

**EXPLORING FAMILIALISM IN MAHESH DATTANI'S
*TARA***

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Abstract

The plays of Mahesh Dattani (1958-) explore the evolution of the Indian society over the years from the closed traditional settings to the open and complex environments marked by multicultural encounters, awareness of marginalization and groping for alternative codes in the wake of Liberalization in India. The predominant societal concern in Dattani's dramaturgy catapults him to the discourse of familialism in India and in his *Tara* (1990) the same is explored as a prominent locus indicating, at its basis, a family system in which maleness and masculinity confer a privileged position of power, a trope which illustrates the systematic difference in the cultural economic and social position of men in relation to women. The present paper reads *Tara* in terms of familialism to chart how the Indian family system per se endorses patriarchal hegemony to naturalize male dominance and female compliance.

Familialism in Mahesh Dattani is a dominant ideology that arms the existing sociological discourse on the Indian family and its corollary institutions with a plethora of repressive machinations. In his plays significance of the family emerges as an inherent feature of social and human capital whence gender and power relations in various ambits of culture are re-evaluated. This is the dramatist's overwhelming perception of the time-tested functioning of the Indian family within the matrix of patriarchal structures. And Dattani is simultaneously aware that the family mirrors the nation as well for it is "the smallest democracy in the heart of society" (Desai and Thakkar 85). Echoing similar views Vrinda Nabar asserts that the Indian middle class can be identified as symptomatic of what may be defined as a collective Indian identity and "Indianness" for "[t]he middle class world view may be defined as broadly 'Indian'. It is one which is defined in terms of family and community" (Nabar 49).

Dattani is however conscious that the imaginary ideal of this familialism is far from being ideal. The infinite variability of inter-personal relationships within the Indian family, which is essentially about power relations and emotional commitment, prioritizes the male over the female. And it is at this juncture that Dattani's concept of the marginalized individual groping for "fringe-space" becomes pivotal in his dramaturgy (Bhatia 7). Since familialism per se aims at

smothering any burgeoning heterogeneities – women rights, androgyny, homosexuality and the like – into contentment, Dattani’s concern is to initiate his audience into this politics of lack in the discourse of identity. He is very much aware that though there is a significant amount of literature about the social constructions of gender, these are “rarely linked” with the “economics of family” (Woolley 328). Frances Woolley aptly states that “economics of family” must primarily focus on the processes of decision making in the family; “how individuals inside a family reconcile their interests and come to collective decisions” (328) and she goes on to argue that “[o]ne agenda” of feminist economics is to “identify the sources of inequality in the family and identify policies which promote more equal gender relations in families” (334-335). The aforementioned lacunae in familialism are adequately counteracted in Dattani’s *Tara* (1990) in so far as the play primarily uses family as a dominant trope to chart “sources of inequality” and in fact moves one step ahead of Woolley’s contention by calling into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis within the discourse of familialism.

In fact *Tara* catapults us into the hermeneutics of androgyny which is developed to constitute the play’s thematic focus. Erin Mee states that the play is about “the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is ‘male’” (Mee 320). Encountering and acknowledging the “feminine side” in the “male” is surely a significant way of deconstructing the bipolar gender difference which *Tara* demonstrates in spite of a family/society that naturalizes binarization of gender to maintain the patriarchal hegemony of power. The counter-arguments in favour of a supposed “social efficiency” based on gender discrimination which centres round male supremacy and women’s prescribed roles as housewife and mother emphasize that “any tampering with these roles would diminish happiness” (Oakley 192). *Tara* adopts a stance of contestation against such patriarchal mores by charting the disastrous consequences of prioritizing Chandan over Tara in the medical miracle of Dr. Thakkar that separated the conjoined Chandan/Tara, splitting the androgynous wholeness of the self irrevocably. Dr. Thakkar, the God-like life giver, is aware that the third leg would adhere better to the female half of the Siamese twins, and yet collaborates with the decision to afford the male with better chances at least physically – the third leg. He does prolong their lives but also leaves Chandan and Tara physically mutilated and mentally traumatized. Chandan admits it when he says, “[t]his isn’t fair to Tara. She deserves something better. She never got a fair deal. Not even from nature. Neither of us did. Maybe God never wanted us to be separated” (Dattani 330). That both of them did not get a “fair deal” is constantly indicated through their “limp”, a signifier of their psychical impairment as well (324).

The family that Dattani charts in *Tara* is patriarchal to the core. Though like young Jairaj and Ratna of *Dance Like a Man*, Mr. Patel and Bharati had tried to design their life much in their own terms, yet with time their non-conforming spirits waned considerably. They had begun with an inter-caste marriage, and the couple had settled by themselves without the sanction of their in-laws. Tara’s pride is explicit as she recounts her parents’ success story of subversion to Roopa:

TARA: My mother is from Bangalore, My dad’s Gujarati.

ROOPA: Oh, an inter-caste marriage! Was it a love marriage? Tell. Tell.

TARA: Yes. My father had to leave his parents because of the marriage, if you really want to know.

ROOPA: No! I didn’t mean to be nosy or anything! But don’t stop now.

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TARA: ... My, grandfather, my mother's father, was a very influential person. But my dad didn't take any help from him. Today my dad is the general manager of Indo-Swede Pharmacia, the biggest pharmaceutical company in the country (338).

In the absence of what Patricia Uberoi phrases as "material transactions" in the matrimony of Mr. Patel and Bharati, the couple initially seemed poised for a relatively more congruous marital bonding in terms of amity and gender neutrality, yet the very fact that "the pooling of resources and individual earnings within the household or family, and their placement under the control of one decision-maker [- Mr. Patel -] the *karta*, [soon] kills individual initiative" (Uberoi 41, Madan 423). If on the one hand, Mr. Patel's marrying Bharati even at the cost of being rejected by his family individuates him, on the other, he also loses "initiative" in allowing himself to be subjugated by Bharati's father who along with Bharati instructed Dr. Thakkar to "risk giving both legs to the boy", an action that reveals Mr. Patel's endorsing of patriarchal values and hierarchisation of gender. His gender bias is conspicuous in his subsequent treating of Chandan differently from Tara. "Chandan is going to study further and he will go abroad for higher studies", he states at one point of the play and in the same breath evasively throws Tara's future into doom by strategically throwing a rhetorical question to his wife: "When have you ever allowed me to make any plans for her?" (Dattani 352). His fear that Tara might reject him makes him accuse Bharati of "ruining [Tara's] life" by letting her grow up as if "she doesn't need anyone" other than her mother (353, 352). His attitude towards his wife is blatantly authoritative which is evident from his insisting that the "major decisions" of the family are the husband's prerogative and in his refusing to allow Bharati to donate her kidney to the ailing Tara. His reason, in the latter case, being: "I do not want you to have the satisfaction of doing it" (344). His copious individualism that once saw him hold Bharati's hands despite the resistance of his family/society has now dwindled into the despotic.

Bharati too is a victim of patriarchal hegemony in her own way. It may be argued in her favour that since the "role of a woman within the family structure has most often been that of an outsider/insider, acquiring various roles without power from daughter to wife and mother", Bharati might have seized upon the opportunity to acquire a "semblance of agency" in allocating the "third leg" to Chandan (Dasgupta 18; Dattani 378). But beneath this apparent drive for agency is also lurking her inherited sense of valorising the male over the female for she knew that the "third leg" had greater chances of survival on the girl child as the "blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl" (Dattani 378). Subsequently, Bharati's guilt consciousness finds expression in her almost obsessive effusions of love upon her daughter, in her wanting to expiate by confessing to Tara as to how she has been wronged by her mother, in her vain attempt to provide her daughter with her own kidney and in her ultimate lunacy followed by death. While in the course of it all "the betrayed Tara withers away and dies realizing that the enemy of the girl-child does not exist outside but within the parameters of the family" (Ghosh 193). G. J. V. Prasad is right in observing that *Tara* is "about the injustices done in the name of construction of gender identities" and he goes on to state:

Both Patel and Bharati are complicit in the working of patriarchal norms, but though Bharati has changed because of her sense of guilt, Patel carries on merrily, almost as if to rub Bharati's nose in. Dan is the recipient of an ill-starred, unwanted, tragic gift, and will carry forever the burden of having wasted Tara's leg and contributing to blighting her life

– and this role being assigned to him simply because of his being born a male. He has to pay for the patriarchal sins of his parents (Prasad 141).

Dattani's exploration of androgyny within the constrictions of familialism reaches its zenith at this point of the play. Acutely conscious that gender ideologies are necessarily suffused by power and only contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy, he makes a plea for an androgynous consciousness, if only, through Dan's reverie with which the play ends. Dan begins by admitting that gender ideologies might be too overwhelming to be counteracted. Earlier in the play, Tara too had reiterated much the same point when she said: "men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (Dattani 328). Here in Tara's words there is a traditional bifurcation of roles in terms of masculinity and femininity. Men, in accordance with hegemonic masculinity, are associated with strength and power, being active, assertive and competitive hence "hunting" belongs to their periphery. Conversely, "looking after the cave" is the women's job precisely because they are perceived as naturally kind and caring, predisposed to looking after men and children. Though Dattani's irony is explicit in his use of words like "hunting" and "cave" by which he ascribes such socio-cultural division of gender roles to pre-historic times, supposed to be redundant in a 20th century civilized society, he is simultaneously aware that it is easier said than done. Opines Dattani that "a great disadvantage" of "tradition" is such, that even when man is perfecting nature to complete its "near-complete job", gender discrimination prevails in much the same way in which it thrived in the Stone Age (319; 356). And Dan has all along been subjected to the politics of gender right from his birth when "two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb" were "forced out" and "separated" (325). He remembers being branded "a sissy" because, as the stage direction puts it, he once helped his mother to "*keep the wool in order*" (350-351). He has all but forgotten how his interests in music and writing were brushed aside in favour of his father's wish that he goes to office with him; in order to "grow up to be a man" (Prasad 137). Hence he knows that deviations from the normative dimensions of gender ideologies are always crushed as aberrations. Consequently, most of us, as Dan states, move in a "forced harmony" like objects with "other objects in a cosmos, whose orbits are determined by those around" (Dattani 379). "Those who survive" he adds, "are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force" (379). Accordingly the "limp" of Chandan/Tara can only be wholly eradicated in the androgynous vision of Dan:

DAN: But somewhere, sometime, I look up at a shooting star ... and wish. I wish that a long forgotten person would forgive me. Wherever she is.

Tara walks into the spot without limping. Dan also appears without the limp.

And will hug me. Once again.

They kneel, face to face.

Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy (380).

Family in *Tara* as in the *Dance Like a Man* is thus a "battlefield" and both the plays illustrate what the forced harmony "of family life can do and does is to put into jeopardy quietly and completely all chances for individual growth and fulfillment" (Prasad 142). Interestingly, in both the plays, the fringed characters – Jairaj and Ratna in *Dance Like a Man* and Chandan and Tara in *Tara* – are shown to attain individuality only by eschewing the realities of the mundane world. In *Tara* for instance, androgyny is posited as a viable option against the tyrannies of

gender ideologies but the very fact that it is shown feasible only in an imagined idyll of Dan also mitigates its plausibility in a workaday existence. Dan is conscious of it too which is why he calls it his tragedy. Nevertheless, the “taboo subjects” must be “pull[ed] out from under the rug”; the “invisible issues” of the Indian society must be placed on stage for “public discussion” else all that is “confrontational”, to use Dattani’s word as quoted by Mee, would always remain unsighted, steamrolled by the “weight of tradition” and “cultural constructions of gender” (Mee 319). Dattani’s Dan is not an iconoclast just as most of us are not, yet he resists like Ajit of *Where There’s a Will* or Jairaj of *Dance Like a Man*, in his own way to “grab as much fringe-space” for him as he can. And by letting him do so Dattani “challenges the constructions” of familialism as it has “traditionally been defined in modern theatre” (Mee 319).

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