

Psychological Trauma and Emotional Isolation in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract—Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is an influential Indian English play that explores the psychological consequences of gender discrimination, familial prejudice, disability, guilt, and emotional abandonment. Written in 1990, the play narrates the tragic story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, whose lives are permanently altered by a medical decision influenced by patriarchal preferences. Although the twins initially share an extraordinarily intimate physical and emotional existence, their separation becomes the source of profound psychological suffering. Tara is denied the opportunity to develop her potential because her family and the medical system privilege her brother Chandan on account of his gender. This article examines *Tara* through the theoretical perspectives of psychological trauma, emotional isolation, memory, guilt, gender studies, and disability studies. Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that resists complete comprehension is particularly useful in interpreting Chandan's compulsive return to Tara's memory and his attempt to reconstruct her story through drama

Index Terms—Psychological-trauma, Emotional-isolation, Gender discrimination, Disability, Patriarchy, Guilt, Identity, marginalisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani occupies an important position in contemporary Indian English drama because of his willingness to bring socially uncomfortable subjects onto the stage. His plays frequently focus on individuals whose identities or experiences are marginalised by dominant social structures. Instead of presenting social problems as abstract political questions, Dattani places them within families, homes, relationships, and ordinary conversations. His dramatic world demonstrates that discrimination is often most destructive when it is disguised as

affection, protection, tradition, morality, or practical necessity.

Tara, written in 1990, is one of Dattani's most disturbing explorations of these issues. The play tells the story of Tara and Chandan, conjoined twins who are surgically separated in childhood. The medical decision surrounding their separation is influenced by gender preference, with the family and medical establishment privileging the male child. The consequences of that decision extend far beyond the operating table. Tara becomes physically disadvantaged and eventually dies, while Chandan survives but remains psychologically haunted by his sister's fate.

At one level, *Tara* can be read as a play about disability and gender discrimination. At another, it is a profound study of trauma. Tara's suffering does not originate simply in her physical condition. Her deepest wound is created by the realisation that the people who should have protected her have participated in her marginalisation. Similarly, Chandan's trauma does not arise simply because he loses his sister. His psychological suffering emerges from the knowledge that he was privileged at Tara's expense.

The tragedy therefore operates on two interconnected levels. First, there is physical separation: two children who once shared one body are separated surgically. Second, there is emotional separation: the social and familial decisions surrounding the operation progressively destroy the sense of security and equality that the twins once possessed. The psychological dimension of the play becomes particularly important through Chandan, who survives into adulthood and attempts to write about Tara. His writing is not merely a creative exercise; it

becomes an attempt to return to a traumatic past that he cannot successfully leave behind.

II. UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

Psychological trauma generally refers to the profound mental and emotional consequences of an overwhelming experience. Trauma is not limited to war, natural disasters, or physical violence. Betrayal, prolonged discrimination, childhood abandonment, domestic oppression, and experiences of powerlessness may also produce lasting psychological wounds.

Trauma theory has become particularly influential in literary studies because literature frequently represents experiences that are difficult to express directly. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma involves a complicated relationship between experience and understanding. The traumatic event may not be completely assimilated when it occurs and may subsequently return through memory, repetition, dreams, narration, or other forms of representation.

In *Tara*, trauma is not presented through a single dramatic incident alone. It develops through a series of decisions and social attitudes. Tara is born with a physical difference. She is then subjected to a medical decision that favours her brother. She subsequently has to live with the consequences of that decision. She faces the social gaze directed toward disability and difference. Her mother's behaviour further complicates her emotional world. Finally, Tara discovers the truth behind the surgery and is forced to confront the fact that her own family participated in the unequal treatment that contributed to her condition. Tara is wounded not by one event but by a chain of experiences that repeatedly communicate the same message: she is less valuable because she is female and physically different.

Tara's psychological trauma develops because she gradually becomes aware of the unequal value assigned to her life. Her disability is therefore not simply biological. It becomes socially constructed through discrimination. The family's decision to privilege Chandan communicates that his future is considered more important than hers.

The emotional consequences of such discrimination are profound. A child ordinarily expects the family to provide unconditional protection. When the family

itself becomes a source of exclusion, the child experiences a fundamental crisis of trust. Tara's emotional world is therefore damaged at the level of attachment. The people who should affirm her worth instead participate in decisions that deny it.

Tara's trauma emerges from the contradiction between maternal affection and patriarchal preference. Bharati may love Tara, but her actions reveal the extent to which social expectations have influenced her judgement. This contradiction makes Tara's suffering psychologically more complicated. Betrayal by a stranger is painful; betrayal by a parent is devastating because parental love is normally associated with security.

III. THE TRAUMA OF FAMILIAL BETRAYAL

Family occupies a central position in Dattani's drama. In *Tara*, the family is simultaneously a space of intimacy and a site of trauma. The relationship between Tara and Chandan initially represents emotional unity. As conjoined twins, they begin life as an extraordinary physical embodiment of togetherness. Their later separation therefore carries a symbolic meaning beyond the medical procedure. They are separated from the physical unity that had defined their earliest existence.

The emotional bond between the twins remains powerful even after separation. Dattani's dramatic structure continually returns to their childhood relationship and its consequences. The twins' connection is represented as deeper than ordinary sibling affection. Educational material on the play notes their initial physical fusion and their continuing emotional coherence even after separation. The trauma becomes more severe when Chandan discovers that the operation was not simply an unavoidable medical necessity. He learns that his own survival and advantages were connected to the discrimination against Tara.

This produces survivor guilt. Chandan is alive, educated, and capable of leaving India, but these privileges cannot free him from the psychological burden of Tara's death. His success becomes contaminated by the knowledge of what it cost. The tragedy therefore reverses conventional notions of victim and survivor. Tara is the direct victim of discrimination, but Chandan is also psychologically

victimised by the same system. Patriarchy benefits him materially while damaging him emotionally.

IV. EMOTIONAL ISOLATION IN THE PLAY

Psychological trauma frequently produces emotional isolation. The individual may remain surrounded by people but experience an internal sense of separation from them.

Tara contains several forms of emotional isolation. First, Tara is isolated because her physical disability makes her different from those around her. Second, she experiences isolation because she learns that her family has valued her brother more highly. Third, Chandan becomes isolated because he carries knowledge and guilt that he cannot easily communicate. Finally, Bharati becomes isolated within her own emotional world because guilt gradually destroys the possibility of uncomplicated motherhood. Thus, isolation is not limited to Tara. Tara's emotional isolation is particularly tragic because she is naturally connected to Chandan. Their early life suggests absolute intimacy. Yet social and medical intervention destroys that unity. The play therefore establishes an important paradox: the twins are physically separated but emotionally inseparable. Chandan's final psychological state reinforces this paradox. Although Tara is absent physically, she remains present in his memory. His attempt to escape her memory becomes impossible because Tara has become part of his identity. The play consequently suggests that emotional relationships do not disappear simply because physical contact ends. Sometimes absence can become more psychologically powerful than presence.

V. EMOTIONAL ISOLATION AND THE FAILURE OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is another important dimension of the play. Trauma often creates silence because the individual cannot easily articulate the experience. Tara's suffering is intensified because the complete truth is not communicated openly to her. The family's silence and concealment contribute to her alienation.

Chandan's writing, by contrast, represents an attempt to overcome silence. The movement from silence to

narrative is therefore psychologically important. Chandan attempts to give Tara a voice after her death. Although Tara cannot narrate her own story from the present, her brother becomes the medium through which her story is reconstructed. However, Dattani does not offer a simple therapeutic resolution. Writing may provide a form of understanding, but it cannot undo the past.

This ambiguity makes the play more psychologically realistic. Trauma cannot always be "solved" through narration. Sometimes narration is the beginning of acknowledgement rather than the completion of healing.

VI. THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY AS A TRAUMA NARRATIVE

The device of the play-within-the-play is central to Dattani's representation of trauma. Chandan's writing of *Twinkle Tara* allows him to become both participant and observer. He can look at his past from a distance while simultaneously remaining emotionally attached to it. This dual position resembles the fragmented perspective often associated with traumatic memory. The survivor may simultaneously remember and distance themselves from the experience.

The theatrical form also enables the audience to participate in this reconstruction. We do not receive the story as a simple factual report. We witness fragments of the past, interpret them, and gradually understand their significance. The audience therefore becomes involved in the process of remembering. Dattani's dramatic technique is especially effective because theatre is itself an art of presence and absence. Dead characters can appear on stage through memory. The past can become visible before the audience even though it no longer exists in the characters' present lives. Tara is therefore absent and present simultaneously. She is physically dead but psychologically alive in Chandan's consciousness.

VII. PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AS A SOCIAL PRODUCT

One of the most significant achievements of *Tara* is its refusal to isolate psychological suffering from social structures. Tara is traumatised because of a social system that values sons over daughters. She is

disabled more severely because of a medical decision influenced by gender preference. She is emotionally isolated because her family cannot offer her complete equality. Chandan is traumatised because he benefits from an unjust decision. Bharati suffers because she participates in a decision that later becomes a source of guilt. The family therefore becomes a microcosm of society. This approach challenges the idea that trauma is simply an individual psychological problem. In *Tara*, trauma has social origins.

The play demonstrates that discrimination can become internalised and eventually produce psychological consequences such as guilt, shame, isolation, resentment, grief, and identity conflict. The trauma of Tara is therefore simultaneously personal, familial, institutional, gendered, and social.

VIII. RELEVANCE OF TRAUMA THEORY TO *TARA*

Trauma theory provides a productive framework for understanding several aspects of the play. First, the theory helps explain the persistence of memory. Second, it illuminates Chandan's guilt and repeated return to Tara. Third, it clarifies the relationship between powerlessness and psychological suffering. Fourth, it demonstrates how silence and failed communication contribute to emotional isolation. Fifth, it allows us to understand the play's fragmented structure as more than a theatrical technique. The movement between past and present reflects the persistence of unresolved experience.

At the same time, *Tara* also challenges trauma theory to take account of social structures. Trauma cannot be separated from gender, disability, family, medicine, and culture. The play therefore encourages an interdisciplinary reading in which trauma studies intersects with feminist criticism and disability studies.

IX. CONCLUSION

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is much more than a play about a physically disabled girl or gender discrimination. It is a deeply psychological drama about the wounds produced when individuals are denied equality, trust, bodily autonomy, and emotional security.

Tara's trauma begins with the unequal valuation of her life. Her physical disability becomes more devastating because it is produced and intensified by a social decision that privileges her brother. Her emotional suffering is compounded by the discovery that her own family participated in the decision that harmed her. Her death is therefore the final consequence of a much longer process of marginalisation. Chandan's story reveals another dimension of trauma. Although he is the apparent beneficiary of patriarchal preference, he becomes psychologically imprisoned by guilt. His physical survival does not result in emotional freedom. His decision to leave India cannot free him from Tara because the memory of his sister has become inseparable from his own identity. His writing of *Twinkle Tara* represents an attempt to understand, remember, and symbolically restore the sister whose life was sacrificed. Bharati's character further demonstrates the destructive consequences of guilt. Her love for Tara cannot erase the consequences of her earlier decision. Dr. Thakkar represents the institutional dimension of the tragedy, showing how professional authority may become implicated in social prejudice. The play's treatment of disability is equally significant. Tara's condition is not presented simply as a medical fact. Dattani demonstrates how society constructs disability through prejudice, staring, exclusion, gender expectations, and the denial of equal opportunity. Contemporary criticism likewise identifies the intersection of gender and disability in the play.

Ultimately, *Tara* reveals that psychological trauma is often produced within relationships and institutions rather than in isolation. The family that should provide safety becomes a source of betrayal; medicine that should heal becomes implicated in discrimination; society that should provide inclusion creates exclusion. The most tragic aspect of Tara's story is therefore not simply that she dies. It is that she is never allowed to realise the possibilities of the life she could have lived. Chandan's continuing memory of her transforms Tara into a permanent psychological presence. She remains alive in his consciousness because her story has never been emotionally completed. His attempt to write her story becomes an act of remembrance and resistance.

Through *Tara*, Dattani ultimately asks society to examine the invisible wounds created by

discrimination. Physical injuries may be visible, but psychological injuries often remain hidden. Gender prejudice, ableism, parental favouritism, social stigma, and institutional power can produce wounds that continue across generations. The play therefore remains significant because it reminds us that equality is not merely a legal or social principle. It is also a psychological necessity. Every human being needs recognition, belonging, dignity, and the assurance that his or her life possesses equal value. In this sense, *Tara* is a tragedy of both physical separation and emotional isolation, but it is also an ethical appeal for recognition. Dattani gives dramatic form to a question that remains socially relevant: when a society decides that one life is more valuable than another, what kind of psychological wounds does it create—not only in the person who is rejected, but also in those who survive the rejection? The answer in *Tara* is devastating. The body may be separated, the place may be changed, and the name may be changed, but unresolved trauma continues to live in memory.

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