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Fragmented Bodies, Fragmented Identities: Gendered Disability in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract

This paper examines Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* as a site of intersectionality between gender and disability. The titular protagonist's body is not only a physically disabled one but the battered remnants of social injustices and prejudices meted out to the female. By examining the partisan surgical separation, the paper questions the patriarchal manoeuvrings that govern natural determinism to perpetuate cultural hegemony. The surgery acts as a metaphor for the fragmentation of human souls depriving humanity from a composite identity, rendering them deficit by prioritizing masculinity and repressing femininity. Chandan is unable to retain the leg and is a cripple too but naturally privileged due to his sex, his handicap is lesser in comparison to his sister. Disability and gender work in tandem to doubly marginalize Tara. Her disabled body is the battleground where patriarchal mutilations, clinical corruptions and familial expectations are contested, leading to Tara's untimely demise. Tara's death is more tragic than pathetic since a conspiracy by her nearest ones caused her impairment, not nature. Chandan writes their story, naming it as '*Twinkle Tara*' but ends up writing his own tragedy. Dattani being a man, writes *Tara*, so of course, the narrative could never be unbiased, Tara remains perpetually unrepresented and unwritten. Using Feminism and Disability Studies, the paper spotlights the nexus between gender and disability and explore how these intersect to cause the compounded marginalization of the female sex.

Keywords: Feminism, Ableism, Disability Studies, Intersectionality, Identity

"Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (Bronte 82).

"She wanted to be with him in a permanent unison, soul and body, forever... to be perfectly herself in him, and he perfectly himself in her" (Lawrence 364).

Literature, through the ages, have depicted the interwoven identities of man and woman and Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* through the metaphor of the conjoined twins physically embodies the concept. Dattani, in an interview with Lakshmi Subramaniam states "I see *Tara* as a play about the male and the female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst" (Subramanyam (ed.) 134). It

is the enthralling story that encapsulates society's discriminatory treatment towards children belonging to different sexes sharing the same womb.

Initially named as *Twinkle Tara*, the play was first performed by Dattani's playpen performing Arts Group on 23rd October 1990, at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bangalore. It was later performed as only *Tara* under the directorship of Alyque Padmasee and bagged the prestigious Sahitya Academy award. Having already written *Dance Like a Man*, when Dattani chances upon an article in a medical journal about the separation of a Siamese twins and the complications involved regarding the fused leg, the author immediately uses it as a potent metaphor in *Tara*, making the twins of opposite sexes which they were not in the actual case, to bring home a few lessons on gender inequalities that pervade Indian society. The tragic story of *Tara* not only vigorously critiques the intersections of gender discrimination and disability prevalent in the Indian society but also exposes the patriarchal biases that prioritize male bodies over female ones, even at the expense of medical ethics and familial concord. The plot of *Tara* comes as a reminiscence of the adult Chandan (now Dan), who has escaped to the anonymity of London where he resides without a personal history, attempting to write down his childhood in Bangalore with his disabled sister, Tara. Born conjoined, with a shared leg, the twins undergo a surgery where the viable third leg that biologically derived its nourishment from Tara's body, is unjustly allocated to Chandan by Bharati and her influential father's manoeuvrings. Chandan is thus given a 'normalcy' though only for three days, dooming Tara with a lifelong impairment. Hereafter, the family fractures: Bharati overcompensates with her smothering love for Tara in order to whitewash her guilt, Patel in a helpless rage becomes distant and resentful, and Tara's intellect battles with the pitiful and often hostile society. Tara dies young, after Bharati's failed kidney donation attempt and this finally prompts Chandan/Dan's writerly exorcism. Thus stands the script of *Tara*, a narrative comprising of Dan's non-linear scribbling, blurring the border between past traumatic flashbacks with present guilt-ridden isolation.

Dattani's insightful observations reflected in his text not only establish gender as a social construct but also posit disability not as a form of inherent deficit but as a social construct in terms of a 'lack.' Growing up at a time when the feminist movements were gaining ground across the world and debates about women's rights and equality sparked discussions, Dattani took up on himself the task of exposing the urban, middle-class, English educated audience to subjects that were hitherto considered uncomfortable and taboo. Alternative sexuality, gender discrimination, child sexual abuse and communalism are some of the recurrent themes informing Dattani's plays. Voicing the fringes thus become the dramatist's aesthetic responsibility and Tara's surgically disabled and battered body becomes the site of cultural anxiety bearing the brunt of injustices meted out to the female and the disabled.

Feminism and Disability Studies have been frequently used to evaluate Dattani's text but the intersectional approach of the two theories in analysing the text is an area that is rarely explored. Tara is not only a victim of gender discrimination but also ableism making her doubly oppressed and marginalized. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson contends, "The complexities of women's identities are not addressed when feminist theory asserts the gender oppression of women but does not recognize the oppression of disabled people, or when disability studies expose the oppression of disabled people without analysing the gendered nature of that oppression" (Garland-Thomson 279). Just as one needs to understand Dattani's multi-layered stagecraft to realise the shift in time from past and

present, so also one needs to understand the multilayered oppression faced by a disabled woman due to her gender and physical disability. The interplay of gender and disability work in tandem to heighten the impairment of Tara and she becomes a victim of compounded marginalization. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, mentions that disparate social identities like gender, class, race and disability do not exist independently but are mutually connected and influences each other. An intersectional approach to disability reveals how disabled people who share some other form of marginality, experience a heightened and a distinct form of discrimination. Hence a disabled woman is at the receiving end of two forms of marginalization and oppression: sexism and ableism (Crenshaw 139-167). Crenshaw's argument adds a unique dimension to Tara's story making it a site where gender and disability oppressions converge. Tara is doubly discriminated: sexism devalues daughters as dowry obligations while ableism constructs her body as deficient and defective, amplified by her female identity. Chandan's disability is immediately corrected for meeting patriarchal standards at the expense of Tara's permanent impairment leading to her eventual demise, illustrating a sorry tale of the convergence of patriarchal norms and ableist perceptions.

Judith Butler in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" contends that gender emerges not from biology but from "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 519). Gender roles thus do not emerge from any innate essence but are cultural scripts that naturalize binaries like masculine/active versus feminine/passive, thereby creating an illusion of a stable identity. Deviation from the prescribed normative roles leads to the devaluation and disruption of 'compulsory heterosexuality' that fosters patriarchy. Dattani's *Tara* very subtly probes into the performative theory of Butler by depicting how the enforced gender roles on Tara and Chandan go against their natural inclinations, spotlighting on the nexus between family and society for compelling individuals to internalise normative gender assumptions. Chandan's role in *Tara* breaks the binaries of gender and subvert the hegemony of heterosexuality. He helps his mother in knitting, something that is gravely condemned by his father since he considers this an effeminate practice. Mr. Patel plans for the education and future career of Chandan but has no such plans for Tara and hopes she would hone her household skills. Chandan, however, prefers to be a writer and when asked about his career replies: "I haven't decided yet. (Looks at Patel.) I might stay back in the cave and do my jigsaw puzzle" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 328). Patel, in anger, accuses his wife of turning Chandan into a 'sissy.' Tara, on the other hand, wishes to have a career like her father. But when does her wishes count? Grandfather too left all his money to Chandan and no one questions its righteousness since a man is the perpetuator of familial legacy while a woman is only considered an obligation. Tara's victory in card game too is attributed to her cheating capability and not to her calculative moves and business acumen. Tara, intelligent as she was, replies to Roopa's query in her own witty way "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 328). It is no wonder that in such a separatist social structure, the Patels choke their girl-child in milk and being socialized in such a patriarchal society Roopa would obviously choose a male child over a female child if given a choice by the Nazis. Woman is considered a liability that best do not exist, even if exists she is best to be restricted to the domestic domain catering to male needs. Virginia Woolf's assertion in this context rings loud and clear: "Imaginatively, she (woman) is of the highest importance; practically she is

completely insignificant, she pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from the history" (Woolf 53).

Dan in his attempt to exorcise his guilt for the injustices meted out to Tara attempts to write their story but ends up writing his own story implicating the fact that in a rigidly patriarchal world, writing in a phallogocentric language, that too by a male writer, a female perpetually remains unwritten. Hence, it is noteworthy that discrimination with Tara continues, even after her demise. Chandan, in his attempt to write Tara, appropriates her story and makes it his own tragedy: "Yes. The material is there. But the craft is yet to come. Like the amazing Dr Thakkar, I must take from Tara - and give it to myself. Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy. To masticate them in my mind and spit out the result to the world, in anger (Dattani *Collected Plays* 379). Though Chandan has always shown concern for Tara and lives in seclusion to expiate his guilt, but he himself acknowledges that he remembers her only during his search for a subject matter for his story: "I had even forgotten I had a twin sister. Until I thought of her as subject matter for my next literary attempt" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 324). Tara is the subject of the story but ironically, she gains her subjectivity through a male. Making capital out of the angst, sorrow and emotions of the subjects, is what Dattani does too in *Tara*. Both Dan and Dattani being men, Tara's voice is submerged and the narrative that comes out falls under suspect as regards its neutrality in representation. At the end of the play, though Dan offers an apology to Tara, "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 380), one cannot help but feel that a mere apology cannot make up for the brutal silencing of female voices across history and time.

Tara could not be given justice through Chandan's story '*Twinkle Tara*.' But nonetheless Tara shone in all her glory: whether through her witty repartee to Roopa and her friends or in her desire to "feeding and clothing those...starving naked millions everyone is talking about" and sacrifice herself "to a great cause" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 370). A vibrant potential crippled by society's gender prejudice; Tara suffers a "social death" hastened by her mother's decision to give a completeness to the boy at the expense of the girl. Patriarchy, profoundly embedded in the 'collective unconscious' of the Indian society and Bharati, a product of social conditioning, becomes a potent agent to impose patriarchy's prejudiced beliefs and attitudes (Chandra 157). Dattani portrays family as the microcosm of society where the initial socialization process is carried out strictly on gendered lines. Equality between the sexes is belied and women are taught to sacrifice everything for the sake of men. At one point in the story, Chandan recounts: "May be God never wanted us to be separated.... But even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life. A dual to the death between God and Nature on one side and on the other - the amazing Dr. Thakkar" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 330). Almost a 'presiding deity,' 'a marvel in the World of Medicine,' occupying the highest level of the stage, Dr. Thakkar, represents the unethical, partisan surgery that haunts the lives of the Patel family members. In his mercenary interest to acquire three acres of prime land in the heart of Bangalore city, Dr. Thakkar becomes an accomplice to Bharati and her father. His detached commentary of the operation is pitted against the emotional turmoil caused by his medical miracle. For Dr. Thakkar, Tara was not even a human let alone a woman; the surgical separation of the conjoined twins was only a remarkable case for him, a lab experiment that only denied one of the subjects. But what matters? Commemorating his medical feats, Dr. Thakkar callously reduces human beings to

guinea pigs. With his God-like aura, he challenges nature with culture. The Hippocratic Oath, long redundant in a patriarchal and materialistic world, is twisted daily and is evident from the regular cases of selective abortions and other clinical corruptions and Dr. Thakkar is not an exception. Theoretically, he prolongs their lives through the surgery, but metaphorically leaves them mutilated and fragmented.

Tara unaware to everything dotes on her mother and even cries out loud at one time "I don't care for anyone except mummy!" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 370) Bharati, in her attempt to recompense for the sin she has committed against Tara, over-indulges her in obsessive motherhood and even prejudices her against her father to create a way out in case, the sordid episode involving the surgery comes to light. Patel in an enraged fury once screamed at Bharati saying "You have to face it. You want her to believe you are the only one who loves her" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 352). Bharati keeps on telling Tara how much she loves her: "You are my most beautiful baby! I love you very much.... I want you to remember that, Tara" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 355). Bharati's suffocating motherhood is evident when she bribes Roopa to be Tara's best friend to augment her loneliness and even takes a decision on behalf of Tara that she "must have a career.... She can't be ... aimless all her life" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 348). To redeem herself of the guilt committed against Tara, she decides to donate a kidney to her. But the affluent Patel arranges for a commercial donor. Bharati fiercely argues against it in her desperation to compensate for the loss that she has caused to Tara. Bharati's father's wealth has ever driven a breach between the couple and Patel uses it as an excuse to justify his silence regarding the decision of the unfair operation and shifts the blame entirely on Bharati. Patel's denial of opportunity to Bharati to expiate her guilt by donating a kidney to Tara is in a way his revenge against Bharati for causing his estrangement with his daughter. To Bharati's question "Why won't you let me do it?" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 344), Patel's reply "Because ... need I tell you? Because I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it (Dattani *Collected Plays* 344), is an act of regaining his control and voice that he claims to have lost during the crucial decision-making time of the surgical separation. Later on, by strictly instructing the hospital staffs to not allow the children meet their mother alone, he even denies Bharati the satisfaction of a confession. But, however, seeing Patel's unequal treatment of Chandan and Tara, one has doubts whether he would have done anything otherwise had he had enough money and power back then. Being a representative of patriarchy, it is only natural that he too believed in gender hierarchy and remained silent in the subjugation of women. Bharati's guilt eventually drives her to mental breakdown and she is sent to an asylum and Patel's words resonate "If at all they must know, it will be from me. Not from you" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 345). Bharati is presented both as a victim and an enforcer of patriarchal values.

The partisan decision regarding the operation is revealed. Tara's leg, given as a gift to Chandan, comes with the price of a guilt-ridden angst for his future. The shattering discovery dims the lustre of the ever-ebullient Tara and she could only say: "And she called me her star!" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 379). The knowledge of the betrayal and its consequent excruciating mental trauma eventually propels her to death. Tara's condition is more tragic than pathetic since she was not simply a physically crippled girl but a great conspiracy, that too by her most loved person in the world, caused her deformity. The female body, as is evident across history, has always been seen as a locus for celebration, for entertainment, for venting ones for anger, frustration and in this case for compensating male deficiencies. Her

blighted past caused by forces beyond her control, the biased surgery and being born a Siamese twin, are curses that she suffers even after her death leaving behind an essential part of herself in the form of Dan. Deconstructing gender dichotomy of man and woman, Dattani obliquely foregrounds the concept of 'Ardhanarishwar' where both the genders reside within the same individual. But the patriarchal social framework represses and debunks the feminine side of identity and prioritizes the masculine side. The surgical separation represents the split between feminine and masculine from a composite wholeness. Tara aptly puts it in words: "Maybe we still are. Like we've always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out... And separated" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 325).

Tara's presence in the play is just as short-lived as a shooting star. She shines temporarily through Chandan's recollections of togetherness and then she shines no more. Born as inseparably fused, hugging each other, though physically separated, they were spiritually inseparable. Her death results in a crisis of identity in Chandan and at the end of the play he envisages a prenatal reconciliation with her, in a tight embrace without a limp. Tara and Chandan together represent a singular, cohesive, genderless identity. First, the surgery then the death of Tara implicates self-fragmentation, the denial of the female and the cultural construct of gender that favours the male in every field of life. The masculine side is always content and it does not need expression but the feminine self, being repressed, seeks expression. The women in Dattani's plays are marginalized and subsumed, yet they fight back. Tara's life, though brief, was bright. In that short span of time, she journeyed from oppression to rebellion.

The death of both the major female characters of the play, Tara and Bharati, suggest that women are not fit to survive and are only necessary to the extent the male characters need them. Though the play may be named after Tara, her death effectively displaces her from the centre and the story becomes Chandan's; his guilt, his estranged familial relationships, his writerly frustrations and his quest for a story. The only female character with a little agency in the play seems to be Roopa. She along with her two friends, Nalini and Prema represent the society around Tara. Just like everyone whose expectations are focussed on the societal conception of normativity, disability raises their curiosity and it titillates their urges to inspect the nature of disability even if that hurts the so-called aberrant persons concerned. Roopa seems to possess all the negative stereotypes that society often attributes to the women; she is spiteful, malicious, gossipy, shrewish, insensitive and shallow. Through Roopa, Bharati invites the greatest threat to the twins' sense of self-respect and integrity into the Patel household. The 'freakish' bodies of the twins incite uncalled-for and demeaning gazes from Roopa and her cronies. Roopa may fit the category of normalcy physically, but her callousness and insensitivity make her emotionally deficient and is retaliated by Tara when she claims that it is much better to "be one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged than an imbecile...with uneven tits" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 369). The twins' shared experiences of discrimination make them reject the so-called normative category of abled people. In their eventual rejection of their mother, father and society at large, they carve out a new category for themselves, a sub-culture that pulsates with life, empowerment and mutability. Roopa, however, despite her viciousness and pettiness, is the only woman character in the play, who has agency and gets what she wants — revenge on the twins by placing a poster on the alleyway saying, "We don't want freaks" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 378).

In a world where a woman's worth is measured in terms of her beauty, the similar freakish bodies of the twins evoke discriminatory responses from the onlookers, on the basis of gender. A disabled man is still acceptable but a woman with disability is unthinkable as one finds Bharati saying: "Yes, Chandan. 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" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 349). The otherwise rebellious Tara too at times feels inferior and horrible being "one-legged" and secretly hopes for a pair of real legs:

TARA: I would wish for both... I would wish for two of them.

CHANDAN: Two Jaipur legs?

TARA: No, silly. The real ones (Dattani *Collected Plays* 362).

Sexuality is another factor that discriminates Tara against Chandan despite their similar nature of disability. Though both are incapable to reproduce, Chandan is sexually alive. He tries to initiate his first sexual activity by kissing Roopa but is ruthlessly turned down and accused of molestation. But Tara's sexuality is a topic that Dattani tactfully avoids. Written by a man, the text's silence on this topic may be read as an indication to the fact that a disabled female body has no right to sexuality and is considered desexualized, grotesque and unfeminine. Such gross aberrance cannot even gain human dignity and Roopa's "We don't want freaks" (Dattani *Collected Plays* 378) resound from every corner of the patriarchal society.

In *Sophie's Choice*, a film that the twins discuss with Roopa, Sophie had to undergo the agonizing Holocaust-era dilemma, where she could choose to save only one of her children from going to the Nazi concentration camp. Bharati's decision mirrors Sophie's where the female child was sacrificed in favour of the male. *Tara* adapts Sophie's universal trauma and guilt and posits an equivalence between Nazi brutality and patriarchal standards. Tara, marginalized as she ever was, withdraws even more after learning of the betrayal. Living under the curse of being born a woman that too a disabled one, she lives a confined life like the Lady of Shallott, and sees the reflected and distorted reality through her family's, especially her mother's eyes. But once the truth comes out, the mirror cracks, she could now only embark on a journey to death that could release her from gender and disability curses. The Lady of Shallott's defiance in looking out, inviting the curse and consequently embarking on her boat trip narrates the story of ultimate agency that prioritizes active self-determinism over passive isolation. Jubilation and not lament may be read in her lines and may be ascribed to Tara as well who chooses to assert her identity, despite fatal consequences:

She left the web, she left the loom
She made three paces thro' the room
She saw the water-lily bloom
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shallott (Tennyson *lines* 109-117).

Dan's tragedy is even greater, though he does not suffer discrimination on the basis of gender. But he realizes too late that the memory of whom he wants to erase, avoid and forget is actually the neglected half of himself. He conjures a vision at the very end of the play where the twins hug each other in a prenatal embrace and he offers an atonement plea to Tara. But, deep down in his heart, he knows that Tara is already dead and his quest for wholeness can never attain fulfilment: "Each of us when separated, having one side only...is but the indenture of man, and he is always looking for his other half" (Plato 30).

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