



ECHOES OF FEMINISM IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *TARA*

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Abstract

Over the last three or four decades, the terms, 'literary theory' and 'criticism' have acquired considerable significance for the study of literature and social sciences. Literary theories can be understood as the principles or tools that can be applied for interpreting a work of literature. They attempt to trace history and culture in the texts and also their linguistic structure. The feminist theory came to the forefront in its theoretical sense in the U.S. and Western Europe in the 1960s. This theory views distinction between man and woman as the product of culture and thus brings socio cultural set up of the society under the scrutiny of the theorists who question it rather than simply reflect it as a social reality.

The play Tara by Mahesh Dattani too offers multiple reading levels when read in the light of feminism. The paper is an attempt to look at this play in the light of feminism for the better understanding of the play and to explore the dormant feminist voices getting subtly reflected through the plot and the characters of the play.

Keywords: *Feminism, Literary Criticism, Literary Theory, Mahesh Dattani, Tara*

Introduction

Literary theories can be understood as the principles or tools that can be applied for interpreting a work of literature. They attempt to trace history and culture in the texts and also their linguistic structure. Illustrating role of theory in a literature classroom, Pramod K. Nayar writes, it seeks to understand modes of *interpretation*, of how *knowledge* is formed and distributed, the *pedagogic*-i.e., teaching, classroom and educative-role of literary texts, the *philosophical* basis of metaphors or image-making, the *historical* location and sources of texts and interpretation, the *psychological* (individual or collective) roots of particular kinds

of images or representations and the *political* consequences of literary and cultural representations. (ix)

The feminist theory came to the forefront in its theoretical sense in the U.S. and Western Europe in the 1960s. It is a political stance and as a theory focuses on gender as a subject while analyzing the texts and demands for equality, rights and justice. It primarily draws a link between the representation of women in the works of art and their real conditions. According to Flax, feminist theory has several purposes: 1. to understand the power differential between men and women 2. to understand women's oppression—how it evolved, how it changes over time, how it is related to other forms of oppression 3. how to overcome oppression. (82)

Further elaborating on the role of theory in the interpretation of a text, Flax writes,

A fundamental goal of feminist theorists is to analyze gender: how gender is constituted and experienced and how we think—or equally important—do not think about it. The study of gender includes but is not limited to what are often considered the distinctively feminist issues: the situation of women and the analysis of male domination (patriarchy).... Feminist theories recover and explore the aspects of societies that have been suppressed, unarticulated, or denied within male-dominant viewpoints. (20)

Discussion

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* written in 1990 is a play focusing on gender bias and reflecting the predicament of women in Indian society who face discrimination with their male counterparts in all the walks of life. Dattani through the themes like gender identity, discrimination, middle-class life and revelation has beautifully shown the agony of a girl in typical Indian society. The central character of the play, Tara is the voice of every woman who questions her marginalized treatment at each step and wants to emerge as an independent female. By not conforming to the traditional roles being imposed upon her she voices her feminist perspective. Mahesh Dattani, in one of his interviews with Laxmi Subramanyam, says, "I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst" (134). For students trying to get acquainted with Feminist theory, this play can facilitate understanding of the basic principles of the feminist theory through a close analysis of the girl *Tara* and the theme of the play.

The plot of the play apparently complex, owing to the technique, is simple. *Tara* and *Chandan* are Siamese children who are joined at the hip and have to be separated surgically. Born with three legs one of the children will have to forgo one leg. Though *Tara* has pretty bright chances of survival with both the legs, she is made to pay the price of being a girl from the very first day of her entry into the world dictated and ruled by men. Being a girl *Tara* is denied a healthy and a fulfilling life against the better judgement of everybody as their mindsets are plagued by the parochial logic of patriarchy that male-child will better their

lives. Even her mother, Bharathi, who well understands the hardships a girl child might have to face owing to her physical deformity and knows that the leg legitimately belongs to the girl child, fails to oppose it and stands by the decision to let the male child have both the legs. "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 is going to feel when she sees herself at eighteen or twenty .Thirty is unthinkable and what about forty and fifty! Oh, God ! And, thus, as foreseen, starts a life of struggle for Tara ultimately leading to her death.

As the play begins we are transported to the life of Tara through flashbacks by Dan (the twin brother Chandan of Tara).The alter ego of the girl, her brother Chandan, now a playwright, recounts her past and unlike the stereotyping of other men, feels sympathetic towards her sister and undergoes a sense of guilt as he tries to pen down the life of his sister. He well realizes the suffering that Tara had to undergo because of him and seeks her forgiveness as at this point of time too, Chandan is writing her story thus making it his tragedy, "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy."(60)

Their existence as twins and subsequent separation is also 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." (Multani, 130)

This very discrimination forms the base of the feminist theory and leads us to Beauvoir's contention of women as Other who maintained that "otherness is a fundamental category of human thought" (xxii). Women are defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute; she is the "Other." In the play, both the females have been projected in the marginalized state as Bharati forgoes her right to make decisions and Tara her healthy existence in favour of 'the Subject', 'the essential' male members of the family

Bharati by not being able to protect her daughter from being deprived of her rightful claims to a leg and a healthy existence herself becomes a victim of the system that doesn't let a woman act out on her own- "a system of systematic discrimination against and oppression of women", as asserted by the gender-feminists. This helplessness of a female who is always on a crossroad prioritizing her various roles has been described by Adrienne Rich who aptly observes that though motherhood is the experience of women, the institution of motherhood is under male control and the physical situation of becoming a mother is disciplined by males. (45) In Bharati's case it is her father who controls and dictates her decisions and choices as a mother, thus crushing her motherly spirit.

Dattani establishes that mother and daughter relationship is ultimately subordinated to the directives of patriarchy. It makes obvious that women's lives are organized and manipulated by the patriarchy in all ages, all culture and all countries by establishing

values, roles, gender perception and prescribe unequal means to achieve the 'wholeness' for women. (Agarwal, 89-90)

Based on this marginalized position of women in the society, Feminists distinguish between sex and gender arguing sex is biological and gender is social. According to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association also, "Gender is cultural and is the term to use when referring to women and men as social groups. Sex is biological; use it when the biological distinction is predominant." And according to the World Health Organization, "Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women." The play thus focuses on gender based stereotypical roles of males and females in the society. We see Mr. Patel constantly worrying about Chandan's future and completely ignoring the intellectual potential of Tara. Mr. Patel keeps asking Chandan to join office and attend college regularly and is completely indifferent towards the career path of Tara. Tara's victory at the card game is also conveniently attributed to her shrewdness by her brother.

Here it would also be important to highlight Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but rather becomes a woman- females become women through a process whereby they acquire feminine traits and learn feminine behaviour. Masculinity and femininity are thought to be products of nurture or how individuals are brought up. Bharathi's concern for Tara in a society that doesn't easily accept girls with physical deformity comes out of her experience of growing up to be a woman in a patriarchal society.

By socially defining the gender roles, Betty Friedan saw domesticity as the main vehicle of gender oppression and called upon women in general to find jobs outside the home. (7) And thus we see Patel completely ignoring Tara's future prospects and the need to engage her in any meaningful endeavour. She jests on this fact by telling Rupa, "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave." (8) She thus echoes the plight of women who were presumed to be suitable for the domestic domain only. "The play as a whole thus depicts the relegation of the relevance of the Woman, and her upper edge whenever it does assert itself in a male-dominated society" (Sharma, 8).

In the play we are also introduced to the division of roles being assigned on the basis of gender. When Chandan is seen helping his mother in knitting, his father Mr. Patel finds it not only awkward but also alarming as he reprimands Bharathi "But you can think of turning him into a sissy-teaching him to knit?.....I am disappointed in you. From now on you are coming to the office with me. I can't see you rotting at home' (31) . This clearly reflects the typical mentality of the parochial society which defines stereotypical roles of men in the society as not being of any domestic kind.

Towards the end of the story as we hear from the narrator Dan (Chandan), the story of medical complications involved in separating the twins and fairer chances of the girl of surviving with both the legs, as a reader we cant ignore the stark reality of the male dominated society preferring healthy and independent male child over a female. Thus a price of being a girl in a patriarchal society is paid by Tara in the form of not only social discrimination but also physical deprivation. Anna-Maria Lind (2006) stated that the preference for having sons permeates all social classes in India, which sets the standard for girls throughout their entire lives.

Conclusion

As a feminist play, *Tara* thus reflects on how women were kept away from decision making, how they were denied their basic rights and how they had to suffer indiscriminately against men in the educated society. It is an attempt to expose the modern educated urban family's adherence to the conventional attitude of favouring anything that is masculine. "This is a play about the injustices done in the name of construction of gender identities – this hierarchisation and demarcation of roles does as much harm to men as to women" (Prasad, 141). Through this play, thus, many significant aspects of the feminist theory can be introduced in the classroom and a responsive discussion can be initiated. As a pedagogical tool, this play will facilitate identification of the practical applications of feminist theory and recognition of the 'genderedness' of all social relations and consequently of all societal institutions and structures, while promoting the importance of social change concerned with gender justice and overcoming oppressions.

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