in sharp contrast to the conservative, traditional and passive attitude of her husband,. the fact that she does not waste time lamenting the rupturing of her dreams or the pointlessness of all the toil makes the psychological enslavement all the more pathetic and tragic.

Shanta in *Thirty Days in September* highlights the internalization of the subordinate positioning of women laid down by patriarchy. She belongs to a generation where a girl is trained from childhood to obey the dictates of the male members of the family. It is therefore no wonder that she accepts the dictates and norms as final and irrevocable. The negative side of the unquestioning, compliance is that she does not make an effort to break free from the escapist cocoon of religiosity and household chores that she creates for herself.

The emotional outbursts towards the end of the play is too transient to have a lasting impact on her. This is revealed in the final scene by Mala attempts to connect to the unresponsive Shantha.If Shantha lacks the will to

change her circumstances Farhima's economic background works in her favour in the sense that patriarchal restraints do not affect her as much as they affect Shantha. However the focus here is not in the nature of exploitation but the manner in which the women respond to it. Shantha makes no attempt to overcome her childhood trauma. The reason for this can be traced to her urban middle class background as well as her timidity which prevents her from seeking strength within herself.

Among the three women Bharati enjoys the greatest autonomy for that very reason it is paradoxical that it is she who consciously and actively participates in the morally wrong and highly questionable act of disempowering her daughter in favour of the son. Her action projects the urban Indian woman's uneasy negotiation with modernity and change. When patriarchal norms get subtly incorporated into women's cultural perspective, their power to define and direct female behavior becomes even more tenuous. It is this danger that the depiction of women in the above plays highlights belief in their autonomy and the will to retain that autonomy lies buried under centuries of patriarchal rubble. It is imperative that the contemporary Indian woman ceases to live around and above the rubble, that she clears and retrieves her lost autonomy from beneath rubble

## Conclusion

These three plays present a diverse picture of motherhood. Shanta , Fathima and Bharathi project fractured images that subvert the conventional portrayal of motherhood. Devoid of idealization they appear to be as much prone to weakness and frailty as anyone else. Simultaneously they highlight features that are and crucial and constant to the patriarchal discourse of male dominance.

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