

# Guilt-Complex And 'Clash Between Traditional And Modern Life Styles And Values': A Critical Study In Mahesh Dattani's Tara

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## Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's Tara, as a few of his other plays, explores the baffling dilemmas of today's Indian family in metropolitan cities, the relations which at bottom are based on and sustained by natural love, but suffer immense stress and threat of dissolution due to complex forces of external nature. Family being the microcosm of society offers a valid ground for exploring society's maladies and thus a faithful reflection of a socio-cultural fabric. Family whose formation and function used to provide answers to many a serious problem of the individual and succour by giving the inmates the much-desired security, has in recent times itself turned into a site where many a problem is seen to arise and puzzle individuals. In taking up the Patel household with a twin surgically separated but unequally treated by the parents, Dattani has sought to present many layers of the subject-matter, each enmeshed with the other in a complex grid. In this paper, I intend to explore the guilt-complex of the characters that creates tension and emotional turmoil in them analysing from feminist perspective. Moreover, this paper delves into the relation between traditional and modern life styles and values.

**Key Words:** Guilt, Dattani, traditional and modern life styles and values, feminist approach, Indian family, and culture

## Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most leading and serious contemporary playwrights in English. He always deals with the complicated dynamics of the modern urban family. A director, actor, and writer, Mahesh Dattani was born on August 7, 1958. He has the honour to become the first Indian English playwright who won the Sahitya Academy award for Final Solutions and Other Plays in 1998. Bold themes and unusual style of his plays have attracted the attention of audiences and readers. In 1986, he produced his first play Where There's a Will. There are several other

plays written by him like Dance Like a Man (1989), Tara (1990), Bravely Fought Queen (1991), Final Solutions (1993), On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998), Seven Circle Round the Fire (1998), 30 Days in September (2001), and many others. His plays deal with social, gender and contemporary issues. One of his films Dance Like a Man has won the award for the best picture in English.

Dattani's plays are about the marginalized sections of our society, minorities and women. They also present real problems and sometimes cause controversy. It also projects issues related to discrimination, including religious prejudice, and homosexuality. The struggle of women in a patriarchal society with gender bias and prejudices are rooted up with power in his plays. In the domain of Indian English Drama, Mahesh Dattani's plays have emerged as 'fresh arrivals'. His works also express his political beliefs without being instructive or revolting. According to Erin Mee: 'by pulling taboo subjects out from under the rug and placing them on stage for public discussion, Dattani challenges the constructions of "India" and "Indian" as they have traditionally been defined in modern theatre.' [319]

This play highlights the complex relationships within a family facing severe crisis and insecurity. It reminds us of Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*, in which the deep attachment between siblings is overshadowed by a woeful absence of communication and easy understanding. But Mahesh Dattani reveals that the problem becomes more involved in that there is a deep love between Bharati and her daughter Tara, between Tara and her brother, Bharati and Chandan, and a peculiar distant attachment between the father and his son and daughter and a worsening relation between the husband and the wife. What comes under focus in the play is the enigma that human personality presents the unpredictable ways in which human temperament moves, blind to the consequences of its ways. It also brings out the intricate relations within a family that is located in a new context of culturally transforming Indian society. The family that has shrunk into a small nuclear structure is perpetually teetering on the edge of a dark chasm trying to preserve its unity and harmony in the face of growing individual's internal menace. This problem has come to dominate the recent Indian-English literary

consciousness, giving a new orientation to both fiction and drama. Men writers in the past didn't make the core issues of urban family structure in culturally dynamic new India their theme; but in the late 1960s one sees a sudden rise of women authors who, equipped as they were with a uniquely different approach to social problems, began producing remarkably revealing fiction. This can be seen to form a new category in itself enriched by such authors as Attia Hosain, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and many other new talents active in the field.

### **Discussion:**

#### **Guilt-Complex**

Tara boldly explores the complex psychological strands at different layers of relationships in a small family which is blighted by the birth of a twin - a boy and a girl - to a happy couple, Patel and Bharati. The twins are unfortunately joined physically. Bharati gives birth to conjoined twins with three legs. Despite all sensible advice, Bharati and her father interfere in influencing Dr. Thakkar to give the third leg to the boy, Chandan. Doctors tell them that for the sound health of the child this leg should not be separated from Tara whose body supplied it with blood. This obstinate stand of both Bharati and her father formed under biases of gender, brings upon the family, and specially the children great tragedy. The reason is that they prefer the male child because he will carry forward the family name, and on the contrary, the word girl is a synonym for 'dowry'. The situation becomes worse, if the girl is physically challenged or there is any physical or mental deformity in her, then the dowry too will not work out. She will remain unmarried and defame her family. At last, the surgeon is silenced by a bribe. His worst fears come true. This results in Dan becoming a cripple while Tara is already a crippled one. What hurts Tara most is the fact that preference is given to the boy simply because he belongs to the dominant sex. She also realises

that she is denied the opportunity of becoming a normal human being simply because she is a female. Bharati knowingly determined the results of the surgery in accordance with cultural preferences that put male life on a higher plane than female life. She has to live knowing that she has indirectly caused the death of her daughter for the sake of her son. We see the couple bickering after the death of Bharati's father and after Bharati has felt the sense of fear that takes birth because of guilt in taking decisions about Tara. Having sacrificed Tara's leg, Bharati has had to struggle to construct her maternal love and concern for her daughter, to assert her moral superiority over husband, to carve out her space in the family. Her final act of donating her kidney to Tara is an act of expiation, even if ultimately futile.

On the other hand, Patel, Bharati's husband and children's father, is helpless as he finds that he can't do anything about this inhuman and senseless conspiracy. The resultant frustration and self-accusing complex turn him into an aggressive person which destroys his marital life. The play focuses mainly upon the two children, Tara and Chandan whose point of view dominates, and life's shades are seen through their eyes. This is the high point of the play and the finest aspect of it. Close attachment between Tara and her brother, their concern as much as their child-like playful outlook create deep compassion in the audience. Patel is burdened with a crippling sense of guilt which makes him deal with children in a very harsh manner; on the other hand Bharati's oppressive guilt makes him keep it under tight control, thus turning her into a virtual psychopath, who lands in a mental hospital. Patel somehow has substantial responsibility in the decline of his wife's health and disintegration of her personality. A practical man with a desire of inculcating controversial values in his growing children, Patel fails to see some crucial implications of his rigid approach, failing even to understand their tender emotions

and attachments. As the story progresses he becomes more and more revengeful.

The playwright has imaginatively revealed the secrecy about the forceful separation of conjoined twins by a surgeon. In an emotional outburst, the father discloses that Tara would have led a normal life if the surgeon would not have amputated her leg and transplanted it to Chandan to enable the male child to lead a normal life at the cost of his sister. To undertake such an heinous act which is blatantly against medical ethics, the surgeon was bribed by the father of the mother who was a rich and influential person and Tara's mother was complicit in this abhorrent act. This disclosure left an atmosphere of gloom and doom; the brother feels guilt and leaves for England.

#### **Relation Between Modern and Traditional Lifestyles and Values**

The characters of the play represent two different generations. Bharati and Patel represent the old generation having old values, whereas Tara and Chandan represent the new generation having radical values. Patel and Bharati prefer Chandan to Tara, whereas Chandan recognizes and respects Tara's talent and identity. Bharati is brought up on old values and satisfied to be a housewife taking care of her family and does not think of her identity, whereas Tara is ready to assert her identity, and does not consider herself different from her brother. Patel has all the qualities of a traditional Indian male, who is a firm believer in old values; He has a fixed opinion regarding women's position, whereas Chandan has an opinion just opposite to his father. Chandan, for instance in the play, helps his mother in knitting. But Patel, the father of Chandan, does not like this. Naturally he develops a kind of hatred towards his son because he considers knitting, managing the kitchen, rearing children and seeking happiness for their

families are all girl's activities. Chandan believes in cooperation and equality while Patel doesn't believe in cooperating in women's activities and the vision of his son's generation.

Apparently it seems that one of the thematic aspects of the play is how science and nature are complementary to each other. If any attempt is made to challenge the laws of nature, there would be a conflict and consequently disaster. The character of Dr. Thakkar tries to separate the twin against the way nature has biologically programmed the twin. However it was not the fault of medical science; it was unethical and criminal medical practice of Dr. Thakkar that was responsible for the tragedy. This statement of Dan (Chandan) is an example of a verbal irony. He addresses Dr. Thakkar with the adjective 'amazing'. If we take into account the character of Dr Thakkar, he is an example of situational irony. One of the fundamental objectives of medical science and a doctor is to save human lives but what happens in the play is almost just the opposite. However, medically Dr. Thakkar is very competent but somewhere he lacks the required values to be a good doctor. In other words, he educated himself properly in terms of medical science but he failed to receive the cultural and moral values that are required to be a good doctor. Dan introduces Dr. Thakkar in a "mock" television interview as an outstanding doctor with international repute.

'But, soon, even the remotest chance for survival was received with hope once they were made aware of the facilities offered by modern technology... there was a strong possibility of both twins surviving.' (Tara, 342)

The above extract convinces us that all the test reports of the twin before the surgery were in favour of their survival. Theoretically, the modern medical technology and facility were sufficient to successfully separate the conjoined twin with help of a surgery. To quote Dr.

Thakkar, " Nature has done a near complete job. Medical science could finish it for her" (Tara, 356). There was nothing wrong as long as Dr. Thakkar practiced his medical science knowledge in consonance with ethics. As Dr. Thakkar says, ' that was (is) a strong possibility of both the twins surviving'. In the same way, science, culture and nature have the potential to coexist and complement one another. He boasts of the new technology and fundings of medical science. He says:

Dr. Thakkar: Yes, indeed, it was a complex case. But modern technology has made many things possible, we are not very far from the rest of the world. In fact, in ten years' time we should be on par with the best in the west.

Dan's area is lit. He applauds mockingly'. (Tara, 379)

Mahesh Dattani tries to portray the character of Dr. Thakkar as a doctor who has a God-like stance - may be a creator and destroyer. It shows his control and power. In order to show his dominance and control in the plot he has been given the higher level on the stage. He is the representative of modern science and technology who plays a crucial role in contemporary society. Like science and technology which seems does not directly influence our relationships, he doesn't watch the action of the play but he is an integral part of it. In order to further emphasize his importance, Dattani decides to make the character of Dr. Thakkar remain seated throughout the play. 'Chandan and Tara walk into it. They both have a limp, but on a different legs' (Tara, 324). The play begins with an assertion and claim of Chandan who has been addressed as Dan whenever he has been shown in London for convenience and dramatic situation that despite separation from Tara, he still feels firmly attached to her. He also accepts and assesses that his 'progress... has been zero' after the separation. It seems quite obvious that Mahesh Dattani wants to communicate more than what the above extract

literally means. It has layers of metaphorical meanings. We can interpret this statement as a keen observation of Mahesh Dattani about contemporary society. One twin (It seems Chandan ) seems to represent scientific progress while the other represents social and cultural advancement. It may be interpreted here that despite huge scientific and social advancement, one can observe an imbalance and lack of coordination between them. The problem lies both in the cultural advancement and the scientific and technological progress. However, the nature of problems differs in both the cases. In order to ensure a balanced overall inclusive development and growth, scientific and technological progress should be made in consonance with cultural advancement and vice versa. The play basically deals with medical science and unethical medical practice of a doctor. It highlights the same of the hidden aspects of medical practice. There are many things that do not come into the public domain.

It is not only Dr. Thakkar who is a byproduct of the imbalance and disproportionate developed culture but also some other characters like Bharati and her father. The story of the play is not about illiterate or uneducated people. It is about the people who belong to the highest class of the society who almost always claim to be quite cultured and civilised. They are called modern people who do not believe in any orthodox and conservative practice of society. Both Bharati and her father are equally responsible for the unethical surgery of the twin and for the suffering of Tara.

### **Conclusion:**

Dattani's subtle use of irony can be found in his depiction of Bharati's pain to see Patel giving preferential treatment to Chandan. The audience is aware of the fact that it is Bharati who is responsible for Tara's condition. But her sole aim is to compensate for the loss, that also at the cost

of Patel. She alleges him of lack of concern for Tara and extra care for Chandan. Bharati has been brought up on old values. So she prefers Chandan to Tara. She takes her father's help to accomplish her condition. She doesn't seek her husband's advice which clearly shows us how the lives of the members of the family are affected by social gender preference. Bharati and Patel are guided by old values which make them suffer. All the characters in the play suffer in his/her own ways. This happens because of prejudices which can hardly be removed even from the minds of educated persons.

The play seems quite relevant in the twenty-first century where scientific progress in general and medical education and practice in particular needs to address some of the issues in order to adapt with cultural progress and nature. Tara is to depict a clash and imbalance between scientific advancement, nature and culture. The play indeed dramatizes, chiefly through the character of Dr Thakkar the subtle conflict between scientific temper and cultural notations of life. The play also deals with the duel between science and nature. Probably the clash and mutual dependency of science and culture has also been communicated with the help of the twin. A good and wealthy society can be imagined only when there is a balance, harmony and coordination between Science and Humanities.

The play hints that the cultural development in our society has not taken place with the same pace as science and technology has progressed. Cultural development has almost always been given relatively less priorities in comparison to scientific development. Sometimes we are not ready to adapt ourselves according to the social change brought by scientific development. So Erin Mee in his notes on the play rightly observes: 'Women into the play are issues of class and community, and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyles and values.' It seems Mahesh

Dattani warns us that in the end the culture and nature may leave us alone like Chandan has left his father all alone.

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