

Unveiling Gender Constructs: A Study of Gender Performativity in *Tara*

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Abstract-

This paper aims to explore Judith Butler's concept of Gender performativity as central to Mahesh Dattani's play "Tara," by examining the condition of women in Indian society through the perspective of the play's titular character. In line with Butler's theory that gender is a performative act, Dattani's representation explores the nuances of gender identity creation within familial and societal contexts. The drama examines the dynamics of Tara's family, where her twin brother Chandan receives preferential treatment due to patriarchal ideals. Tara's chances are restricted by cultural expectations, which highlight the persistence of gender stereotypes and prejudices, despite her intelligence and desires. By deftly integrating gendered experiences into the story, Dattani illustrates how Tara's physical impairment and femininity interact to cause systematic marginalisation and prejudice. He provides examples of how gender standards are internalised and reinforced, even by women. Moreover, the immoral behaviors of men highlight how patriarchal ideology permeates society and shapes medical procedures as well as other structures. Dattani exposes the repercussions of challenging gender norms and the intricacies of individual agency inside authoritarian systems, taking on the violence and hypocrisy inherent in gender discrimination. "Tara" proves to be a potent indictment of both the marginalisation of women in Indian society and patriarchal rule. Dattani emphasises the performative element of gender identity and the repercussions of breaking from social norms by utilising Butler's concept of gender performativity.

Keywords- Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Gender Identity, Gendered Body, Gynocentric, Gender stereotypes, Marginalization

Introduction-

John McRae, the Canadian Poet, appreciates Dattani as the "Voice of India". When Indian English drama was struggling for survival and identity, Mahesh Dattani appeared on the literary scene as a potent dramatic voice in the arena of plays. His experiments and innovations in traditional theatrical mechanism enriched the soil of

Indian drama and this earned him a name among the leading playwrights of India. Dattani in his plays problematises the issues of gender, status of woman in Indian society, and the problem of Hijra community. One of the most important features of his plays is that, it addresses the invisible issues of contemporary Indian society. His plays are revolting and sometimes outrageous in nature, as it questions the problem of gender, sex, religion, communal tension, feminine identity, same- sex marriage, and above all gay and lesbian relationship. Both internal and external elements are exposed in the dramatic performance of Dattani.

Mahesh Dattani's poignant play *Tara* was originally performed as *Twinkle Tara* in the year 1990. The title emerges as a powerful metaphor for the various wrongs perpetuated on woman in patriarchal society. The play highlights gender complexities existing in Indian society along with quandary of women. In contemporary Indian society, everyone boasts of celebrating womanhood, woman empowerment, etc, but at the same time many dishonorable practices and tendencies against women are prevalent in that society. Dattani's play helps in unearthing these practices thus exploring the hypocrisy of the society. In one of his interviews, the playwright has acknowledged the fact that gender issues and the trouble it created are central to the play.

An Exploration of Gender Performativity: A Critical Analysis-

As Dattani rightly puts it, "I see *Tara* as a play about male self and female self, and the male self being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst" (134). From the title of the play itself it is understood that the play is about a girl named Tara. She is the protagonist and is the one who is denied all the opportunities in life. She is physically challenged and thus her life is made grievous in all possible ways closing all the doors of happiness, freedom, and equality thereby resulting in physical and psychological trauma which further leads to her untimely death. The most important social group that plays an essential role in the socialization process of an individual is the family. The play clearly highlights the roles of parental family works in creating gendered identities of individual. It is mostly the mothers, the one who is assigned to perform housekeeping and child rearing actually make their girl child 'a lesser child' and even inferior and subservient to her brothers. Therefore, the life of a girl child can be well explained in the words of Anshu Shekhawat, "She is born in regret and brought up in neglect and becomes the victim of sexist bias" (229). The category 'woman' is always part of the process of fixing gender and sex. The girl, Tara, in the play is doubly discriminated as she is a victim of gender discrimination as well as she is physically challenged. *Tara* is not only the story of a single girl but it represents and tells the story of every girl child born in rural or urban society. The play can be taken as a typical example that shows how the twins – one being a girl and other being a boy are compelled to imitate or perform their gender identity. Judith

Butler in her work *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* states that “...there is no original or primary gender a drag imitate, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original”(313). Therefore, even though the play is set in urban middle class educated family, the family members are adhered to the orthodox attitude of preferring masculinity. All the characters, to an extent, imitate their gender roles and there are a number of instances by which Mahesh Dattani has poignantly repeated it in the play.

The play narrates the story of the lives of two conjoined Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, who were miraculously separated by a number of surgeries. Gender injustice towards Tara is shown explicitly when the ‘two peas in a pod’ are treated differently right from her birth. They were conjoined from breastbone down through the pelvic area, indeed this was not at all a problem as they do not share any of the major organs. But a complication arises and was brought to the lime light by a medical report which states clearly that there were three legs in total and one of them was shared by both of them. The medical report also clearly states that the major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl. So the probability of the leg’s survival was greater with Tara. However, the mother of the twins Bharati along with her misogynist father convinces Dr Thakkar to transplant the leg to Chandan’s body. It is said that the doctor was bribed and he agreed to risk giving both the legs to the boy. The very act of Bharati against her own daughter is one of the best instances which shows how classic male-child-preference operates in society. The mother and daughter relationship is ultimately submissive to patriarchy. She has no other choices but, to act out her gender identity which was socially constructed. With this instance, the playwright brings up the application of gendered roles of a woman. The gendered body can be viewed from the perspective of concepts like performativity, marginalization of disabled body, madness and socialization. Judith Butler in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* discusses that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (33). She asserts on the idea that repetition of a set of performative acts are appropriated through language and behavior and the gender of masculinity and femininity is constituted by the repetition of these acts. As a result of the repetition of performative acts by Bharati, it is Tara who has meted out to suffer the cruelty and injustice in her whole life. She was considered inferior and even a ‘lesser child’ when compared to her brother. Just because she was a female child she was denied her own leg and that left her crippled throughout her life. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly says that one is not born but rather becomes a woman; Tara, right from the beginning of her birth, was made feminine – one who will sacrifice her life and who will be inferior to the males. Thus the biological sex of any gender is also socially constructed through repetitive performance. Repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is

what enables a subject. It also constitutes the temporal condition of the subject. The subject is formed from the act she or he does. The performance is given importance. Hence the subject is formed from the performance.

Unlike her brother, Tara is evangelical, full of life, and has high aspirations. But she is unhappy about the fact that she is unable to accomplish it as she is a physically disabled person. Moreover, her father, Patel only thinks about the future and career of Chandan. Unfortunately, nobody is interested to think about the future of Tara just because of her gender. Butler is interested in examining how an individual comes to assume her or his subject position and is less interested in the individual. Society plays a major role in assigning duties to an individual based on their gender identities. Generally, people do not even try to go beyond the social norms. Even if they do so they are black marked in that society. In addition, society punishes those who fail to 'do' their gender correctly. Tara in the play is not supposed to have any plans for her future. In order to be signified in the society, she is bound to act according to the constructed norms of society. Both Chandan and Tara were physically and emotionally conjoined. The operation was unsuccessful and it left both the twins crippled. They had to depend on artificial legs throughout their life. Patel surely is the representation of the male head of the family. As a patriarch, he firmly believes in old values. He is not ready to change the fixed opinion he has in his mind about woman and man. This is very evident in the play when he sees Chandan helping his mother to sort out the mistakes in her knitting. He could not bear the scene and scolds Chandan to stop it and ordered him to give it to Tara:

PATEL. Let Tara do it.

CHANDAN. It's okay.

PATEL. Give it to her.

CHANDAN. Why?

PATEL. Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!...

PATEL(to Bharati). How dare you do this to him ?...you can think of turning him into a sissy—teaching him to knit. (351)

This is quite a good example to suggest how gender roles related to men and women work within family. Patel shouts at Bharati; he could no longer resist the sight of his son performing the gender roles associated with women. According to the established norms of gender, women are assigned to do household duties, rearing of children, etc. Sewing, knitting, and all such activities are meant to be performed by females. The gender roles in society expect the females to be polite and meek whereas men are expected to be aggressive and strong. They are supposed to be superior to females and they manage the financial side of the family. In the play Patel wanted his daughter to help her mother joining with her in sewing, knitting, etc. Instead, he wanted his son to accompany him in his office duties. He does not want to see his son rotting at home ; but it is okay for him in the case of Tara. Therefore at every stage in the development

of a person, gender performativity functions and produces a series of effects.

Tara is not at all less intelligent than Chandan, but her father thinks only about the higher studies of Chandan. In the past girls were denied education. It was only after the coming of feminist theorists into the scene girls were granted the right to education like the boys. But even then conventional mind of the people never planned a good future for girls. Soon after their primary education, they were married off and are expected to perform the conventional gender roles constructed by society. As Chandan is emotionally attached to Tara, he is not ready to go to college without her. Patel feels unhappy and he argues him that he has some future plans for Chandan. Chandan likes to sit at home just like her sister and help his mother. But then the patriarchal world will not accept him. The conversation Patel had with his children projects the operation of gender bias in society. Tara is a victim of male chauvinism. Girls are always given lower position in society. It is a social reality that they are considered as second grade citizen. But Tara's twin brother Chandan is an exception. He considers his sister equal to him. This is evident in his conversation with his sister:

TARA. Who do you know in this city? Except that silly Roopa?

CHANDAN. Who do you know?

TARA. I don't. It's all the same. You. Me. There's no difference.

CHANDAN. No difference between you and me?

TARA. No! Why should there be?

CHANDAN. That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me. (361)

But his father wanted Chandan to be significant in society and ask him to do the duties that fit into the roles of male gender.

The most interesting part of the play is that, Bharati being a woman also discriminates her own daughter. With this discrimination, Dattani brings out the root cause of gender discrimination, by making a woman destroyer of another woman's life. Following Nietzsche, Butler argues that there is no doer behind the deed, the deed is everything and the deed creates the doer. Bharati feels guilty for the injustice she had done to her own daughter. Even Chandan feels guilty on account of injustice done to Tara. It is to get rid of these horrible and haunting memories, Chandan escapes to London. Bharati's over showering of motherly love and protection for Tara is the result of guilt feeling developed in her mind. This is very well shown in the play when she pleads Roopa to be the best friend of Tara. She wanted to give all the happiness to Tara and addresses her as Twinkle Tara. Above all the way she argues for her daughter with Patel are examples that expresses Bharati's act of love, in order to escape the shadows of her mistakes. She tries to overcome her guilt with her decision to donate her kidney to Tara, but Patel does not agree with her decision. Moreover he does not provide a rational reason for not permitting her to do so. As Patel is the male head of the family, she is to obey him. But when she tries to come out of her confined gender roles and starts questioning Patel, she is accused of madness and advises her to meet a

psychiatrist. He puts all the blame on Bharati; including his failure to take decisions in the future life of Tara. He gives an excuse that Bharati has not allowed him to take decision on behalf of Tara. Performativity for Butler has to do with repetition and that too the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms. It also tells how to work out the trap, when one is inevitably in. According to Butler 'I' or 'We' does not involve in the construction of gender. In addition, it neither precedes nor follows this process of gendering. Females are always considered as an object and she is blamed for all the faults. The same happens in the play, where Patel blames Bharati for the issues she is not responsible for. Bharati on the other hand shed the burden of guilt with the maternal love for her daughter. Even though it was too late, she identified the mistake she had committed and wanted to sacrifice her life for Tara, but her dreams were futile.

Tara and Bharati, the two major female characters suffer throughout the play. Dattani has remarkably presented the suffering of Bharati as a mother as well as a woman. As a woman she, has the realization of what would happen to Tara in a male dominated society, as life is always harsh and difficult for a girl. So, Bharati has a vision how her daughter would be treated.

BHARATI. It's all right while she is young. It's all very cute and comfortable when she makes witty remarks. But let her grow up. Yes, Chandan. The world will tolerate you. The world will accept you—but not her! Oh the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty. Thirty is unthinkable. And what about forty and fifty! Oh God! (348-349)

Only a woman can understand the lives of other woman. But it is shame on Bharati as she has joined with her father for the crime. From a theoretical point of view; Bharati cannot be blamed for it is the society that is responsible for the present condition of Tara. As we all knew the fact that gender is a social construction; every individual is compelled to act out their gender roles. Thus, it is the society's unjust social system that kills Tara. Prejudices and social pressures create differences between sexes which ultimately lead to the suppression of desires, thus resulting in prioritizing one sex over another.

After kidney transplantation, Tara finds out that her mother had a nervous breakdown and she is hospitalized. She misses her mother badly as she always believes that she is the one who had made her a strong girl; and she wishes to visit the hospital. But Patel does not allow Tara and Chandan to visit the hospital. When she insisted, Patel narrates the birth of Tara and Chandan; and reveals Bharati's role in Tara's deformity. Tara is completely shattered and starts to hate her mother; reluctantly she says, "And she called me her star!"(Dattani 379). Tara was high spirited, bright and shining star. She would like to be strong, healthy and beautiful; on the other hand Chandan likes to be a writer. If she had been given proper support and complete life, her life would have been something different. She has the spirit to achieve things in

life, which Chandan did not have. But her potency was sacrificed at the altar of gender discrimination. Gender discrimination against Tara continues to exist even after her death. Chandan writes the story of Tara from his perspective. He always feels himself incomplete without her. Hence, by presenting the character of Chandan, Dattani highlights the fact that even males can be gendered beings, as it deals with the injustice done to males like Chandan. He has not committed any mistake, but he is also forced to lead a guilty life. He feels that he is also responsible for Tara's immature death, which leads him to leave to his refuge in London. In London he changes his identity from Chandan to Dan because he does not want to carry the haunting memories of injustice done to Tara. Consequently, he wants to free himself from the bitter past. When the play begins, Dan is seen typing and addressing the audience. He tries his hand in writing. But his inner consciousness still have the memories of his sister, which constantly haunts him for being responsible for the tragic condition of Tara. He cannot write his story without writing the story of Tara. He always feels that Tara is his another half. Guilt psyche continues to operate in the life of Chandan. Butler challenges the conventional social constructionist notion of subjectivity. From her assertions, it is understood that identity is reduced to a type of 'doing' that is demonstrated only at that point of action. Butler's aim is not to complicate and multiply identity formations, instead she aims to subvert and implode the basis of identity. Chandan gains a new identity from his act of changing his name. Therefore, Butler's assertions on identity in relation to Nietzsche's claim are true. In *Gender Trouble*, she further claims that identity is constituted in the results of the expression and gender identity is absent behind the expressions of gender. This is what happened in the case of Dan. Chandan escapes his identity and became Dan. When he begins to write the tragedy of Tara, he ends up writing it as his own tragedy.

Bharati's father, Dr Thakkar and Mr Patel are the male chauvinists in the play. Bharati's father is absent throughout the play, but he had played an important role in the life of Tara. He arranged the master plan of conspiracy behind the surgery. Being a rich, influential politician and a misogynist he badly needed a male heir. As he did not have a son, his grandson was the next preference. Hence he did his best to see Chandan standing on his natural legs. He, therefore, bribed Dr.Thakkar to do unethical job. Dr.Thakkar agreed as he was given three acres of prime land in Bangalore in order to start a large nursing home. But the operation was unsuccessful. His misogynist attitude is even more clear in Patel's conversation with his children:

PATEL. Your grandfather has left all his wealth to you. Since your mother was his only child, you and Tara inherit their home in Bangalore.

CHANDAN. That huge house. It gives me the creeps, I remember.

PATEL. He left you a lot of money.

CHANDAN.And Tara?

PATEL.Nothing.

CHANDAN. Why?

PATEL. It was his money. He could do what he wanted with it.(360)

Woman has not been defined in terms of subject. She is always identified in relation to the male members of her family. Indian society continues to believe that men have cultural hegemony and power in society. In addition Indian society has presented a complex picture of motherhood wherein motherhood is an important part in the life of a woman. But the most interesting thing is that duties and confines of mother is generally designed by the male chauvinists.

Dr Thakkar is a god like presence in the play. He is the representative of an unethical medical professional. He is the only one who knew the mystery surrounding the family of Patel's. As a doctor, he is a god like character who should advise Patel and Bharati to follow right ethical positions in order to save the lives of Tara and Chandan. He has taken the risk of a complex surgery for increasing his medical status and achievement. Medical professions are corrupted by greedy and selfish people like Dr Thakkar. Dattani's play is realistic in the sense that it presented the unethical practices behind the aura of fame around the doctors. Dr Thakkar always had a tone of pride when he justifies his skill of surgery. He ultimately falls down from a respected status to the level of a greedy and selfish man. Money is given ultimate importance rather than the life of a person. Human relations are now based on money. The noble professions of medical sciences are entitled as 'life givers' and 'god'. Doctors like Thakkar are a shame on the whole profession of medical sciences. They are not to earn money like industrialists or businessmen or other professionals do. Any professional should do justice to their profession. Dr Thakkar fails to do justice to his profession. Dattani raises the question of ethics of medical professionals in this play.

Discrimination and violence against women is an age old phenomenon. It is thus fixed as a norm in the consciousness of an individual. Even with the dawn of modernity in the twentieth century, people are not ready to erase the age old traditions and prejudices. Roopa is a girl in the neighborhood of Tara with a lot of prejudices. In the beginning she was friendly with Tara and she wanted Tara to stay away from her friends Nalini and Prema as she says they lack English education. Later in the play she signifies the hypocrisy of society towards the disabled. She derides Tara as the "one legged thing", "freak" and accuses Bharati of madness in spite of all the love Bharati showed to her. It is from Roopa the audience learns about the custom of drowning female children in milk. When she came to know that Tara belongs to Patel family, she tells Tara of this custom of Patels drowning female children in milk. She also assures that it is an old saying. Thus Dattani through his artistic work brings forth the existence and practice of such age old customs in India. Gender is performed in a cultural framework and according to Butler the meaning of gender depends on this cultural framework. Performativity of gender is the result of the repetition of acts. Everyone is compelled to act out their gender roles. Roopa, Nalini, and Prema are

representatives of conventional female girls. Prema and Nalini do not appear on the scene throughout the play. It is from Roopa the audience comes to know about the ideology of Prema and Nalini. They lack English education and they are born and brought up in a cultural framework that adore prejudices against woman. So they will repeatedly act out the socially constructed gender roles, thus resulting in the performativity of gender. Just like Roopa ridicules Tara of her physical disability, Roopa also ridicules and accuses Chandan of sexual assault. With reference to his physical disability, she goes on to the extent of saying that they are not “compatible” and mentions Feni Narangiwalla, a mentally retarded girl as a perfect match for him. By presenting the character of Roopa, Dattani has signified the hypocrisy of society towards the physically challenged. Society has negative views about disabled bodies. And they are generally marginalized. Furthermore, the reference to Feni Narangiwalla suggests that disabled ones are meant only for those who are disabled or with any other disability like in the play, mental retardation. Tara soon retorts Roopa with body shaming. In reality no one in this world is perfectly all right. But people ridicule others without knowing their imperfectness. The ideology of preferring male child over a female child is deeply embedded in the minds of the people. They are socialized and they live according to the norms of society. So, whenever a question of choice comes between male and female, even the females and educated people like Roopa and Bharati prefer male child over female child. This gets evident in the conversation between Roopa and Chandan. When Chandan jokingly asks Roopa if she would send her girl child to concentration camp, Roopa replies that she would not do so. She further says that it is more civilized to drown her girl child in milk. This is a casual attitude of Roopa towards female infanticide. This is clear evidence that proves how the notions against females are firmly rooted in the mind of an individual. As Butler rightly puts it, gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. Everyone imitates gender performance; just like every character in this play and performativity produces a series of effects.

Conclusion-

Sangeeta Das has pointed out that Tara is neither the tragedy of Tara nor the tragedy of Chandan; but it is the tragedy of society which faces the burning issues of gender, wherein the characters are made to act like a puppet. The gendered body acts as an undercurrent of political stances in the play. Dattani has also explored the notion of a mad woman in society. A female is regarded as a mad woman when she opens up the realm of truth or reality. He was successful in presenting his social criticism of gender discrimination and gendered bodies in our society. The play is a powerful critique of patriarchal ideology. As drama is basically a matter of performance and Dattani as a theatre person, Butler’s notion of performativity is thoroughly applicable in a play like *Tara*.

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