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Gendered Subaltern in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: Body, Voice, and Patriarchal Dominance

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's Tara is one of the most powerful plays in Indian English drama dealing with gender discrimination, bodily politics, disability, family secrecy, and patriarchal violence. The play presents the tragic story of Tara and Chandan, conjoined twins whose surgical separation becomes the site of a deeply gendered decision. Although Tara has a stronger biological claim to the third leg, the family, especially the maternal grandfather and the mother Bharati, chooses to privilege the male child, Chandan. This paper studies Tara as a gendered subaltern whose body is controlled, whose voice is silenced, and whose life is sacrificed under patriarchal dominance. Using feminist theory, subaltern studies, and the idea of the gendered body, the paper argues that 2 Tara's tragedy is not merely personal or medical; it is social, cultural, and political. Dattani exposes how patriarchy operates within the intimate space of the family, turning love, care, medical science, and inheritance into instruments of gendered violence. Tara's damaged body becomes a metaphor for the mutilation of female identity in a society that values sons over 7 daughters. Her voice, though energetic and intelligent, remains unheard within the structures of familial and social authority. The play therefore becomes a critique of Indian patriarchal ideology and a dramatic representation of the female subaltern's struggle for recognition, dignity, and agency.

Keywords*: gendered subaltern, patriarchy, body, voice, disability, feminism.*

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani holds a key position in modern Indian English drama because of his bold engagement with those social invisible issues that are often pushed to the margins of public attention. His dramatic works deal unsparingly with gender inequality, communal tension, sexuality, family repression, and the hidden violence of middle-class Indian life. Tara, written in 1990 and later published as *Tara: A Play in Two Acts*, dramatizes the story of Tara and Chandan, conjoined twins separated through surgery. The play was first staged as *Twinkle Tara* and later became known as *Tara*; it is widely discussed as a play about the predicament of the girl child and gender discrimination in Indian society. At the superficial level, Tara appears to be a

family tragedy involving two physically disabled children. However, at a deeper level, the play exposes the politics of gender operating through the family, medical institution, inheritance, and societal norms. Tara and Chandan are born joined at the hip with three legs. Medical evidences recommended that the third leg would have had a better chance of survival if it had been given to Tara. However, the leg is given to Chandan as he is male. This decision becomes the central moral crux of the play. The surgery does not merely separate two bodies; it symbolically separates privilege from deprivation, masculinity from femininity, and social value from social neglect. The title of the paper, "Gendered Subaltern in Mahesh Dattani's Tara: Body, Voice, and Patriarchal Dominance," suggests three central concerns. Firstly, Tara's body is treated as a site of patriarchal control. Secondly, her voice is marginalized despite her intelligence, wit, and emotional strength. Thirdly, patriarchal dominance operates not only through men but also through women who internalize and reproduce patriarchal values. Tara becomes a subaltern figure because she is denied equal social worth, bodily autonomy, and narrative authority. Her suffering reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls the problem of the subaltern's speech: even when the oppressed subject speaks, dominant structures often prevent that voice from being truly heard (Spivak, 1988).

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this paper are-

- To examine Tara as a gendered subaltern figure whose body, voice, and identity are marginalized within the patriarchal family and social structure.
- To analyze the politics of the female body and voice in *Tara*.
- To study the role of patriarchy, medical authority, and inheritance in producing gender injustice.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative textual analysis of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*. The study uses 'feminist literary criticism' and 'subaltern theory' as its primary theoretical frameworks. Feminist theory facilitates to examine the unfair and unequal treatment of Tara as a girl child, while subaltern theories lend to understand her marginal position within family, society, and narrative structure. The paper also refers to the concept of the body as a socially constructed and politically controlled site. The analysis is interpretative and focuses on character, dialogue, symbolism, dramatic structure, and thematic development.

Theoretical Framework: Feminism and the Gendered Subaltern

The term "subaltern" was used by Antonio Gramsci (1971) to refer to those groups who remain outside dominant power structures. In postcolonial theory, the term became especially significant through the work of Subaltern Studies scholars and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" does not simply ask whether the oppressed can produce speech; rather, it asks whether systems of power allow that speech to be recognized as meaningful (Spivak, 1988). In the case of Tara, she speaks, jokes,

desires, dreams, and protests, but her voice is not granted authority. Her life is decided by others before she can participate in that decision. The concept of the "gendered subaltern" is pertinent as Tara's marginality is a byproduct of her gender (Choudhury, 2014). Tara is marginalized not only because of disability; she is marginalized because she is a disabled girl a society dominated by male authority. Her brother Chandan also suffers, but his suffering is accompanied by social privilege. Tara, on the other hand, suffers doubly: as a physically disabled person and as a female child. This double marginalization makes her condition deeply subaltern. Judith Butler's theory of gender as socially constructed is relevant here. Gender is not merely biological; it is performed and regulated through social norms (Butler, 1990). In *Tara*, the male child is expected to inherit, continue the family lineage, and receive social investment, while the female child is regarded as secondary. The surgical decision reflects this social construction of gendered value. Tara's body is not seen as her own; it becomes an object through which the family performs its loyalty to patriarchy.

Mahesh Dattani and the Politics of Invisible Issues

Mahesh Dattani is the first Indian English playwright to have received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1998. His plays are a significant shift in Indian English drama from mythological and historical concerns to contemporary social realities. Tara is one of his most discussed plays as it exposes the violence hidden in the preference for sons. Dattani is credited for bringing "invisible" social issues to the stage. He dramatizes the latent violence beneath respectable middle-class life. His dramatic world often reveals that oppression does not always emerge as direct brutality; it may appear as love, care, silence, respectability, or family honour. In Tara, the home is not a safe space. It is the very site where gender injustice is planned, concealed, and rationalized.

Tara's Body as a Site of Patriarchal Control

The central symbol of the play is Tara's body. Her body is not merely biological; it is social and political. The conjoined body of Tara and Chandan initially represents unity, equality, and shared existence. They are literally connected. However, the surgery that separates them becomes an act of discrimination. The separation is not based on justice but on gender preference (Ratnaker, 2022). The third leg becomes the most powerful symbol in the play. It represents opportunity, mobility, agency, and social possibility. Since Tara has a stronger claim to the leg, justice demands that she should receive it. But patriarchy intervenes. The boy is given preference because the family believes that the male child has greater social value. Thus, Tara's body is mutilated by a decision made in the name of family interest. This bodily injustice exposes how patriarchy controls female bodies. Tara is not allowed to decide for herself. Her body is acted upon by parents, doctors, and elders. Dr. Thakkar, the surgeon, represents medical authority, but his role is morally compromised because he participates in the patriarchal decision. Medical science, which should serve truth and healing, becomes an instrument of gendered violence. The operation therefore becomes both a surgical and ideological act. Tara's disabled body also reflects the social disability imposed on women. Her physical impairment is not only a medical condition; it is the visible mark of patriarchal injustice. Dattani uses the injured female body

as a metaphor for a society that systematically weakens women and then blames them for their weakness. Tara's loss of the leg is the loss of equal opportunity.

Voice and Silence: The Subaltern Condition of Tara

Tara is not a passive character. She is sharp, lively, witty, and emotionally intelligent. She often appears stronger than Chandan in personality. She has dreams and desires. She wants to live fully. "However, her voice is denied social power" (Subramanyam, 2002). She can speak, but she cannot determine the conditions of her life. This distinction is central to subaltern theory. The subaltern may speak, but her speech is unheard or misread by dominant structures (Gupta, 2025). Tara's family speaks for her. Her mother claims to love her, her father claims to be practical, her grandfather claims authority through inheritance, and the doctor claims scientific legitimacy. But Tara herself is excluded from the original decision that shapes her destiny. Her voice is also silenced through secrecy. The family hides the truth of the operation from her. The truth is revealed only gradually. This secrecy is a form of violence because it denies Tara knowledge of her own body and history. To hide the truth from Tara is to deny her subjectivity. She becomes an object of pity rather than a person with the right to know. Chandan, later known as Dan, tries to recover Tara's story through writing. The play-within-the-play structure shows his attempt to give voice to Tara after her death. Yet this also raises an important question: Why must Tara's story be told through her brother? Even the act of remembering Tara is mediated through a male voice. This does not mean Chandan is oppressive in the same way as the patriarchal elders, but it shows how Tara's narrative authority remains incomplete. She becomes the subject of a story written by someone else.

Patriarchal Dominance within the Family

One of the most disturbing aspects of Tara is that patriarchy is located within the family. The family is usually imagined as a space of love, protection, and emotional bonding. Dattani challenges this assumption. In the Patel family, love is blended with guilt, preference, secrecy, and control. The maternal grandfather represents patriarchal authority. His decision favouring Chandan is deeply connected with inheritance and male lineage. The male child is regarded more valuable as is supposed to carry the family name and inherit property. Tara, being female, is seen as less worthy of investment. In this way, gender discrimination is connected to economic and social structures. Bharati, Tara's mother, is a very complicated figure who loves Tara intensely, but her love is haunted by guilt. She participates in the decision that damages Tara, yet later she tries to compensate through excessive care. Bharati's character is a good example of women's internalization of patriarchy. She is not simply a villain; she is also a victim of the same system. However, her victimhood cannot be taken for granted erase her responsibility. She is presented as both oppressed and complicit. Mr. Patel represents patriarchal rationality. He is a practical and emotionally dearth person. His attitude reflects the patriarchal structure of the family. He does not openly display the same emotional guilt as Bharati, but he too participates in the silence surrounding Tara's suffering. The family's collective silence becomes an act of patriarchal dominance.

The Family as a Site of Violence

Dattani's another major achievement in the play is his exposure of violence within the family. The family is generally imagined as a room of love, protection, and moral values. However, in Tara, the family turns to be the first site of discrimination. The girl child Tara is not ruined by strangers; she is betrayed by her own family. This makes the play particularly more disturbing and intolerable. The violence is not spectacular but intimate. It happens through decisions, silences, preferences, and emotional manipulation. The family hides its crime under respectability. Dattani reveals that patriarchy is most powerful when it appears natural and loving. The Patel family represents a larger social structure. Tara's tragedy is not an isolated case but a reflection of a society where the girl child is often treated as less valuable. The play therefore moves from the personal to the political. Tara's body becomes the evidence of a collective social crime.

Chandan and Tara: Unequal Twins

The relationship between Tara and Chandan is central to the emotional crux of the play. As twins, they represent natural equality. Their conjoined birth suggests that they are two parts of one entity. Yet, society separates them unequally. Chandan receives the leg, social preference, and future possibility. Tara receives injury, pity, and eventual death. Chandan is not personally accountable for Tara's suffering, yet he benefits from the patriarchal decision. His feeling of guilt shows his awareness of this injustice. His shift to London and his efforts to scripting Tara's story suggest that he cannot escape the memory of his sister. Thus Chandan carries the burden of guilt and Tara's sacrifice. This relationship showcases that patriarchy causes damage to both women and men, though not equally. Tara is destroyed physically and socially, while Chandan is psychologically and emotionally injured. Chandan's identity remains incomplete because it is built on Tara's loss. The play therefore suggests that gender injustice corrupts the entire moral structure of the family.

Disability and Gender: Double Marginalization

The play *Tara* raises serious questions about disability. Both Tara and Chandan are physically disabled after the operation, but their disabilities are perceived differently by society. Chandan's disability is interpreted as possibility; Tara's disability is tied with limitation. The difference lies in gender. Tara's disability is another reason for her marginalization. Society has already devalued her as a girl; disability intensifies that devaluation. She is treated as fragile, dependent, and incomplete. However, Dattani does not present Tara as weak. Her personality is vibrant and courageous. The tragedy lies not in her disability itself but in the social response to it. The play therefore demands a serious disability reading of the text. It suggests that disability is not merely located in the body; it is produced by social structures that deny access, dignity, and equality. Tara is disabled by surgery, but she is further disabled by patriarchy, secrecy, pity, and exclusion.

The Role of Medical Authority

Dr. Thakkar plays a crucial role in the gendered violence of the play. As a doctor, he is expected to act according to medical ethics. However, he allows social and economic pressure to influence the surgical decision. His authority gives legitimacy to injustice. The family's patriarchal preference becomes acceptable

because it is carried out through a professional medical procedure. This is one of Dattani's sharpest criticisms. The play shows that institutions are not 10 neutral. Medicine, law, family, and inheritance can all become instruments of oppression when controlled by patriarchal values. Dr. Thakkar's role reveals how gender discrimination is not merely emotional or cultural; it can be institutionalized. The operation on Tara and Chandan is thus not only a medical event but also a political event. It exposes the alliance between patriarchy and professional authority. Tara's body becomes the place where this alliance is violently enacted.

Bharati: Motherhood, Guilt, and Patriarchal Complicity

Bharati is one of the most psychologically complex characters in the play. She loves Tara deeply and appears to care for her more than anyone else. Yet her love is not innocent. It is shaped by guilt. Her over-protectiveness is a form of compensation for the earlier betrayal. Bharati's character complicates any simple understanding of patriarchy as only male domination. Patriarchy often survives because women are made to internalize its values. Bharati chooses or accepts the choice that privileges Chandan. Later, she tries to repair the damage through emotional attachment. But love cannot undo structural injustice. Her guilt cannot restore Tara's lost leg or lost future. Through Bharati, Dattani shows that motherhood itself can be shaped by patriarchal pressure. A mother may love her daughter, yet still act according to social values that privilege the son. This makes the tragedy more painful because Tara is betrayed not only by distant social institutions but by those closest to her.

Tara as a Symbol of the Indian Girl Child

Tara's individual story becomes symbolic of the condition of many girls in patriarchal societies. She represents the girl child who is denied nutrition, education, healthcare, inheritance, freedom, and emotional recognition. Her body becomes a metaphor for the social mutilation of female potential. The play does not present gender discrimination as an abstract idea. It dramatizes it through a concrete bodily event. The denial of the leg makes visible the invisible violence that many girls experience. Tara's tragedy is extreme, but the ideology behind it is familiar: the son is treated as an asset, the daughter as burden (Bhattacharya & Suresh, 2017). "The play is a strong critique of gender discrimination and the preference for the male child" (Babu 2014). The play unsparingly deals with the manipulation of the separation surgery to favour the boy child over the girl child. In this sense, Tara is more than a character; she becomes a symbol of denied female possibility.

Memory, Guilt, and Narrative Reconstruction

The dramatic structure of Tara is important to its meaning. The play is narrated through memory, especially Chandan's memory. The past returns because it has not been morally resolved. Chandan's writing becomes an attempt to reconstruct the truth and give Tara a form of posthumous justice. However, memory is not enough. Chandan can remember Tara, but he cannot bring her back. He can write her story, but he cannot undo the injustice. This makes the play deeply tragic. The act of narration becomes both confession and failure. It acknowledges guilt but cannot repair loss. The play's memory structure also reflects the hidden nature of patriarchal violence. The truth is buried in the past, concealed by family respectability. Only through dramatic

reconstruction does the audience understand the full horror of what happened. Dattani uses theatre as a space where suppressed truths can be revealed.

Body, Voice, and Patriarchal Dominance: **The Central Argument**

The three terms in the title—body, voice, and patriarchal dominance—are deeply connected in Tara. Tara's body is controlled by patriarchal decision-making. Her voice is silenced by secrecy and family authority. Patriarchal dominance operates through both visible and invisible forms of power. Tara's body shows the material consequences of gender discrimination. Her voice shows the emotional and psychological consequences. Patriarchal dominance explains the system that produces both. The play's tragedy lies in the fact that Tara is not naturally powerless; she is made powerless. Her subalternity is socially produced. Dattani's achievement lies in transforming a family story into a critique of gendered social order. He does not preach directly. Instead, he places before the audience a wounded body, a silenced voice, and a guilty family. The audience is forced to confront the moral violence of son preference.

Findings of the Study

The study arrives at the following findings: Firstly, Tara is a gendered subaltern because her marginalization is produced by the combined forces of gender, disability, family hierarchy, and social tradition. Secondly, the play presents the female body as a site of patriarchal control. Tara's body is surgically altered according to patriarchal preference rather than justice. Thirdly, Tara's voice is lively but powerless. She speaks as an individual, but the family and social system deny authority to her speech. Fourthly, Dattani shows that patriarchy operates not only 3 through men but also through women who internalize patriarchal values. Bharati's role demonstrates this painful complexity. Fifthly, the play exposes the connection between gender discrimination and institutions such as medicine, inheritance, and family. Finally, Tara is not merely a play about one girl's suffering; it is a larger critique of the social system that sacrifices female potential for male privilege.

Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is a powerful dramatic critique of gender discrimination and patriarchal dominance. Through the tragic figure of Tara, Dattani exposes how the female child is denied bodily autonomy, social recognition, and narrative authority. Tara's damaged body becomes the visible sign of an invisible ideology: the belief that the male child is more valuable than the female child. The play's significance lies in its ability to connect the personal with the political. The tragedy occurs within a family, but its causes are social. The surgical decision is made in a private domestic context, but it reflects a larger cultural preference for sons. Tara's voice is silenced not because she has nothing to say, but because patriarchal structures refuse to listen. This condition of Tara recalls Spivak's powerful observation that "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988, p. 308). As a gendered subaltern, Tara represents countless girls whose lives are shaped by decisions made without their consent. Her story compels the audience to question the moral foundations of family, love, medical authority, and social tradition. Dattani's Tara therefore remains a major

text in Indian English drama because it turns the stage into a space of ethical interrogation. It asks us to recognize the cost of patriarchy—not only in abstract social terms but in the broken body and silenced voice of a girl who deserved a fuller life.

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