

Potential Abilities, Real Disabilities : Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani is perhaps India's foremost playwrights to have taken up the challenge of writing about the local Indian scene in an 'alien language'. There is a smooth blending of the social critique and the English language which sometimes has certain limitations while describing subtle nuances of Indian culture. But he succeeds in his experiment just as he succeeds in bringing conventional themes along with some startlingly new ones in his plays. The present article focuses on one of his best loved plays *Tara* which is a reworking of certain staple critical idioms such the marginalization of the female sex and some unexplored ideas as far as Indian playwriting is concerned such as the alter ego or the gendered self. But it is the only play of Dattani's that has touched upon the issue of disability and this aspect as to how disability affects not only the persons having it but also the immediate family, their reactions, responses, biases and the efforts put in to handle it deserves special attention. Along with this his technique as far as use of 'Indian English' is concerned, use of stage-spaces, and the effort put into making the written dramatic text as a performative text is looked into. The use of music is also indicative of the debate between aesthetics, beauty and ugliness. Music has been used as a strategy to highlight the thematic thrust of the play *Tara*.

Keywords: Ability/Disability, gender, binaries, alter ego, social critique, marginalization, stage craft, language experimentation.

For Mahesh Dattani the love of his life is Drama and his principal dramatic subject are the issues of the urban upper and middle classes where personal relationships are stressed and strained, where home is depicted as a place of resentment, confrontation and sometimes barely suppressed violence. The domestic settings, marriage, parent child conflicts and generational shifts or to put it more comprehensively 'the psychodrama of family relationships' is Dattani's *modus-operandi* (Dharwadker 269). But with every new play he follows an arduous and unique task of being different. There is no denying the fact that each time he writes a play he tries to create something different from what he has done earlier. Thus one can observe a repertoire of themes and issues in his plays and all taken up with equal panache. To take an example from linguistics – when we have to coin a new word we fall back on difference to create one. Similarly in the play *Tara*, Dattani focuses on the differently-abled to explore a new concept through drama. In *Tara* he encapsulates the various binaries like – able -disabled | Past Memory - present experience | Husband-Children | Brother-Sister | Stage-audience | and uses the equation arising out of them to his advantage ; and as usual

succeeds in holding up a mirror to society.

In the present study I propose to look at Dattani's one of the best loved plays – *Tara*, with special focus on the hybrid Indian English language that is spoken very naturally by his characters who belong to the middle class milieu, where using of the vernacular along with play on certain words to convey some underlying, sub-textual meaning is relied upon quite often. (I also wish look briefly into the role of music as a means of communicating and connecting with the audience – almost reminding one, of Pavlov's experiment of the singing bell). Secondly the concept of gender or to put it in Dattani's words the gendered self make for an interesting study especially with issues of disability being raised by him for the first and perhaps the only time in this play. When we talk of language – here at the moment – the Indian English language it becomes imperative to differentiate between the theoretical and practical aspect of the same. In theory this language has come a long way from what it was at the post – independence era. It is a language which most people aspire to master, it still has "snob-value" (Chaudhuri 11), it is the language of higher education, a language that would open avenues for job opportunities especially in view of outsourcing done on a large scale under the new system of call centers. Yet all said and done at a practical level English as a language of communication in everyday life is used by a very small percent of Indians and those too mostly belonging to the urban metropolises. Thus to find readership of English writings is not an easy task, and it is all the more difficult to find a committed and comprehending audience for English play performances. To read an English text is one thing but to watch a performance with English as the spoken language is another. A play is an extension of the slice of life, and most of the English educated too speak in Hindi or vernacular within their domestic set up. But this problem has been, I would say, alleviated upto a certain extent by playwrights like Gurcharan Das, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani to name a few. The English that they use in Indian that has been over the years internalized and hybridized and again drama is not a genre that is dependent on the linguistic medium alone. Theatrical language can be both visual as well as acoustic. The visual language including movements, postures, facial expressions, colour, lighting and set design especially the last two have been markedly made use of by Dattani in his plays. On the other hand the acoustic medium too has been fully exploited by him to his advantage, with special focus on music, a vehicle to reassert certain aesthetics which forms an intrinsic part of the narrative.

The essential purpose of language is to communicate either through comparisons or through contrast and differences. Theatre is "a craft of communicating through language of action" (Chaudhuri 18) and it is truly successful if it manages to make the audiences sit up and listen. The play I would say is a signifier with the signified embodied in the audience as they go through an experience which yields a shared response. The

meaning is created on the spot and is usually universally applicable to the set of audience present at that point of time. Though Dattani's audience is not all encompassing in the sense, that it does not include all levels of society, yet he has been successful in targeting the urban upper and middle class audiences. That audience which is perhaps the focus of most of his plays. Dattani has a knack to play with language, play with words as is apparent in most of his plays including *Tara*. In the very beginning of the play the central character Tara is introduced as an intelligent girl who has a penchant for new words. (she is congratulated by his brother for using the word peristalsis.) This play is about the lives of Tara and her brother Chandan and the relationship they share with their parents Bharti and Mr. Patel. They are a pair of Siamese twins who were separated through surgery when they were three months old. Both are orthopaedically impaired as they have only one leg each. Despite this both are shown as happy, witty and intelligent teenagers sharing a close bond with one another. Both have a strong hold over the English language and this comes to the fore especially during interactions with their nosy neighbour and their only friend Roopa. Her rather shaky English gives them moments of shared laughter at her expense, which becomes a language of communication and leads to sibling bonding. Laughter is a medium that can be both congenial or corrosive. It can also indicate a sense of superiority over the other. In the play it is a repetitive paradigm which leads to some comic respite in the otherwise oppressive dramatization of their fractured lives. (eg. two peas in a pot, combatible, decotion concotion / concussion...). Roopa represents the general majority of the so called "normal" people but her hold over the language being rather shaky is used strategically throughout the play to the advantage of the twins and at the same time to subvert the equation between the able and the disabled. In the first instance there is a play upon the word ogre and ogler. Both the words in the mythic world denoted the one eyed monster, the abnormal or in other words the physically disabled. Anything that detracts from the physical beauty is automatically considered "ugly", another word that is oft repeated throughout the play. But the question is who is the actual monster, the ogler, the ugly one?

Tara in her initial introduction to Roopa and her two friends foresees their curiosity and almost voyeuristic interest towards her missing limb and Tara in her turn derives a masochistic satisfaction in playing along ; by displaying her artificial foot almost gleefully and adding "... we get them in pairs. My twin brother wears the other one" (335). Later when Chandan who loves music and likes to write short stories discloses the title of his latest writing as 'The Ogler next Door' makes it obvious as to whom Dattani indicates as the real oglers. It is not the physical disability, which is ugly; rather it is the insensitivity of the able bodied towards the disabled that makes *them* truly ugly. Similarly, the real disability lay within people like Tara's mother or her grandfather who suffer from

gender bias and have no compunction while taking a skewed decision of leaving the third leg with Chandan though it had better chances of surviving on Tara as the major supply of blood was provided by her. Had the decision been in favour of Tara perhaps her real abilities would have seen a different dawn. At this point even at the risk of sounding clichéd I would mention that women have always been discriminated against and this discrimination doubles if she happens to be physically or mentally disabled. They are the marginalized within the marginalized almost echoed in Chadnan's words, "A freak among freaks" (332). Women in general are "caught in a world structured by man centered concepts" (Jones 359) and for disabled women it is all the more difficult to free themselves. Thus we see that Tara's mother is extremely anxious for her future as she realizes that for a physically handicapped girl to fend for herself in a heartless society would be doubly difficult. In one of the rare moment in the play when she is alone with Chandan she confesses her fear : "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!" (349).

"In a patriarchal society there are different yardsticks of perceiving and judging disabled men and women and the treatment meted out to them is definitely discriminatory" (Jain, Rai 75). The same can be perceived in the Patel household. The father framed within the patriarchal sensibilities is always concerned about his son Chandan's future. He wants him to go to office with him while Chandan is more interested in music and literature. Tara's comment "Daddy wants you to be big and sturdy" (333) indicates his expectations from his son but they are the exact opposite of what Chandan actually is. Chandan is a sensitive boy who instead of going out prefers to stay at home and solve jigsaw puzzles. He has a keen eye for details and is quick to point out things like a dropped stitch in the sweater Bharti is knitting for Tara. But for Patel these leanings towards the feminine are intolerable. He reprimands Bharti for "turning him into a sissy – teaching him to knit!" (351). He is equally stringent towards Chandan and says "I am disappointed in you. From now on you are coming to the office with me. I can't see you *rotting* at home!" (351). On the other hand through Chandan's observation about his sister at various points throughout the play, whether in conversation with Bharti, Patel or Tara herself, it is made clear that Tara has the potential instead, to be all that what Patel wants his son to be. Chandan seems to have an unshakeable faith in Tara's abilities, unlike both the parents who just view her as a weak and physically dependent individual, who must be taken care of. The father doesn't want Tara in his office whereas Chandan is sure that "she'll make a great business woman" (328). During one of the conversations with his mother he again reiterates that "There is nothing aimless about Tara's life" (348). He is

sure that she will never need his help and places complete trust in her capabilities and intelligence. Even towards the end during an argument regarding admission in college, Chandan is reluctant to join without Tara and in reply to her taunt of him being a coward he says, "Well I'm sorry. Not everyone has your strength!" (361). It is obvious, Chandan has no qualms about acknowledging Tara's superior abilities. And during this confessional scene when Tara admits that she too is afraid of meeting new people, the so called normal people who don't have the sensitivity to look beyond their physical imperfections into their perfect minds; Chandan is taken aback: "No difference between you and me?" Tara: "No! why should there be?" Chandan: "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." Perhaps the difference had existed in Chandan's mind, as he did not find himself at par with Tara, but at the same time he is bold enough to accept it and unlike his father, benign enough to give her - due credit. Thus we see that though the physical separation had been complete and successful, the twins despite the forces of subtle discrimination within the family, remain emotionally conjoined and co-dependent almost uptill the end.

It is important to note here that the theme of separation and differences runs throughout the play at all levels. It is a play full of conflictual action. The tension between the husband and wife is also made apparent from the start of the play. We are told that theirs is an inter regional, inter caste marriage but the affections seem not to have lasted long. Both of them seem to have hidden agenda. From the start there is a certain underlying restlessness and we come to know all is not perfect. Bharti's over-protective and possessive attachment towards Tara seems at first, a result of her disability but this concern for her is slightly twisted. She goes to the extent of trying to buy a friend in Roopa for Tara, by offering her unlimited use of the VCR (to watch films like 'Fatal Attraction') over a concoction or rather decoction as Tara corrects Roopa; of special coffee with a distinct "Southie flavour" (now this term 'southie flavour' would go down easily with the Indian audience but in the West perhaps they would be flummoxed by the word 'southie'. Here I would also like to mention in passing that Dattani makes use of some vernacular words like *Thatha*, *Hegiddira*, *Ghati*, *Avjo*, *Bartheeni*, *Beda* and so on which gives a domestic turn to the language used – something that the audience can relate to.) Coming back to the mother-daughter relationship, it becomes apparent over a period of time that Bharti has succeeded in making Tara totally dependent on her. Both feel that love can make up for a lot of things. Bharti showers her love in the form of favourite meals cooked for Tara, though in fact it is just a means of silencing her pricking conscience. Tara on the other hand gives credit of her strength to her mother's love and caring. "I am strong" she claims, "my mother made me strong" (330), but this has ironic overtones as towards the end when this apparent nurturing fails Tara "wastes away and dies" (319).

The guilt of Bharti's discriminatory action all those years ago sits heavy

on her conscience and she tries to compensate, for it by giving a part of herself in the form of her kidney to Tara. On the opposite, we find Mr. Patel equally insistent in preventing her from doing so. He almost borders on sadism when he admits he does not want her to "have the satisfaction of doing it". Simultaneously he also prevents her from gaining solace through confession, of her misdeed, to Tara. He does not let go of any opportunity to castigate her – his angst towards Bharti has built up over the years. It was for her love that he has to face his parents' rejection and in turn be subjugated by her powerful father's will. Also her possessiveness towards Tara, almost bordering on madness, leads to a stunted relationship between the father and daughter and finally to rejection. Thus Bharti's emotional sufferings seem to compensate for Mr. Patel's losses but any kind of respite for Bharti seems elusive. Her desire for Tara's exclusive love is a result of realizing the fact that she is responsible for Tara's present condition and that nothing in the world now, can redress this irreparable loss suffered by her daughter. This finally leads to her mental breakdown and estrangement from her family. This conflict between Mr. Patel and Bharti is the real handicap. They are both disabled due to this vendetta – he seems to be hell bent on a revenge path and she on a self destructive one. This continuous conflictual situation leads to a complete dismembering of the Patel family. Dattani's trademark style of building up the narrative to a crescendo leading to a final reversal and denouement is apparent here as well. Under pressure from Tara, Mr. Patel is finally compelled to reveal that the cruel act of discrimination was actually perpetrated by her mother and grandfather in compliance with Dr. Thakkar, rather than her father from whom she remained estranged throughout her life. The false impressions fall apart and the bare truth is too harsh even for an ever-optimistic girl like Tara to handle. It alienates her from all, including her brother Chandan who stands crushed never to feel complete again. It is interesting to note that Tara is at the apex of the play and she is the only stable character while all the others play out their overburdened consciences including Chandan or Dan who is also made to shift from one level of the multi level stage to another. This spatial metaphor is a strategy which reflects the movement of Chandan from home to far away London, from being one with his sister to be separated from her forever.

One can see that the structure (in which lies the language of performance) of this play is complex and the narrative is non linear. There is a continuous flux from present to past, past to present with overlapping of movement and conversations between two sets of characters at the same time on the stage, each off-setting the other. The stage has multi-levels. The lowest level represents the house of the Patels' where the past is enacted. It is an enclosed space from which there is no escape (for Tara, The outside world comes to her or rather imposes itself upon her in the form of Roopa who instead of a breath of freshness of understanding and acceptance brings along poisoned winds of apathy and rejection). The next level represents the bed sitter in London which

belongs to Chandan signifying the present and a place of escape for him, from his past, from his memories. The highest level is the seat of the omni present Dr. Thakkar who was instrumental in carving out literally and metaphorically the lives of the twins. He also represents "the objective inhumanity of science and the perverse uses to which it can be put" (Multani 135). Dattani also makes an extensive use of cross lighting and fading in and fading out of music to create a complex web of meaning. There are 10 instances of music on stage. First "a television show type signature tune" fades in twice during the interview with Dr. Thakkar indicating a commercial interlude. Twice there is music when the flashback shows some tender moments between the mother-daughter duo but the kind of music played is not specified. Twice again there is music at the end and beginning of I and II acts respectively. But the most important parts are, the playing of Brahms, and Chopin when Chandan and Tara are together and only once when she is alone with her father while returning home after the surgery – "The beauty of a special bond between parent and child is created by their movements, the lighting and the music" (356). Thus one sees music has been interwoven, again – very strategically not just as interludes but as an essential part of the performance. The play starts without any music but it ends with an explosive opening of Brahms' 1st concerto – and the twins finally come together in a tight hug, minus their limp, never to be separated again – May be reaching for an Utopian reality which perhaps exists in Chandan's memories alone! In conclusion one can say that Dattani's intention is to achieve a harmony through the language of theatre, as he comments in one of his talks at the 50th Anniversary of Bengali Theatre :

Man has created a very complex language called theatre. A language that has the ability to redefine the natural concepts of time, space and movement. A language that goes beyond the verbal, a movement that goes beyond the physical. Through this language of theatre [man] has been able to see himself for who he is, what he has made of himself and what he aspires to be. (*JIVE*, 1).

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