Gendered Bodies in Mahesh Dattani’s Tara

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Abstract

This paper analyses Mahesh Dattani’s play Tara. The paper draws upon the gender injustice depicted in the play results from the insistence of Performativity. This paper looks at how gendered bodies are constructed using biological reductionism that naturalizes the misogynistic practices as the norm. It looks further into how the disabled body is double marginalized. The hegemonic masculinity and its influence upon the effeminate man is also a chief concern. This paper also attempts to analyze how this gender compartmentalization is infused into the roles and words, especially with special reference to women and madness.

Key Words: Performativity, biological reductionism, disabled body, hegemonic masculinity, marginalization, gendered socialization, silence,
1. Introduction

This paper analyses Mahesh Dattani’s play *Tara*. Mahesh Dattani is well known for the plays that reflect the sociopolitical concerns. *Tara* is no exception. It portrays various issues like homosexuality, gender and class discrimination, female infanticide and the disabled body is one of its core themes. Early research on this text has focused on a series of topics like the gender discrimination, the relevance of the play in the Indian context, questions of parental authority, the quest for identity, the notion of guilt, victimhood, patriarchy, disability and social issues. It is interesting to note that post colonial, psychoanalytical, feministic and even semiotic analysis of the theatrical elements of *Tara* has been attempted by various scholars. As all the major themes come around the corporeal self, the arguments are centered around the treatment of body, that too the gendered body in the play. The gendered body will be looked into through the critical lens of concepts like performativity, biological reductionism and marginalization of the disabled body, hegemonic masculinity, socialization and madness.

**Per Formative Acts**

As Judith Butler discusses in her celebrated work *Gender Trouble* 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 insists on the idea that masculine or feminine gender is constituted by the repetition of a set of performative acts that are appropriated through language and behavior. Any deviation from the same is seen as abnormal and soon the society regulates and imposes norms of heterosexuality upon the subject. Butler’s theory of performativity can be read along with the idea of signifiers of masculinity by Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson. The disruption of the rules of the power structures may lead to abandonment of the subject which eventually results in the lack of belongingness, something that the social being always yearns for. Ruth Butler draws our attention into this longing of the marginalized body.

Tara says their father wants Chandan to be big and sturdy. Everybody expects Chandan to stick to the norms of masculinity. Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson in *Boys' Bodies: Speaking the Unspoken* talks about the “context where the masculine body operates as signifier to masculinity” (168). The great patriarchal father cannot stand the sight of Chandan helping his mother to unravel the knitting for it is a ‘feminine’ act which according to him should be performed only by Tara, the girl. Patel accuses Bharati of turning her son into a “sissy” but Chandan is happy doing that and also he is at ease in the company of women. It is this effeminate male figure that the heterosexual norms of the sexist society cannot accept.

Ruth Butler in *Mind and body spaces* talks about the longing of the marginalized body to belong “Fears of marginalization, due to a lack of
conformity, mean that the need to know that one is not alone in one’s circumstances is important for any individual” (201). The gender injustice towards Tara becomes explicit when the two peas in a pod are treated differently everywhere. Chandan is given an opportunity to go abroad and study. The sexist grandfather has left all his wealth for his grandson who is supposed to carry the family name. Chandan is never happy about this kind of protective discrimination. He feels isolated. That is why Chandan says he feels one with Tara and when she says there is no difference between them, he finds it as the nicest thing she has ever said. His marginalized self is looking for a sense of belongingness that is denied to him by the gendered performative acts.

**Biological Reductionism**

R.W. Connell in theorizing gender has elaborated on biological reductionism. That is, in his seminal work *The Body and Social Practice* the concept of natural difference as “additive conception of society and nature” (73). The work demonstrates how this works and normalizes all gender differences. Here, the entire process begins with the establishment of a kind of difference between both sexes and then it is culturally accentuated by the society. Extending this argument to Tara one could see that the notion of biological reductionism is used as a tool to validate the patriarchal manipulations.

One such instance from the text is when there is an attempt from all characters including Dan, Patel and Bharathi to naturalize the gender inequality that Tara faces.

**DR.THAKKAR.** Our greatest challenge would be to keep the girl alive. Nature wanted to kill her. We could not allow it (278).

All the injustices done to her including her amputated leg is justified using the analogy of God and Nature even by Dr. Thakkar so as to hide the human follies and misogynic prejudices. The term “two peas in a pod” used to refer the twins is interesting and ironical. They are not identical twins but at the same time they have grown up in the company of each other facing gendered favors and inequalities from the same family and to a greater extent from the society. The power structures make use of the best of language and turns into justifiable discourses to naturalize the critical divide. These are the cultural elaborations that Connell discusses in length in his work.

**Gendered Roles**

Pramod K. Nayar has summarized Simone de Beauvoir’s feminism with two key ideas in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* as “(i) the social construction of gender where women accept their men ordained roles as women and (ii) the necessity for women to take responsibility and choose for themselves” (88). Both these elements can be seen in the play. Firstly, Tara mocks at patriarchy and ridicules the gendered nature of social roles:

**TARA.** Not at all. The men in the house were deciding they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave. (237)
This dialogue points towards the pitfalls in the family system that is they are practicing the most primitive form of patriarchy with all its brutalities. The protagonist’s knowledge of the cultural construction of gender roles while surviving in a patriarchal set up is commendable.

As Beauvoir rightly puts it, the question of choice of women is very crucial in building up a gender sensitive society. Secondly, the confidence with which Tara retorts to the accusations against her shows how confident she is or it reveals her tactics to deal with bitter realities of life. She often describes herself as “Strong, Healthy and Beautiful” (238).

Another instance of gendered socialization and the resultant ghettoization of women are also depicted in the play. To Tara’s enquiry where her mother is, Chandan gives the explanation that she is in the kitchen and in a surprised tone he posits a rhetorical question ‘where else?’ Women should be kept indoors and there is nothing much she can do once they step out of the house is the underlying assumption. The depth to which our minds have been conditioned to gender socialization is portrayed here. Tara’s arguments regarding girl’s innate ability to have a mature outlook compared to the “naive” boys of the same age can also be read along these lines.

**Disabled body**

Roopa is a character in the play with a lot of prejudices. She wants Tara to stay away from Prema and Nalini for their lack of English education. There is a blind admiration for the cultural capital of the privileged. At the same time, she accuses Tara’s mother of madness despite all the love Bharati showers upon her. By the end of the play, Roopa ridicules Tara as the “one legged thing” and declares her friendship as an act of beneficence. She even gets into body shaming at a very emotional moment in the play. The hypocrisy of the society towards the disabled is what Roopa signifies. Bharati is burning with guilt. The way she tries to overprotect her daughter and how she literally pleads to Roopa to be friends with Tara, the way she argues for Tara to her husband can be seen more as an act of self-love to escape the ghost of her own mistakes rather than a sign of motherly love and care.

Ruth Butler in his work connects Judith Butler’s idea of the insistence on performativity to construct gender identity with Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity. That is, the performance is accompanied by a set of acts that are “masculine” in nature and they are supposed to establish hegemonic masculinity:

“…a hegemonic masculine style of bodily comportment is about having the freedom to move freely in space and to appropriate it both through physical displays of competence and force, and through having social confidence and a sense of personal security…” (167).

Unlike others, the differently abled man who cannot really exercise this
hegemonic masculinity tends to avoid physical display of power. In Chandan’s case this emerges out of his diffidence and sense of shame associated with the disability. Chandan’s hatred for hospitals can be seen as his general aversion for claustrophobic spaces which constantly reminds him of an institutionalized structure that gives visibility to his disability. Roopa accuses Chandan of sexual assault and then she says they are not “compatible” with clear references to his physical handicap and she moves to the extent of mentioning Feni Narangiwalla, the mentally retarded girl as a perfect match for him. To which Tara fiercely retorts back with body shaming. Tara later justifies herself by saying that she does not own sympathies for others that nobody has ever bothered to offer her.

*Gendered Marginalization of Disabled Bodies*, a journal article by Shuchi Karim is based on the theory of oppression and marginalization by Iris Marion Young. As Young puts it “Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression” (18). In this context, we can say that Tara is a victim of the most dangerous form of oppression. Shuchi Karim asserts in the essay that female gender is the most adverse party when it comes to marginalization of the disabled body. The underprivileged Tara who is denied of foreign education, family wealth and all other privileges that Chandan could afford to have bears testimony to this argument. Shuchi Karim points out that disabled females face more “social stigma, oppression and exclusion from society” (75).

**The Silenced Self**

Whenever the male authority is questioned by the female, she is accused of madness. So is Bharati. The female self-assertion that nobody can stop her threatens Patel’s male ego. And then apart from verbal abuse, he uses physical power to keep the woman under control. Although in a different context, Helene Cixous mentions this female reluctance to break silence in *The Laugh of Medusa*:

“Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away - that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak - even just open her mouth - in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine” (880-81).

Silence is often regarded as a virtuous act, especially of a woman under patriarchal control. A woman who does not question and demand is a perfect subject for oppression. It is interesting to note that ignorance of one’s own rights or the conscious acceptance of marginalization through everyday practice of silence is often accepted as the norm even by women. This gendered socialization is what prevents from breaking the silence. Helen Cixous is talking about this kind of struggle to make one’s voice heard. And once she decides to speak for her voiceless self, all the misogynistic power structures are under threat and they deploy all the means to suppress her quest to be heard. Bharati
was someone who was religiously practicing patriarchal silence but the moment she realizes that it is getting translated into her daughter too, she decides to stand up against the authority.

The patriarch within Patel comes into limelight when Bharati announces her decision to give her kidney to her daughter. Patel does not bother to give any rational reason for not permitting her to do so but it is an order from the male head of the family and the females are supposed to obey it. This part will also remind one of Bharati’s father’s decisions to give the third leg to the male child in spite of the medical complications; the unquestioned male authority that dictates the rules of female life and traumatizes it further is at the heart of the play. The silence of the women often works as a justification for the sexist atrocities.

By the end of the play, Tara starts to let out her anger and frustration born out of her suffering. She doubts her father’s move to prevent her from meeting her mother in person. She comes to the conclusion that he hates her but Chandan refuses to believe her. He stands by the father’s side by saying that if at all there is a conscious attempt to stop them, it may not be good for them to listen to. Tara abuses Chandan for being the “allied party” in the male conspiracy against the females. He is not ready to accept her arguments and calls them a product of “wild imagination”. The creative or the rational female mind is often degraded as hysterical. A female who open up the realms of reality or truth is often regarded as a mad woman.

2. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani has attempted a story enacted in a very Indian context with political undertones and social implications. The gendered body acts as the undercurrent of all the political stances taken by the characters in the play. When the truth unfolds at the end, it is clear that Tara is a victim of the misogynistic society that marginalized her for her sexuality and disabilities. Mahesh Dattani portrays how all institutionalized structures, people of all genders, age groups and classes plotted against the female to protect the ‘Male’. The sky of life belongs to ‘Tara’ and ‘Chandan’, the inseparable forces separated by sexist conventions; it is the need of the hour to reprimand patriarchy in place so as to ensure a gender sensitive society. The play proceeds in such a way that corporeal realities in the play evolve to be a site of feminism that enables resistance over the control of the authority. The playwright had cautiously weaved in the gendered geographies into the characters and spaces within the play so as to enunciate the gender politics of the work.

References


