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Splitting the Self: Gendered Bodies and Canonical Bias in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* presents a compelling exploration of gendered violence through the literal and metaphorical splitting of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan. This paper explores how the unequal surgical separation—favouring the male child—functions as a powerful metaphor for the patriarchal logic that shapes both familial decisions and societal values. Drawing on feminist body theory, particularly the works of Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, the paper examines how Tara's body becomes a site of gendered inscription, where female potential is systematically dismembered—physically, socially and symbolically. Furthermore, this paper attempts to situate the drama within broader cultural frameworks of gendered expectations and caste-class dynamics by engaging with Indian feminist intellectuals such as Nivedita Menon and Uma Chakravarti. In doing so, it contends that *Tara* not only critiques patriarchal norms but also challenges the exclusionary character of the Indian literary canon, which is historically dominated by male voices. As a contemporary English-language play, *Tara* demonstrates how revolutionary theatre may promote discursive spaces for marginalised gender narratives, calling for a revision of the methods used to establish the canon to incorporate voices that challenge and expose oppressive hierarchies.

Keywords: Dattani; Gender; Body; Violence; Patriarchy; Canon; Theatre

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) stands as a landmark in contemporary Indian English theatre for its insightful depiction of gender inequality in a so-called forward-thinking urban Indian family. Dattani, the first English-language playwright to win the *Sahitya Akademi Award*, has said that his plays often revolve around “the invisible issues,

the ones that are not usually talked about" (Dattani xiii). Tara embodies this goal by portraying the surgical separation of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, in a way that favours the male child, exposing the underlying patriarchal motivations that influence even the most personal family choices.

The play's central metaphor—the physical and emotional separation of the twins—is a potent illustration of the gendered violence inflicted upon female bodies in patriarchal communities. The systematic undervaluation of the female self is epitomised by Tara's literal dismemberment and emotional marginalisation. Particularly through the lens of body theory and gender performativity, as articulated by Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and other intellectuals, the play calls for an urgent feminist interpretation. The idea that "bodies are not merely matter but materialisations of regulatory norms" (Butler 2) is reflected in Tara's fate, which was moulded by cultural expectations and parental prejudice.

Tara also challenges the boundaries of the Indian literary canon, which male-centric, upper-caste narratives have historically dominated. The inclusion of a gender-critical, urban, English-language play like *Tara* represents the extension of canonical limits. Indian feminist researchers, such as Nivedita Menon, contend that feminist reinterpretation is a political intervention to "see the invisible" (Menon 12), which Dattani's drama masterfully achieves. This study contends that *Tara* serves as both a critique of patriarchal dominance over gendered bodies and a plea to reimagine the Indian literary canon through a more inclusive and feminist perspective.

Contextual Background and Literature Review

In Indian English drama, Mahesh Dattani occupies a seminal position and is frequently credited with bringing the urban, middle-class experience to the theatrical stage. His writings are praised for addressing themes such as gender, sexuality, class, and identity. In the introduction to *Collected Plays Volume One*, Dattani himself summarises his dramatic ethos: "I write about the invisible issues. I have a strong need to make visible what has been invisible for so long" (Dattani xiii). His works, such as *Final Solutions*, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Tara*, persistently highlight the undercurrents of violence and exclusion that exist in Indian homes that appear to be progressive and liberal.

The story of *Tara* revolves around the lives of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, whose surgical separation was engineered to favour the male child. The play explores the trauma of separation, gender inequality, and repressed sadness via Chandan's reflections. Despite Tara's superior claim, the choice to give Chandan the superior limb exposes a troubling reality about familial complicity in patriarchal norms. Tara's statement, "If at all a body had to be mutilated, it could have been mine," highlights the silent sacrifices that women are expected to make in the name of love and protection (Dattani 335).

Historically, Indian literature, both in English and regional languages, has prioritized heteronormative tales about men from higher castes. As G.N. Devy points out, "The Indian literary tradition is not only a tale of inclusion but also a powerful

history of exclusions—of women, of Dalits, of tribals, and alternative sexualities" (Devy 27). Feminist interventions into canon formation challenge these exclusions by highlighting voices and experiences previously marginalised. In *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Nivedita Menon examines the ideological structure that obscures gender-based disparity in daily life, and she notes, "The family is the most intimate institution through which patriarchy is reproduced" (Menon 18). Through its representation of the Patel family, in which the mother's complicity and the father's utilitarian logic support the gendered hierarchy ingrained in both medical and household discourses, *Tara* exemplifies this critique. By situating *Tara* within the context of canonical bias, this paper highlights the urgency of recognising contemporary Indian plays, particularly those that question gender and embodiment, as essential contributions to a more equitable literary tradition.

Feminist Body Theory and the Splitting of the Self

In Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*, the physical and emotional separation of Tara and Chandan is more than just a medical operation; it is a dramatisation of how patriarchal power structures favour the male over the female by inscribing meaning onto the human body. The feminist body theorists Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray provide essential frameworks for understanding this behaviour as representative of the social construction and political manipulation of gendered bodies.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray asserts that throughout history, the female body has been viewed as a "commodity" in a phallogentric society, with its primary purpose being to serve men (Irigaray 31). Tara's body is violated due to social and gendered preference, not medical necessity, despite its strength in carrying both legs. Irigaray's perspective of a system that "exchanges women's bodies as objects of power between men" (Irigaray 171) is reflected in the surgical choice to provide Chandan with a stronger leg. Given this context, Tara's mutilation is not unintentional; it represents how she is being treated as a "commodity".

Judith Butler expands on this reading by introducing the idea of "materialisation of gender," claiming that "bodies are not born; they are made through regulatory practices that produce intelligible gender" (Butler 2). Only by tearing apart Tara's body does she become the 'other', in contrast to Chandan's typical male identity. Tara's identity is formed through erasure rather than agency as "a ritual of abjection" (Butler 243). Dattani gives this process a theatrical form when Chandan, reflecting on their past, says - "I am not sure if I want to remember that... that I am not sure I want to be reminded of who I am." (Dattani 343). Chandan's remorse stems from the awareness of his privilege—his ability to forget is a male luxury that is denied to Tara, who has to live with the repercussions in her mind and body.

Tara, despite her name evoking cosmic magnificence, is slowly forgotten from the story of life. She has lost her voice, her body is covered with scars, and she has been denied her agency. As she states bitterly, "Perhaps we are still Siamese twins...in more ways than one" (Dattani 340). This suggests an unhealed emotional trauma, a forced splitting that never quite succeeds—both literally and symbolically.

This portrayal is strongly supported by the Indian feminist academic Uma Chakravarti's critique of the family as a location of gendered injustice. In *Gendering Caste*, she writes, "The family becomes the institution where gender hierarchies are learned and legitimated, often at the cost of the girl-child's agency and life" (Chakravarti 37). The Patel family epitomises this dynamic; their choices are motivated by normative expectations of male success and female sacrifice, even if they are shrouded in concern and remorse. Thus, through the lens of feminist body theory, Tara emerges as a profound commentary on how gendered bodies are constructed, mutilated, and silenced within patriarchal systems, both domestic and discursive.

Gendered Violence and Familial Betrayal

Dattani exposes the architecture of gendered violence in *Tara*, not through obvious acts of cruelty, but through the subtle betrayals that occur within the family, the institution that is often thought to be protective and supportive. The violence that Tara experiences is not only legitimised by medical logic and parental affection but also understated and internalised. In this way, the play offers a powerful commentary on how gender prejudice, when normalised in the home, results in a lifetime of oppression.

Tara's surgical separation is the central act of violence in the play. The choice, which is heavily gendered and disguised as parental concern, seems to be a medical operation. Tara's mother, Bharati, is involved in this— a complicity that stems from her ingrained patriarchy and sense of guilt. In a shocking admission, Chandan tells the truth, "It was all decided long ago. When we were born. That decision was made. By the elders. For your sake, they said. But it was always for my sake, not yours" (Dattani 346). This confession highlights the systemic nature of betrayal, where family elders often defend gendered injustices in the name of love, progress, or tradition.

Bharati's father represents patriarchal utilitarianism. His choice to give Chandan the leg is justified through logic and potential: a boy's life is assumed to be more valuable, productive and worthy of physical integrity. This reasoning is similar to what Judith Butler refers to in *Gender Trouble* as the "heteronormative matrix," in which bodies and their futures are arranged according to binary gender roles and hierarchies (Butler 6).

Indian feminist scholar Uma Chakravarti addresses this dynamic in her book *Gendering Caste*, stating: "The family constructs and reinforces gender roles through a hierarchy of needs and entitlements—often privileging the male child's future over the female's very survival" (Chakravarti 41). This is precisely what *Tara* dramatises. In her efforts to establish her identity or independence, Tara is systematically disempowered as well as physically mutilated.

The betrayal is made worse by the mother's silence and subsequent guilt. Bharati's overbearing love for Tara is a means of atonement, not empowerment. When Mr. Patel, Bharati's husband, angrily confronts her, the underlying reality comes to light: "You spoiled her because you felt guilty. You felt responsible for what happened to her. You wanted to make up for it" (Dattani 339). This performative affection fails to restore

Tara's dignity or agency. It rather confirms that she is the victim of a familial wrongdoing that cannot be undone.

In *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Nivedita Menon argues that the family is "the site of the first betrayal" where the daughter learns the bounds of her worth (Menon 24). This betrayal is reflected in Tara's story. Her childhood decision reverberates throughout her adolescence and eventually into her death – a symbolic erasure that mirrors society's ongoing disinvestment in women's lives.

The emotional climax of *Tara* lies in the realisation that familial love, in its gendered execution, can be both caring and cruel. As Dattani himself observes in the preface, "The tragedy lies not in the characters themselves, but in the social codes that govern their lives" (Dattani xii). Although the Patel family is not cruel or abusive in the traditional sense, their actions serve as an example of how gendered violence is frequently carried out through commonplace, everyday decisions. Tara's betrayal is a tradition rather than a break—inherited violence disguised as love, and this nuance contributes to the play's strength as a feminist work.

Reimagining the Indian Canon: The Place of *Tara* in Feminist Literary Discourse

The literary canon of India has historically been defined by patriarchal, caste-based and heteronormative systems that exclude stories that focus on the gendered body and the feminine experience. Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*, which focuses on the trauma of a girl-child being dismembered, abandoned and eventually erased by a society that prioritises male survival and visibility, is a revolutionary intervention in this context since it questions canonical boundaries and representational conventions.

Dattani's inclusion in mainstream Indian English literature is itself a relatively recent development. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "The canon, though perceived as a fixed set of elite texts, is always susceptible to revision through cultural and political shifts" (Mukherjee 89). *Tara*, with its urban, English-speaking milieu and feminist critique, opens a space for theatrical forms to engage critically with social injustice.

The play is feminist because it has the power to speak for the oppressed. Tara's existential crisis reflects the centuries of women whose potential has been cut short by patriarchal choices. Tara's fragmented voice is a necessary dissonance in a literary tradition that is dominated by epics celebrating male heroism and novels that chronicle male journeys. As Nivedita Menon reminds us, "To see like a feminist is to insist on that which the dominant narrative erases" (Menon 20), and Dattani's play emphasises this feminist visibility.

According to feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter, Tara performs a "gynocritical" move—exploring not only the conditions under which women are written about but also the systems that prevent them from speaking or surviving (Showalter 131). Tara's fate—death after being betrayed by her family and society—serves as a metaphor for the canonical exclusion of female subjects whose bodies and stories are deemed disposable. The play concludes with her absence, which emphasises the systemic silencing of female experience even in our memories.

In Indian literature, the usage of English is often associated with elitist, male-authored stories, but Dattani uses it to present a feminist, subaltern tale. Gayatri Spivak's idea of "strategic essentialism", in which disadvantaged voices employ dominant tools to challenge dominant structures (Spivak 284), is consistent with this linguistic change. Dattani uses English drama to deconstruct the ideological framework that previously supported patriarchal values in Indian literature.

Lastly, the play's meta-theatrical framework, in which Chandan writes and rewrites their story as a means of remembering and grieving, raises important issues about memory and authorship. Who is remembered? Who creates history? Dattani casts feminist memory as a form of resistance and canon formation by refusing to allow Tara to be forgotten. In the final act of Chandan's storytelling, he symbolically regains Tara's position in cultural awareness, as he says, "Tara, forgive me for turning it into my tragedy" (Dattani 348). This painful and belated acknowledgement serves as a poignant critique of a canon that frequently overlooks or disregards women's experiences. Thus, Tara is not only a feminist play but also a political act of literary revision—a plea to reinvent the canon as a vibrant, inclusive repository of gendered realities.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* exposes the deep-rooted gender bias embedded within familial and cultural structures, using the literal splitting of the conjoined twins as a metaphor for the patriarchal division of value between male and female bodies. Tara's surgical dismemberment is transformed into a symbolic act of gendered violence, motivated by systemic inequality but supported by love. Drawing on feminist body theory (Irigaray, Butler) and Indian feminist critiques (Chakravarti, Menon), this paper demonstrates how Tara exposes the erasure of the girl-child from the home, the body, and the larger cultural memory. The betrayal Tara experiences is symbolic of a society that systematically undervalues women's autonomy and prioritises male potential.

Most significantly, *Tara* questions the very foundation of Indian literature. By bringing a disabled, gendered and voiceless voice to the forefront, it urges us to think about who belongs in our stories. Chandan's last statement, "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (Dattani 348), expresses her sorrow while also criticising a canon that overlooks women like her. By providing Tara with a voice, even after her death, Dattani's drama forces us to consider a more inclusive, feminist canon that recognises and remembers the lives that patriarchy would prefer to ignore.

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