

Psychological Enormities in Mahesh Dattani's Tara

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ABSTRACT

Analogous to a number of his other dramatic works, Mahesh Dattani's Tara delves into the intricate predicaments encountered by contemporary Indian families residing in urban centers. These familial bonds, while inherently grounded in natural affection, are frequently subjected to considerable pressure and the possibility of rupture due to elaborate external pressures. Given that the family unit acts as a miniature representation of society, it offers an appropriate setting for investigating societal ailments, thereby mirroring the wider socio-cultural landscape of the era.

Historically, the structure and operation of the family offered solutions to numerous individual issues, granting its members emotional stability and a feeling of protection. Nevertheless, in more recent times, the family unit itself has become the focal point where multiple disputes originate, causing unrest amongst its participants.

In Tara, Dattani centers his attention on the Patel family, specifically focusing on the situation of conjoined siblings who underwent surgical separation but were subjected to differential treatment by their parents. Through this storyline, he introduces several interconnected layers of significance, each disclosing profound social and emotional intricacies.

The objective of this academic piece is to examine the sense of guilt experienced by the dramatis personae, which fosters internal emotional conflict and stress, and to analyze this through a psychological lens. Furthermore, it will scrutinize the conflict between traditional and contemporary ways of life and the values that influence their self-perceptions and interactions.

Keywords: *Psyche, Guilt, Traditional and Modern Lifestyles and Values, Psychological Approach, Indian Family, Culture.*

1. Introduction

Mahesh Dattani stands out as a serious and highly regarded playwright within contemporary Indian English dramatic arts. His creative output consistently investigates the complicated workings of the modern, urban family structure. Dattani, born on August 7, 1958, is a versatile artist, recognized not only for his writing but also for his skills as a director and performer. Notably, he was the inaugural

Indian English dramatist to be honored with the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1998, which he received for his collection, *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. His dramatic works are celebrated for their brave thematic choices and groundbreaking stylistic approach, successfully engaging both audiences and reviewers alike.

➤ **Mahesh Dattani's Theatre and The Persistent Theme of Relegation**

A central focus of *Mahesh Dattani's* dramas is the portrayal of society has ostracized populations: minority groups, women, and other vulnerable individuals. His writing tackles pressing social realities, often sparking widespread dialogue and contention. *Dattani* shines a light on various forms of prejudice, including bias based on religion and challenges related to homosexuality. The struggles faced by women within a patriarchal framework, grappling with gender bias and ingrained disparity, are integral to his narratives.

Dattani's contributions are recognized as revitalizing and original within the landscape of Indian English Drama. His pieces articulate profound political viewpoints without descending into didacticism or outright rebellion. As commented upon by *Erin Mee*:

"Dattani takes subjects considered taboo, brings them out from concealment, and stages them for public scrutiny, thus questioning the traditional definitions of 'India' and 'Indian' that have dominated modern theatre."

(Mee, 2002)

Tara, one of *Dattani's* most impactful plays, meticulously examines the intricate emotional ties within a family struggling with deep-seated uncertainty and crisis. In *Tara*, *Dattani* illustrates the profound affection shared between *Bharati* and her daughter *Tara*, between *Tara* and her twin brother *Chandan*, juxtaposed with the strained, distant connections separating the father from his wife and children.

The essential puzzle of the play resides in the enigma of human behavior; the unpredictable nature of individuals who often remain oblivious to the outcomes of their actions. Additionally, *Dattani* scrutinizes the fragile foundation of the contemporary Indian household, which battles to maintain cohesion and peace amid rapid societal transformation. The subject of the modern nuclear family in India, constantly subjected to the pressures of individualistic desires and internal friction, has emerged as a significant motif in current Indian-English literature. While male writers of earlier generations rarely explored the emotional conflicts of urban family life in a rapidly evolving India, the late 1960s witnessed the rise of female authors who introduced fresh insights into complex social matters.

2. Rationale Adjuvant the Study

Mahesh Dattani's theatrical works, *Tara* (1990) reconnoiter subjects encompassing suppressed desires, identity conflicts, and the psychological impact of societal demands. His protagonists frequently endure intense emotional turmoil as they strive to balance their personal identities with the obligations imposed by their families and broader society, particularly concerning matters of gender, sexuality, and cultural norms. In *Tara*, the primary source of conflict revolves around the emotional agony endured by *Tara* and her twin brother, *Chandan*. Ensuing a surgical intervention intended to fix a physical defect; *Tara* is left impaired, whereas *Chandan* seems physically unharmed.



➤ Identity Crisis and Self-Expression in Tara

Fragmented Identity: Both twins experience a fractured sense of selfhood. Tara struggles profoundly to define who she is amidst her physical and social limitations, while *Chandan's* identity is constructed around feelings of guilt and emotional displacement.

Inner Conflict: The drama examines the internal struggle between the masculine and feminine aspects of the self, highlighting the difficulty of accepting one's identity especially the feminine identity, which is frequently suppressed under cultural and societal expectations.

➤ Societal and Psychological Repression

Internalized Oppression: *Tara's* life serves as a stark illustration of repression's destructive force, unveiling how familial dynamics and traditional cultural values can mute an individual's genuine desires and authentic self.

The Social Judgment: The play analyzes the way patriarchal scrutiny and social stigma perpetuate emotional pain, significantly affecting the characters' sense of belonging and their mental health.

Tara's blend of physical and psychological suffering can be analyzed through a psychoanalytic lens, utilizing *Freudian* concepts like repression and viewing the body as a manifestation of subconscious conflict. Her anguish is intimately linked to her gender as a young woman, her physique becomes an embodiment of the prejudice and humiliation enforced by a patriarchal system. Ultimately, *Tara's* act of suicide underscores the deadly repercussions of repression, demonstrating how the denial of one's authentic self and genuine desires, due to social and familial coercion, can result in complete psychological collapse.

3. Methodological Approaches for Psycho-Analysis of Tara

- **Psychoanalytic Framework:** Investigate the psychological tensions of the characters using *Freudian* concepts such as trauma, repression, and the dynamic interplay between the id, ego, and superego.
- **Postcolonial and Feminist Critique:** Analyze the manner in which gender bias and patriarchal authority structures contribute to the silencing and marginalization of women.
- **Disability Studies Perspective:** Explore the play's depiction of disability and its exposure of associated social stigma and prejudice.
- **Thematic Examination:** Focus on key motifs, including betrayal, guilt, identity, and the psychological pressure stemming from external societal demands.

4. Confab: The Refrain of Guilt in Tara

In *Tara*, *Dattani* expertly navigates the emotional and psychological complexities within a small family unit devastated by the birth of conjoined twins—*Chandan*, the boy, and *Tara*, the girl—to *Mr. Patel* and *Bharati*, a couple who appeared content. The twins were born with an anomalous third leg. Despite medical guidance, *Bharati* and her father pressured the surgeon, *Dr. Thakkar*, to allocate the superfluous limb to the boy.

The physician cautioned that the leg should rightfully stay with Tara since her circulation sustained it. Yet, *Bharati* and her father, motivated by severe gender bias, insisted on the opposite. Their decision driven by cultural beliefs that assign greater worth to male offspring inflicts tragedy upon the entire family. The male child is viewed as the inheritor of the family lineage, while the girl is perceived as a financial liability due to the necessity of a dowry. If the girl is also physically disabled, she is considered doubly unfortunate, unlikely to secure a marriage, and a source of family disgrace.

Ultimately, the surgeon accepted a bribe, and his anxieties materialized *Chandan* was left with his condition, and *Tara's* health declined significantly. Tara suffered not only physically but also emotionally, recognizing that her mother's favoring of the boy's welfare was rooted in gender prejudice. *Bharati* is subsequently burdened by the guilt of having compromised her daughter's future for her son's sake.

Following the death of her father, *Bharati* becomes progressively consumed by fear and guilt. Her subsequent decision to donate a kidney to Tara can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to compensate for her past actions. Nevertheless, her efforts to demonstrate affection, assert moral superiority over her husband, and establish a meaningful role within the family prove fruitless. Her final self-sacrificial act stands as a gesture of atonement—simultaneously profound and tragically human.

Patel, the spouse of *Bharati* and father to their offspring, is consumed by a profound sense of powerlessness upon recognizing his incapacity to halt the cruel and nonsensical machinations engulfing them. This escalating despair and shame progressively transform him into an aggressive individual, ultimately resulting in the destruction of his marital relationship.

The drama primarily focuses on the two children, *Tara* and *Chandan*, whose vantage points predominantly shape the narrative. Through their eyes, the spectators are privy to life's myriad complexities. Their powerful sibling bond, shared tenderness, and youthful innocence deeply resonate with the audience.

Patel is burdened by intense remorse, which manifests in harsh and severe treatment of his children. *Bharati*, conversely, is plagued by overwhelming guilt that she desperately attempts to conceal. This internal emotional struggle propels her toward psychological instability, culminating in her institutionalization in a mental health facility. *Patel* equally bears significant accountability for his wife's declining health and the disintegration of her character. While he is a pragmatic individual striving to instill conventional ethics in his children, he fails to recognize the emotional fallout of his rigid perspective or to comprehend the sensitivity and affection of his offspring. As the story unfolds, *Patel's* temperament becomes progressively more jaded and vindictive.

The playwright expertly unveils the truth behind the mandated separation of the conjoined twins by a surgeon. In a heart-wrenching confessional moment, Patel reveals that Tara could have enjoyed a normal existence had the surgeon not amputated her leg, grafting it onto *Chandan* so that the male child might live a complete life a benefit gained at the expense of his sister's well-being. This unethical surgical procedure was performed because the surgeon accepted a bribe from *Bharati's* affluent and influential father, with *Bharati* herself being complicit in the action. This revelation casts a profound pall of sorrow over the family, and *Chandan*, overcome by remorse, relocates to England.

➤ Conflict between Modern and Conventional Dogmas

The characters within the performance embody two disparate generational groups. *Bharati* and *Patel* represent the older generation, entrenched in established norms, while *Tara* and *Chandan* symbolize the succeeding generation with contemporary, liberal convictions. *Patel* and *Bharati* exhibit favoritism toward their son *Chandan* over their daughter *Tara*, yet *Chandan* respects and champions *Tara*'s distinct identity and capabilities.

Bharati, molded by traditional expectations, is satisfied being a homemaker devoted to her family, never questioning her own selfhood. *Tara*, in direct contrast, is determined to assert her independence and refuses to acknowledge any disparity between herself and her brother.

Patel exemplifies the characteristics of a conventional Indian male head of household austere, conservative, and unwavering in his belief in the secondary role of women. *Chandan*, contrastingly, maintains a more progressive and equitable outlook. For instance, *Chandan* assists his mother with knitting, a practice *Patel* frowns upon, classifying such activities as exclusively female. He maintains that cooking, child-rearing, and household maintenance are the purview of femininity. This clash of viewpoints causes *Patel* to resent his son, while *Chandan's* generation advocates for collaboration, parity, and the rejection of antiquated gender roles.

A central concept in the play is the notion that science and nature are mutually supportive forces. Any attempt to defy or infringe upon the laws of nature invariably generates friction and, ultimately, catastrophe. *Dr. Thakkar's* endeavor to surgically separate the twins contradicts the biological order established by nature. However, the subsequent tragedy does not stem from medical science in itself, but rather from *Dr. Thakkar's* unscrupulous and irresponsible execution of his medical duties.

Dan (Chandan) employs verbal irony when he describes *Dr. Thakkar* as "amazing." Considering *Dr. Thakkar's* nature, he also illustrates situational irony a physician, whose sacred obligation is the preservation of life, ironically becomes an agent of harm. Although *Dr. Thakkar* is medically proficient, he lacks the moral and ethical foundation essential for a truly competent doctor. Put differently, he is educated in the domain of medicine but has failed to absorb the cultural and ethical tenets critical for his vocation. During a staged television interview, *Dan* introduces *Dr. Thakkar* as a highly respected and globally renowned doctor:

"But soon, even the remotest chance for survival was received with hope once they were made aware of the facilities offered by modern technology... there was a strong possibility of both twins surviving."

(Tara, P-34)

This excerpt reveals that all pre-operative screenings indicated the twins could survive. Theoretically, modern medical technology possessed the capability to successfully sever their connection. As *Dr. Thakkar* himself states,

"Nature has done a near complete job. Medical science could finish it for her."

(Tara, P- 35)



There was nothing inherently flawed with the scientific intervention—the issue arose when *Dr. Thakkar* neglected ethical considerations. As he concedes, there was “*a strong possibility of both the twins surviving.*”

(Tara, P- 36)

This underscores the potential for science, culture, and nature to coexist and complement one another. *Dr. Thakkar* proudly touts the advancements in medical technology:

“Yes, indeed, it was a complex case. But modern technology has made many things possible. We are not very far from the rest of the world. In fact, in ten years’ time we should be on par with the best in the West.”

Dan applauds mockingly as his area is lit

(Tara, P-37)

Mahesh Dattani portrays *Dr. Thakkar* as a medical professional who assumes a deity-like status—a figure of creation and destruction. His elevated physical placement on stage symbolizes his dominance and authority, representing the supremacy of modern science and technology in society. While he does not directly participate in the play’s action, his presence remains integral and influential, much like how science indirectly governs our lives. *Dattani* further emphasizes his importance by keeping *Dr. Thakkar* stationary throughout the duration of the play.

The production commences with Chandan and Tara entering the stage—both exhibit limps, but on opposing legs. Chandan, called Dan when depicted in London, confesses that despite his separation from Tara, he still senses a profound connection to her. He also admits that his “progress... has been zero” since the separation.

(Tara, P- 32)

Dattani’s utilization of this declaration transcends its literal denotation it carries metaphorical significance concerning contemporary society. The twins can be viewed as symbolic entities: *Chandan* embodying scientific advancement, and *Tara* symbolizing societal and cultural evolution. *Dattani* appears to suggest that notwithstanding substantial developments in both scientific and cultural spheres, equilibrium and harmony between the two remain deficient.

The fundamental issue lies in the dissociation between scientific innovation and cultural growth. Authentic progress necessitates the harmonious evolution of both. The play ultimately scrutinizes unethical medical practices and exposes the concealed, more sinister aspects of the medical profession those aspects often kept hidden from public view.

It is not only *Dr. Thakkar* who personifies the disparity and imbalance inherent in modern self-proclaimed “*developed*” culture. but also, other characters such as *Bharati* and her father. The narrative of *Tara* does not revolve around uneducated or illiterate individuals it centers on members of the upper echelons of society, people who proudly consider themselves refined and cultured. These are the supposed modern individuals who purport to reject rigid and conservative social customs. Yet, both *Bharati* and her father share culpability for the unethical surgery performed on the twins, which results in *Tara’s* anguish.

5. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani effectively employs irony when depicting *Bharati's* distress at witnessing *Patel's* preferential treatment of *Chandan*. The audience, however, is aware that *Bharati* herself is responsible for *Tara's* condition. Her compulsion to atone for her guilt frequently at *Patel's* expense demonstrates her internal conflict. She accuses *Patel* of caring more for *Chandan* than for *Tara*, yet she is the one who originally favored *Chandan* over *Tara* due to her traditional upbringing. *Bharati's* reliance on her father instead of consulting her husband reveals the profound impact of gender bias on family dynamics. Both *Bharati* and *Patel* are constrained by antiquated beliefs, and all characters experience hardship due to these deep-seated prejudices that persist even among the educated class.

The play retains significant contemporary relevance, as it provokes questions about how scientific advancement particularly in medicine must be balanced with cultural and ethical consciousness. *Tara* articulates the tension between science, nature, and culture, most clearly through the figure of Dr. Thakkar, who embodies the conflict between scientific rationale and cultural values. The play also delves into the struggle between science and nature, and through the twins, it illustrates both the friction and the interdependence of science and culture.

As *Erin Mee* accurately observes in her analysis of the play, “woven into the play are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values.”

(Mee, 2002)

Dattani proposes that while technology and science have advanced rapidly, cultural and moral advancement has trailed behind. Society frequently prioritizes scientific development over cultural adaptation, and we are sometimes hesitant to embrace the social transformations necessitated by technological progress. In summation, *Mahesh Dattani* provides a warning: if this imbalance persists, both culture and nature may forsake us just as *Chandan* ultimately abandons his father.

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