Kurdish Studies
April 2022
Volume: 10, No: 01, pp 221-223
ISSN: 2051-4883 (Print) | ISSN 2051-4891 (Online)
www.KurdishStudies.net

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v10i1.3750

Disability, Gender, and Social Constructs in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

Palak Motsara*

*PhD Research Scholar, University of Delhi. Palak.motsara100@gmail.com

Abstract - The paper aims to explore the dual marginalization of the disabled female protagonist, Tara, in the context of Indian society. By analyzing the play's depiction of the unethical surgical decision favoring the male child, Chandan, the paper examines societal biases that devalue the disabled girl child. The study critiques ableism, patriarchy, and gender discrimination, highlighting how Tara challenges societal norms by presenting disability as a socio-cultural construct rather than a personal deficit, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of disability and gender.

Keywords: Ableism, gender inequality, patriarchy, disability studies.

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) opens with the medical case of separating conjoined twins of opposite sexes and proceeds to unravel the psychological and emotional trauma that the procedure inflicts upon them. The play highlights the rigid definition of disability, which controls, wields power, and instils fear in society—precisely what compels Bharati and her father to make the unethical decision to give the third leg to Chandan rather than Tara. The fear of disability for the male child, rather than the female child, dictated this decision, even when there was a lower chance of the leg surviving on Chandan's body. Dattani uses this premise to interrogate gender inequality and the biased attitude of society towards disabled girls. The play also questions the notion of normality and the stigma associated with disability. Through this, *Tara* reveals the deeply rooted cultural anxieties associated with both gender and physical impairment, presenting disability not merely as a personal condition but as a space of societal conflict and negotiation.

In an ableist society, disability is perceived as a life sentence, with the assumption that a disabled person will lead an unhappy life, devoid of education, sexuality, and motherhood. In Indian society, a female child is already considered a liability, whereas a male child is seen as an asset. Tara, being both female and disabled, becomes a double liability to her parents. The fear of shame and stigma attached to disability leads parents to hide the disability of their children. Disability is problematic in an ableist world as it reinforces the superiority of the 'able-minded' and 'able-bodied' over those deemed 'abnormal.' This societal framing not only marginalises disabled individuals but also enforces rigid expectations of gendered embodiment, further deepening their exclusion.

Ableism is not confined to prejudices against people with disabilities and mobility impairments; it also manifests in interpersonal interactions. In the play, interpersonal ableism is exercised through interactions with Tara, Chandan, and Bharati. Roopa openly mocks Tara and Chandan, addressing them as "freaks" and a "one-legged creature". She taunts them, saying, "What's the matter, you freak? Are you deaf as well?" (542), "There. At least you are not blind! Do you get the message? Freaks" (543), and "How dare you! You one-legged thing!" (530). Additionally, she reinforces societal rejection by putting up a poster that reads, "The spot fades out with the music. Silence. The street area is lit. Roopa has brought on a poster, saying 'We don't want freaks,' which she places prominently against a wall or post" (543). Roopa's remarks also reveal microaggressions towards Bharati, who suffers from a psychosocial disability and a nervous breakdown. She comments, "She is a real freak of nature all right, but wait till you see her mother! Oh God! I can't tell you—she is really… wandh tarah. Oh God! I'll never go there again" (489). Such instances reveal how ableist attitudes pervade multiple aspects of social life, reducing disabled individuals to objects of ridicule and dehumanisation.

The text, however, attempts to challenge the stigma attached to disability by shifting the focus onto the concealed disabilities of Deepa and Roopa. Through these characters, the play underscores the idea that disability is not always overt or physical but can also exist in less visible forms. Tara, in a moment of retaliation, exposes Deepa's vulnerability to Roopa, saying, "There was a rubber sheet underneath! Imagine. Thirteen years old and she was wetting her bed. I laughed. I laughed out loud. She went red… I never told anyone at school. But she knew I could easily have done so—at the slightest provocation. I soon had her doing all my homework" (589). She similarly targets Roopa's insecurity regarding her body, cruelly remarking, "So how does it feel having one tit smaller than the other? Don't worry—it's not very noticeable, except from a certain angle. Then it's very noticeable" (590). She further exacerbates Roopa's distress by stating, "They are going to look at your tits the same way they looked at my leg! Let me see how you can face them ogling at you! You won't be able to come out of your house, you horrible creature!" (591).

Tara's words, though harsh, serve to highlight a crucial aspect of social stigma—while some forms of disability are visible and immediately subjected to societal discrimination, others remain hidden, allowing individuals like Deepa and Roopa to navigate the world without facing the same overt prejudice. According to Erving Goffman's framework, Tara and Chandan are "discredited" individuals whose physical disabilities are immediately apparent, making them subject to constant scrutiny and bias. In contrast, Deepa and Roopa are "discreditable", as their stigmas remain concealed and, therefore, do not subject them to the same level of interpersonal and systemic ableism (4). Unlike Tara and Chandan, they do not experience the same psychological and emotional trauma, as their disabilities do not visibly mark them as different in society's eyes. In this sense,

the play challenges the rigid distinctions between the 'disabled' and the 'able-bodied', emphasizing that disability is not a static condition but a fluid and universal experience.

In an ableist society, "the concept of normalcy is constructed as a reaction to the concept of [the]ideal human body[,] and it implies that the majority of the population must be should be somehow part of that norm. Instead of accepting that all bodies are not ideal, the power of the norm makes it so that people are described as deviant if their bodies don't match the norm" (Davis 16). Those who do not fit this constructed norm are labelled as 'abnormal', marginalized, and excluded. Tara and Chandan, due to their visible disabilities, are perceived as 'abnormal' and 'deviant', whereas able-bodied individuals like Roopa, Prema, and Nalini are considered 'normal' and, as a result, hold power over them. This asymmetrical relationship highlights how the 'normate' often struggles to comprehend the lived experiences of the 'abnormal'. Words such as "freaks" and "one-legged creature" are used casually, without awareness of the deep psychological and emotional trauma they can inflict on those who are labelled as such.

Mahesh Dattani critiques society's double standards, which frame Tara's disability as significant burden while treating Chandan's condition with greater tolerance. This bias is evident in Bharati's statement: "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" (556). This remark underscores how gendered ableism operates—while a disabled man may still be granted a place in society, a disabled woman is viewed as undesirable, asexual, and incapable of fulfilling expected roles such as homemaker, wife, or mother. The idea that Chandan will be accepted while Tara will not highlights the hypocrisy of patriarchal ableism, which devalues disabled women even more than their male counterparts.

Lennard Davis asserts that, "People with disabilities have been isolated, incarcerated, observed, written about, operated on, instructed, implanted, regulated, treated, institutionalized, and controlled to a degree probably unequal to that experienced by any other minority group" (15). This discrimination is further intensified when the disabled individual is a woman creating a compounded form of oppression that stems from both ableism and patriarchy. However, through the character of Tara, the play challenges these entrenched notions of normalcy and deviation. Unlike Chandan, Tara is strong-willed and independent, refusing to internalize the prejudice directed at her. She confronts Roopa's insensitive remarks with sharp wit and assertiveness, responding, "You are ugly and I don't want ugly people in my house!" (591).

Tara's resilience highlights the play's critique of the able-bodied gaze, exposing the flawed perceptions that define disability as a personal shortcoming rather than a societal construct. Instead of portraying disability as a tragedy, the play reinterprets it as a condition shaped by prejudice and systemic exclusion. Ultimately, *Tara* dismantles the rigid and exclusionary definitions of normalcy, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of human diversity.

In the Indian context, disability has historically been depicted in a negative light, particularly in foundational texts like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which continue to influence cultural narratives, societal structures, and individual aspirations. The morality/religious model of disability frames physical impairment as a consequence of past karmas, reinforcing the belief that disability results from moral or spiritual failings. Meanwhile, the medical/bio-centric model perceives disability as an individual defect requiring medical intervention. This perspective isolates disability as a condition belonging exclusively to those with impairments, reinforcing the idea that it is a personal tragedy that must be "cured".

Garland-Thomson postulates: "The ideology of cure directed at disabled people focuses on changing bodies imagined as abnormal and dysfunctional rather than on exclusionary attitudinal, environmental and economic barriers" (364). This mindset is evident in *Tara*, where the decision to provide Chandan with the extra limb reflects a prioritization of his physical wholeness over Tara's well-being. Within this framework, individuals with disabilities are categorized as "abnormal," viewed primarily through the lens of medical treatment, dependency, and public assistance, further entrenching their marginalization through a culture of charity rather than empowerment.

In contrast to these models, the Human Rights Model presents a more inclusive perspective, advocating for a "set of principles concerned with equality and fairness… living a life free from fear, harassment, or discrimination" (*An Introduction to Human Rights*). This model recognizes individuals with disabilities as an integral part of human diversity and challenges the notion that disability is an inherent deficiency that must be corrected. It emphasizes that a person is not solely defined by their disability but rather by multiple intersecting aspects of their identity. Rejecting the idea that disability is merely a biological or medical problem, this model posits that the real issue lies in the way normalcy is constructed to create the "problem" of the disabled person. As Lennard Davis asserts, "'The problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (16).

A disabled person with an acquired disability must navigate complex social realities, reconstruct their identity, and redefine their personal narrative from scratch. In contrast, individuals with inborn disabilities grow up identifying themselves within the framework of disability from the beginning, as they are socialized into the role of a disabled person. Regardless of whether disability is congenital or acquired, the stigma associated with it remains ever-present, shaping the disabled individual's social identity. In *Tara*, disability serves as a central aspect of Chandan's identity, as reflected in Tara's observation: "You are afraid. Afraid of meeting new people. People who don't know you. Who won't know how clever you are. You are afraid they won't see beyond your" (577). Chandan is viewed as deformed and abnormal, making him unworthy in the eyes of an ableist society. His disability becomes a barrier, even in matters of love and relationships—something that would not be questioned if he were able-bodied. Roopa, representing the dominant societal mindset, reinforces these biases when she falsely accuses Chandan of rape and dismisses him as an undesirable partner. She coldly asserts, "Well, I'm sorry. I'm just not that type. And personally, I don't think we are—you know—compatible. If you get what I mean… And if you really want someone who is—you should meet Freni Narangiwalla. I think you will get along fine. She is mentally retarded!" (587). Roopa's remark reflects the widespread belief that people with disabilities can only form romantic relationships with others who are also disabled, further dehumanizing and isolating them.

Dattani scrutinizes the troubling intersection of patriarchy and disability in *Tara*. Although Patel did not directly take part in the surgical decision, his treatment of Chandan and Tara reveals deep-seated gender biases. He envisions a promising future for Chandan, making plans for his education abroad and his eventual role in the family business, yet he has no such aspirations for Tara, assuming her life will remain confined to the domestic sphere. His disapproval of Chandan engaging in traditionally feminine activities becomes evident when he angrily reacts to him helping his mother with knitting: "How dare you do this to him? ... But you can think of turning him into a sissy—teach him to knit… I am disappointed in you. From now on you are coming to the office with me. I can't see you rotting at home!" (561). Similarly, Tara's remark to Roopa: "The men in the house were deciding on whether they were going to go hunting while the women looked after the cave" (523)—underscores how deeply ingrained gender norms position men in the public sphere while relegating women to domestic caregiving roles.

G.J.V. Prasad, in his essay, asserts that "If we could learn to value both sides of ourselves, give equal importance to feminine and the masculine, we would have a completely differently abled world, a world of real abilities and possibilities. This is why the play ends with them whole and complete, with two legs each, because they are finally, in his memory, beyond nature and society" (141). Prasad's analysis highlights how Dattani critiques rigid gender roles, envisioning a more inclusive and balanced society where perceptions of ability and identity are redefined.

Roopa's sarcastic remark about female infanticide in Gujarat further contextualizes the decision made for Tara and Chandan, shedding light on the deep-rooted misogyny that devalues female children. She tells Tara, "…it may not be true. But this is what I have heard. The Patels in the old days were unhappy with getting girl babies—you know dowry and things like that—so they used to drown them in milk" (557). This unsettling comment reflects the harsh reality of gender-based discrimination, where cultural, economic, and religious factors contribute to the marginalization of women. In India, it is widely acknowledged that women are often treated as commodities, and through Tara's story, Dattani critiques the social structures that reinforce this marginalization. The belief that lineage (*vansh*) and caste identity are carried forward by sons further perpetuates this systemic bias. Dattani exposes how these deeply ingrained beliefs, coupled with economic and cultural factors, create a social order that continues to devalue and disadvantage female children.

The intersection of disability and gender discrimination in *Tara* is particularly complex, as it subjects Tara to double marginalization. Another critic, Charu Mathur, observes, "Tara, sharper and smarter than her brother, is doubly victimized—once at birth and again by her parents' discriminatory behaviour. Her mother's apparent showing of love is the only strength in her" (167). Mathur's perspective highlights how, despite Tara's intelligence and wit, she is systematically disadvantaged due to both her gender and her disability. Dattani effectively portrays how medical bureaucracy, patriarchy, and ableism intertwine to restrict Tara's opportunities and limit her autonomy.

Ultimately, Dattani's realistic and inclusive depiction of disability challenges its traditional framing as an individual deficit. Instead of perceiving disability as a personal shortcoming, he presents it as a social construct shaped by cultural attitudes and systemic structures. By reframing disability as a shared social responsibility—one that demands inclusivity, accessibility, and equal opportunities—Dattani advocates for a world where disabled individuals can lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Work Cited

1. "An Introduction to Human Rights." The Australian Human Rights Commission, https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/introduction-human-rights.
2. Dattani, Mahesh. "Tara." Collected Plays, Penguin, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 508–609. Charu Mathur. "Dramatic Structures in Mahesh Dattani's Tara and Final Solutions",
3. Contemporary Indian Drama: Astride Two Traditions, eds. Urmil Talwar, et. al. Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 2005, P. 167.
4. Davis, Lennard J. "Introduction: Normality, Power and Culture." The Disability Studies Reader, 5th ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 9-25.
5. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." The Disability Studies Reader, 5th ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 358-374.
6. Goffman E. Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster; 1963.
7. Prasad, G. J. V. "Terrifying Tara: The Angst of the Family", Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives, ed. Multani Angelie, New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007, p. 141.