DISCRIMINATION OF CLASS AND GENDER: MAHESH DATTANI'S *TARA*

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Mahesh Dattani is a name that guided weakling and sickling Indian English Drama on the path of reliability, steadfastness and distinct identity. Besides prolific and prominent Indian playwright writing in English, Mahesh Dattani is also well known as a stage director, screen writer and film maker with numerous scripts and productions to his credit. His plays have been anthologized in single volume called *Collected Plays* by Penguin. Most of his plays have been translated and performed in other regional languages of India and have been incorporated in the syllabus of several Indian and foreign universities and schools. He made his maiden mark in filmdom with the film "*Mango Souffle"* and it was displayed in numerous international film-festivals and pronounced best motion picture at the Barcelona Film Festival 2003. His film "*Morning Raga"* remained cynosure of the Cairo Film Festival in December 2004 and it registered the award for best artistic contribution. More importantly its script has been archived by The Academy of Motion Pictures, USA and it was accepted by Oscar Academy for nomination of the award. He has worked in partnership with various international theatre companies and his recent achievements are stage adaptation of Paolo Coelho's bestseller classic, The *Alchemist* and composing of the script of Brief Candle, directed by Lillete Dubey. In an attempt to bridge the gap between the East and the West he was recently also engaged in a multicultural project, called *Reorientations*, a workshop that lasted for a three week period at the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre in China. This occupied an English director Michael Walling along with English actors, one Indian dancer, two actors from Sweden and four Chinese actors.

There is variety and versatility in the creative caliber of Dattani and he showed his mettle in all three: stage, radio and screen plays. The list of Stage Plays to his credit are**:** Where There's a Will(1988), Dance Like a Man(1989), Tara(1990), Bravely Fought the Queen(1991), Final Solutions(1992-93), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998) and Thirty Days in September(2001). The number of Radio Plays that have accrued into his account are: Do the Needful(1997), Seven Steps Around the Fire(1998), The Swami and Winston(2000), A Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child(2000), Clearing the Rubble(2000) and Uma and the Fairy Queen(2003). The last but not least is the demand of time that he fulfilled through his three consecutive screen plays of high repute and recognition: Mango Souffl(2002), Morning Raga(2004) and Ek Alag Mausam(2005).

Successes became darlings for Mahesh Dattani after he turned the first playwright writing in English to receive the central Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection Final *Solutions and Other Plays in 1998*. This highest award for a literary work in the country opened a new door for debate, analysis and critical appraisal of dramas in the spectrum of Indian English Literature. Mahesh Dattani speaks after receiving Sahitya Akademi Award:

Well, I think this has been really the kind of endorsement that Indian English Theatre in the country has been looking for because up till now it seems as if it belonged to a fringe section of society and that it was seen as not quite theatre, not quite art, that it was more of a kind of theatre club kind of thing. And perhaps justifiably so. I am not saying that its not entirely unwarranted that feeling and opinion. But I think since so much has actually happened and there has been a serious attempt to, you know, have a kind of movement in this direction. Because there are enough English speaking people and there are enough people who want to do theatre, and right in the language, so this has been a kind of endorsement of that effort.[1]

Fathoming the literary and creative magnanimity of Dattani various magazines and newspapers shower all the available admiration for him. *The New York Times* calls his works powerful and disturbing, *the Wasafiri Literary Magazine* quotes him a playwright of world stature and *the International Herald Tribune* deems him one of India's most serious and well known playwrights writing on contemporary Indian themes. Gauging the magnanimity and comprehensiveness of Dattani's works veteran critic makes concluding and viable remarks:

Contemporary in tone and spirit, alive to the pressures of the present, and eminently stage-worthy, Dattani's plays squarely give the lie to the popular notion that Indian English drama is at best only a hothouse plant.[2]

The peculiarity of Dattani lies in the fact that despite not being the student or scholar of art and literature his performance is par excellence in the arena of stage and screen craft. It is his cultural, traditional and native attachment that compelled him to turn towards stagecraft. Dattani is basically from Gujarat and Bangalore was haunting place for some of the Gujarati theatre groups. Dattani used to visit these theatres along with the family members and thereof he dreamt of dramas and gradually developed knack of theatrical performance. Though the plays he watched in his early days were in Gujarati and Kannada languages but he preferred to write on his own in English to render his local feelings the colours of comprehensive and universal significance. Very soon his dream translated into reality and he became a representative dramatist, luminous beacon and

torch bearer for Indian English Drama. Though written in English he uses Indian words copiously and his plays carry the sense and sensibility of Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada. He acknowledges the influence and inspiration of playwright Madhu Rye, Vijay Tendulkar, Sakharam Binder and Alyque Padmasee in shaping and chiseling his dramatic career. Dattani responds to the question what makes him write plays, in the following words:

I participated in the usual school plays and skits but I always yearned to direct performances. I realized that there must be a script for a performance. That's why I started writing - not very serious stuff though, initially. I watched a play whenever I could. Every time there was a group from Bombay or Ahmadabad staging a play in Bangalore, it became a community event that we would all attend. I remember a play I saw as a child at Ravindra Kalakshetra that fascinated me. It used the "play within the play" concept that I'd never seen before and a dramatic finale that took place in the auditorium. The teasing tone, the costume and make-up, the lights -- were all bright and loud yet I was utterly captivated. I later learnt that it was Madhu Rye's *Koi Pun Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo* (Tell me the name of a flower). He is a sensational playwright. I got the chance to see his other plays, especially *Kumarni Agashe* (Kumar's Terrace), also in Hindi as *Neela Kamra*, in Bombay. Then the Bangalore Little Theatre was formed and I became seriously involved in acting, directing and writing plays. I learnt much from Vijay Padaki in the early years. I started my own theatre studio after a few years.[3]

Dattani had an opportunity to be commissioned to write the play *A Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* for BBC Radio on the eve of six-hundred anniversary of Geoffrey Chaucer. He is touchstone of versatility and apart from play-writing he tried his hands in many others creative and art activities. He has not only written the plays but also starred effectively in some distinguished plays and won honour for his radiant and excellent performance. While responding to the questions whether there occurs a conflict between the actor Dattani and director Dattani, he explains in following terms:

The actor, the playwright and the director are all complimentary to each other in a production. It is like gardening; where a whole is made of many parts. So many conditions determine a garden's lushness, its beauty. I write for an actor in the true sense of the word and not to ponder to vanity actors. There is no theatre without an actor or an audience. Everything is geared towards 'rasa' which is why I always direct the first production of any play I write. That enables me to put in more stage instructions which go on to become a kind of blue print for other directors. That way, there is no conflict.[4]

There is inseparable relation between the play and the audience. Every setting, action and characterization in the drama is performed keeping in mind the audience and viewers of the play as every act has to be played live and in as it is manner. Drama is different from film and TV shows which can be altered even after act is finished. So as a playwright Dattani has peerless power to transform his script into living and natural performance. Besides a veteran playwright Dattani is the master of stagecraft and he deems the stage ability more important and instrumental in the success of drama rather than relying on only its themes. Dattani acknowledges this fact in an interview:

Audience need to make the effort. Unlike TV or cinema where the viewer doesn't have to contribute, theatre is collective experience. In fact, at a moment of truth, you will find how people who don't know each other join in from all corners of the darkened hall to applaud and declare their appreciation of that important moment. And that's when you know a play works.[5]

The themes of his plays bear the testimonial of varying tone, temperament and treatment. Dattani expanded his range and canvass of creativity from stage Plays to radio and screen Plays. He has an ability to amalgamate the traditional beliefs with ultramodern disposition and conviction. His plays are heavily charged with socio-political, emotional, physiological and psychological issues. The theme of family covers the large chunk of plays wherein its members are found to be struggling and wrestling with one another. The best example of such play is *Tara* which circles around the grave and traditional issues of gender biasing. The son and daughter delivered from same womb are preferentially treated by no less than parents themselves in the intoxication of superstition and ancestral beliefs and the daughter is sacrificed for the short term benefit of the son. The play is contextual and relevant in the light of the burgeoning incidents of foeticide and widening gap in the sex ratio of male and female child. On the question of what gave him the idea for the play, *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani:

Well, basically, it began with, you know, reading an article in a medical journal about Siamese Twins being separated, and, of course, they were invariably of the same sex and there was this thing about a fused leg and which had the qualities of both left and right so there had to be some careful consideration as to which twin was supplying the blood to the leg and the journal went into the detail because obviously it was a very unique operation and separation. Although that was the inspiration but I think by then having written *Dance Like a Man*, I was prepared to take on the gender issue head on, and I think that was a powerful metaphor. Again, you know, the play is misread and, you know, people tend to focus on the medical details but that's really not what the play is about. It's a metaphor either for being born equal as male and female and sharing so much more and with

the surgical separation comes a cultural distinction and prejudices as well, but on another level, it could also deal with the individual having the male and female self and half the female self is, whether your gender is male or female, is definitely given the lower priority.[6]

To look son and daughter with biased and discriminating eyes has been traditional and age old custom in India and it has been tagged with rites and rituals of life. Parents think their daughter of alien home as one day she would be married and would be of her husband. They have superstitious and mythical belief of being ultimately emancipated at the hands of their son. This fact pertaining to illusion of life is optimally exploited by Dattani in this play. The whole drama is circling round one dark secret and its revelation. The twin: Tara and Chandan successfully operated and separated by Dr. Thakkar. The twin had three legs between them and the third leg was supplied by Tara's blood system. The probability of the leg's survival was greater with Tara. But Bharati and her influential father were hand in glove to undertake the risk of supplying the third leg to Chandan. In the pursuit of procuring this malicious design the doctor was bribed with a plot of land in Bangalore by Bharati's powerful and political father. Patel couldn't object muscularly enough and he also ultimately became accomplice of this nasty conspiracy. The leg that had survived only for two days with Chandan could have been accompanied Tara's forever. Tara is devastated by this revelation that has been ultimately done by Patel himself. Further elucidating the context of gender discrimination in the drama Dattani speaks in an interview:

Well, I think it is the revelation in the end about, you know, Tara's love for her mother which uptil then was unquestionable. She suspected her father for having done something, you know, was in someway, but she had no idea what it was, but her love, her mother's love was unquestioned and she did not question that, so when she comes to know of the truth of what we, I mean, we only have the father's version. We don't know whether that is the real truth or no. again, but it does sort of break her away like a shooting star from the mother, and I think with that she-that's tragedy, she dies. We don't know how she dies, but we know that's the end of Tara, and I think that's somehow all the attitudes towards Tara and the relationship between her mother, her father and her brother, which we see through the play. In hindsight you could see where it was coloured or where it was blinkered or where it was being compensated for.[7]

Dattani has non-conformist and avant-garde advance towards theatre. He based his script on the contemporary and appealing reality of the world. He fought relentless war for the aggrieved, marginalized and underprivileged sections of society like HIV positive, eunuchs, and physically challenged. Besides these facts he remains bold and brave enough to incorporate taboo themes in the cultured, ethnic and traditional country like India. Such

nature of Dattani is bolstered by the inclusion of volatile and radical themes of gay, lesbian and sexual abuse of the child in his dramas. Dattani's plays are his exploration and experimentation with stagecraft. Homosexuality, gender identity, revelation and the pressure of the past, family as a battlefield and the hollowness of middle class life in urban India, Hindu-Muslim hostility and catching up in the current of capitalism are some of the major themes that he dwells upon in his plays. As far as the play *Tara* is concerned, the two kinds of discriminations have been dealt in the drama. One is class discrimination and other is gender biasing but Dattani deems the gender issues more prominent and grave than the problems of class. Dattani presents his own views in this regard in a conversation:

Because I think that's the most visible form of discrimination in our country. Well, you could say that class is the most visible form, but in a way it is such, so ingrained the class system, that sometimes it remains unquestioned. You know you can order your servants about nobody questions you. You know weapon to fight discrimination against her. If Rupa is going to stare at her when she walks across the road, when she limps across the roads. As she, you know, examines her artificial leg, and knocks on it and what not. Tara is going to pull her cards and say that, you know I speak English better than you do and hence you are inferior to me. It's such a you know, ridiculous system we have, but then that's the only weapon she has against Rupa, so in a way, she is buying a social perception of what is superior and what is inferior, the same way as Rupa is doing to her.[8]

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harati realizes her committing of sin and stigmatizing motherhood by doing injustice with her daughter. Consequently she suffered nervous breakdown and metamorphosis. She abruptly cultivated disproportionate compassion for Tara in an effort to seek salvation from unforgivable sin. She exhibited pretentious sympathy and empathy towards Tara and did all attempts to bring ill repute for Patel in the eyes of her daughter. How can males be well wishers of females once women's enemies are only women? Females are discriminated not only biologically but also culturally. The biological difference has been more or less created by Nature but cultural difference is solely manipulated by patriarchal society. Women and girls are trained to remain confined to kitchen and courtyard. Such an aura and atmosphere is created for them so that they could do nothing other than quenching the carnal thirst of their husbands and nursing their age old in-laws, elders, husbands, children and youngers. For Dattani biological differences is bearable for time being but cultural differences are totally fabricated and can be curtailed, contained and averted:

Absolutely, yes, because it is an artificial difference in that sense, you know, biologically there are polarities between the genders, you know, which is

meant to seek the union of one another, but the cultural polarities are artificial, and actually the boundaries hinder the natural unions of male and female whether its body-to-body or within oneself.[9]

The character of Rupa has been deliberately inducted into play by Dattani to counterpoise the burgeoning seriousness and morose mood of the drama. The humour of Dattani is exhibited through the characterization of Rupa and she remains an object of ridicule the moment she brings any term on her tongue. She is both linguistically, rationally and intellectually weak and deficient. Like Chandan and Tara she is though not suffered from disability but she is offensive and comic. She has been purposefully bestowed with hesitant command over both English and Kannada. Thus it provides awesome opportunity for spectators, audiences and readers to laugh at her and thereby they enjoy a kind of diversion amid glum, grisly and gruesome story of Chandan and Tara. The characterization of Rupa is essentially and admirably felt in the light of the fact that how a society looks up at a family undergoing deep distress and depression. She exploits and laughs at the compulsion of Bharati to please her daughter, Tara as compensatory measure for her committed sin against her daughter. During denouement of the drama, Rupa is found to be playing taunts at the deploring and pathetic plight of Patel's family and calling them, "We don't want freaks". Dattani presents contrast between the life of Rupa and Tara in an interview:

Right, well, we got to, there are several scenes in the play which deal with her furies and how she fights her battles when she talks about how she blackmailed her classmate into doing her homework for her and even very much earlier on when she shows up Rupa for her malapropism, her lack of usage of certain idioms and you get to know very earlier on that she is sort of fighting for superior position and then when finally she confronts Rupa and say how does it feel having one tit smaller than the other and let me see how it feels, you know, when other people stare at you. You know, the way they stare at my leg and how would you feel, you won't be able to come out of your house and what not. So those are the places where we get some insight into Tara's inner life and her anger basically. And you know, you, you, you know the idea is so easy to sympathise because sympathy is another way of polarizing as well. You sympathise with someone, and you are saying they are not me you know, No I am in a different location, you know, I am the superior and I am the one to sympathise. So stay there and I will sympathise with you.[10]

The childhood and Indian name of Dan is Chandan. Dan is both the narrator and character of the drama and spectators watch the drama from the points of view of Dan so it is called Dan's play. He is deemed as the Sutradhar of the play. All the actions and characterizations pertaining to drama are portrayed through revelation made by Dan and most of the

actions in the drama are resulting from the flash back of Patel's family six years earlier. The play, *Tara* opens with Dan who remains busy in typing the text pertaining to his lifelong experience. Dan is undergoing mental pain and conflict caused by reverberation of some tragic incidents of the past. Dan and Tara had shared one body which is popularly and scientifically known as Siamese twins and in the terms of Dan they were like "two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb". He lives in London to keep sufficient distance between his bruised past and present. The case of play within the play is witnessed as Dan is writing a script of a drama known as "Twinkle Tara" which has comprehensive connotation as Tara is protagonist of the drama under discussion and also the literal meaning of the twinkling star.

The play suddenly takes the shape of flashback and action suddenly moves towards Mumbai where Dan and Tara had passed their childhood lives. The scene of traditional, patriarchal and paradigmatic Indian family is observed wherein Bharati, the mother of Tara and Dan just finishes her worship and Patel, the father of the twin, is getting ready to join his duty. Both Bharati and Patel seems to be in the milieu of making Chandan a writer and Tara, as usual, strong, healthy and beautiful to be a belle bride of the future. Bharati and Patel belongs to two different states, Karnataka and Gujarat respectively and they were not in good terms and always shown to be quarreling with each other owing to cultural gap and dominance and intervention of Bharati's father between the relationship of Bharati and Patel.

Dr. Thakkar is bribed by Bharati's father to operate the Siamese Twin according to his wish and thus he earns notoriety to the name and fame of doctor who is deemed as next to godliness for healing the wounds and pains of the aggrieved and diseased. Father-in-law of Patel has played a villainous role in this play and he is responsible for the imbroglios, gender biasing and class discrimination encountered by Patel's family. It is he who bribes Dr. Thakkar to carry out surgery in favour of Chandan. He is of belief that male should always be given golden and great opportunity and his penchant for male-chauvinism remains unabated when he left his in Bangalore for both Tara and Chandan but money for only grandson, Chandan. Dattani aptly demonstrates that how the interventions of in-laws into the family affairs destroy its smooth functioning, harmony and cordial atmosphere. Bharati's father is responsible for bringing bitterness between her and husband, Patel. Though it is another thing Patel should not have remained mute onlooker to the discrimination perpetuated on Tara by Bharati and her father. He is further an accomplice in the malicious acts of gender biasing when he chalks out plans for the better education and career of Chandan. Dattani further elucidates gender biasing in the light of the character and protagonist, Tara in the play:

Well, that's a little difficult because you do have various forms of theme. So, you know, in one sense gender prejudice against feminine gender is a strong thing but you also have the class differences coming and, of course, all these prejudices are interrelated because ultimately it is about power, the patriarchal system, it's to, you know, to acquire and appropriate power, you know, for-for you know, what I call what Dan says in the end to live in the forced harmony. It's forced because it's not equal but at the same time there is a harmonious existence because as long as, you know, your status and you continue to play and stay within your station, then there is harmony. But there is also discontent and that's why needs the kind of ferment, which Tara is able to bring about but it still is a tragedy.[11]

The themes of gender discrimination are all dominant in the drama, Tara. The issue of cultural discrimination with women has been elaborately and comprehensively dealt by Dattani in the play wherein female is subjugated and underestimated by patriarchal society and she remain only a care taker for household utensils, , children, husband, other domestic requirements and tasks of fatigue. Thus Dattani's drama showcases the stark reality of the life and warrants the attention of the world towards the pressing needs of the time.

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