

## **From Wounds to Words: Exploring Gendered Power Dynamics and Psycho-Social Victimhood through Literary Lens**

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### **Abstract**

The primary texts taken in this research article are Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) and Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1995). Incidents of psychological harassment of women are common in some way or the other to most families and social circles, but seldom publicly reported. The two renowned twentieth-century playwrights have skilfully unmasked the veil of silence in two very different and delicate cases in their plays. This paper intends to critically analyse the literary representation of the characters of Miss Leela Benare (in Tendulkar) and Tara Patel (in Dattani), and also to examine the nexus of gender discrimination and male chauvinism in twentieth-century India.

**Keywords:** Chauvinism, Gender Discrimination, Hypocrisy, Society, Victim.

It has been ages since matriarchal societies prevailed in many sections of India. The days of egalitarian society when women were highly revered are also long gone. Today, Indian women folk, despite the fact that some female professionals have established themselves unequal footing with their male counterparts, are struggling under the grip of regressive patriarchy. Even in some north-eastern regions such as Meghalaya, where the matrilineal system is still functional, men are campaigning for change—a change in not merely the social system or the head of the family, but a degradation of the social status of women. And this condescending attitude and activities of most men towards any and every woman—mother, sister, girlfriend, wife, or a stranger—have reached an alarming state at present. This situation of women subordination to the male folk and the resulting humiliation has been handled with artistic dexterity by many authors in different times. In the present paper, I have taken one work each of Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) and Mahesh Dattani (1958-present), two leading playwrights of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, to explore one important aspect of male chauvinism as depicted in their plays. Physical tortures

on women are almost regularly reported in the print and electronic media in the country. But beyond physical tortures, Indian women are often submitted to silent psychological anguish as well. Both Tendulkar and Dattani, in their plays, have skilfully carved out the psychological harassment of women in two very different and delicate cases in their plays, cases that are common in some way or the other to almost every family and social circle, but are so subtle that they are never publicly reported.

Indian English writers have long been credited for their sincere effort to represent, in their works, various aspects of Indian society to readers across the world. Although the language in which these writers write is a foreign one, the sentiments expressed in their writings are typically Indian. And the socio-economic-cultural pictures portrayed in the pages of their works are easily and directly relatable to the readers. Many of the recurrent evils and problems of Indian society appear as leading themes in these writings. One of the most crucial of these problems is the exploitation of the 'other' or the 'lesser' sex. Women suffer in almost every sector of life, domestic as well as public, from their birth to death. And the agents of their torture are insiders as well as outsiders— their parents, relatives, friends and even strangers. Unfortunately, those who are tortured are hardly found to have any voice. The Indian English writers are often found to give voice to these unvoiced. Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are two such dramatists who speak against social discrimination and injustices in their plays. Their works bring up gender issues and the space usually allotted to women in a patriarchal society. Both the authors present the bizarre reality of women playing a secondary role to men. I intend to take up this socially sensitive issue as represented by Tendulkar and Dattani through the characters of Miss Leela Benare and Tara Patel, figuring respectively in *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) and *Tara* (1995), and I also seek to explore how the issue has been problematised by these two authors. The shameful and filthy practice of female foeticide or infanticide, still prevalent in the so-called 'modern' Indian society, serves as a common link between the two.

Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, as we all know, was originally written in Marathi and was entitled *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*. The English title is a literal translation of the Marathi one, and is equally

significant. The immediate implication of the title may be seen in connection with the court proceedings in the mock trial where an imaginary charge of infanticide is brought against Miss Benare in the form of a game. However, the title takes up graver significance when, in the name of the mock trial, all the co-actors heap up charges on her. She is cornered and maliciously attacked by all her companions. Her personal life is publicly scandalised. Her purely personal love life is exposed with the open intention of deriving sadistic pleasure. Miss Benare is shocked and almost frozen in anguish at this unexpected turn of the situation. Her voice is choked and she is full of tears. The spirited, lively and frank Miss Benare is forcibly silenced, thus making the title of the play meaningful. Mr. Kashikar and Sukhatme, the self-styled guardians of the society, talk in a grave voice about the corruptions in the society due to the moral depravity of women like Miss Benare. Silence also deepens in the minds of the audience and the readers at the exposure of male chauvinism, hypocrisy and cruelty in the so-called progressive urban middle-class society. The famous Marathi dramatist in this play realistically reflects how gender discrimination exists in Indian society. Miss Benare's personal life harms no other individual except her own self. What on the earth, then, the society has to do with the personal incidents of an individual? She is often attacked because she is unmarried, and therefore taken as insecure. It reflects the traditional attitude that girl children are born to be married off early. It also reflects the mythical patriarchal assumption that women are incapable of conducting themselves and need to be sheltered and protected by men. But in reality, women are forcefully silenced all the more because an independent woman is a threat to the gender status-quo and patriarchal justification of supremacy. Benare is also going to be suspended from her profession as a school teacher on the lame excuse that her illegitimate relationship with Prof. Damle is harmful to her students. Quite strangely, Damle does not have to face any such adverse consequence. The hypocrisy and dual standard of the male-dominated society is prominently evident here. Quoting Nilanjan Chatterjee, Girijashankar Mane rightly explains in the article "Male Chauvinism in Translated Select Works of Vijay Tendulkar" that Benare is a "victim of a revengeful and myopic society that does not tolerate deviance from its mores" (qtd. in Mane 34). Her "efforts to be an individual" interestingly falls under the concept of 'deviance' as

understood by such a social system and hence each of her moves comes under close scrutiny and criticism (qtd. in Mane 34). The qualities of a responsible teacher—punctuality, sincerity and efficiency—are not taken into consideration. Rather, her personal life is taken to be the sole criterion for her elimination from her professional life. But no one accuses the man who is equally responsible for the adultery, and who uses the body of the woman and insults her love and worship. If Miss Benare has to lose her job for her sexual attachment with Professor Damle, he should also have confronted the same consequence. For, Prof. Damle's fault is, by no means less, but perhaps much more than that of Benare.

The mock trial that starts as a 'game' gradually evolves into a hunt. Miss Benare is trapped and is made the target of severe psychological torture by others. Her monologue to ward the end of the play expresses her pent up, long suppressed feelings, and at the same time becomes a fitting reply to all the accusations made against her in the mock trial. She starts in the form of self-meditation: "For many years, I haven't said a word. Chances came and chances went. Storms raged one after another about my throat. And there was a wail like death in my heart. But each time I shut my lips tight" (Tendulkar 72). Miss Benare here appears almost as the mouthpiece of a majority of the Indian women who experience similar situations in their lives. Most of the times, they are compelled to remain silent in the face of patriarchal hegemony. They are often not in a position to protest or justify themselves. The agonised inner self of Miss Benare is gradually explored. She admits painfully that "life was a burden to [her]" (72). The pains and deceits she faced from her childhood compelled her to conclude: "Life is a betrayal. Life is a fraud. Life is a drug" (73). She seems to appeal to the Judge: "Milord, life is a very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged" (73). Even today, daily newspapers exhibit many suicidal cases of women fed up with the exploits of men all around. Miss Benare becomes furious to think about how her employers have punished her, not because of any lapse in her profession as a teacher, but because of something that is exclusively personal to her. She demands that her "private life is my own business" and "I'll decide what to do with myself" (73). She accuses all men of being hypocrites. Commenting on the members of her drama troupe she observes: "These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces-how ferocious they look!" (74). She is

frightened by those who are all around her.

In the second half of the monologue, Miss Benare makes painful confessions. She remembers how she fell in love with her mother's brother. The man was not a lover, but rather a pervert who had his eyes only on her newly blossomed beauty. So when it comes to marriage, this "brave man turned tail and ran" (Tendulkar 74). Again, as a grown-up woman she loved Professor Damle for his intellect and offered herself unhesitatingly to him. He too cared for her body alone. So she screams in utter frustration that the "body is a traitor!" (75). However, she soon asserts that she now must have her body for the baby in her womb. This, obviously, is another compulsion of women. Women, especially the married women in India, are often treated as baby producing machines. Men take this factor to be the weak point of women by which they can keep women under their control. Often the saying goes that men treat women either as a goddess or as a whore, nothing in between, and never as a normal human being. The only other female character in the play is Mrs. Kashikar, who always gets snubbed by her husband for nothing but to show his superiority and power over her. The various categories of female characters and the varied treatment they receive from their male counterparts in the literary narratives remind one of the male chauvinism and patriarchal hypocrisy portrayed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance, practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (36)

Miss Benare's monologue, in fact, is a powerful defence of her own self against the ruthless attacks of the so-called upholders of social norms, who can hardly tolerate a successful and economically independent woman like her. She contrasts sharply all the emotionally starved and unsuccessful men who vindictively prosecute her. The monologue bounds the readers as well as the audience to seriously ponder over the double standards of the male-

dominated Indian society.

'Tara' in Mahesh Dattani's eponymous play is another victim of the Indian male chauvinism. This young girl, who might have shined and twinkled all her life like a *tara* (star), is subjected to deprivation almost from her birth. She was a conjoined twin in the mother's womb, and her trouble started when their mother Bharati along with their politically and financially powerful grandfather bribed the doctor to privilege the boy child with the third leg of the conjoined twins though naturally it belonged to the girl child. The operation at the time of birth leaves Tara crippled for life. The play exhibits how she had to die a premature death because of patriarchal favouritism and domestic deprivation. Tara possessed the boldness and strength of mind to engrave a place of her own. She was more intelligent, sharp and witty and would have performed much better than the male child, if only she were given the chance and moral support by her parents. Still, she was extremely optimistic and was not deterred by the injustice done to her. She had her dreams and she asserts them in definite terms:

I will spend the rest of my life feeding and clothing those ... starving naked millions everywhere. May be I can start an institution that will do all that. Or I could join Mother Teresa and sacrifice myself to a great cause. That may give ... purpose to my ... existence.  
(Dattani 50)

But Tara was discouraged to have the course of her life in her own hand. She was bubbly and energetic who had all the qualities of a normal girl. But she was reminded time and again that her life was nothing more than a burden on this earth, and such disparaging words gradually made her lose interest in life altogether. When Tara came to know that it was her mother who made such a decision, she could not bear the truth and the shock took away her life.

Shakti Batra rightly notes in the 'Introduction' of the play that "Dattani sees Tara as a play about the gendered self, about coming to terms with the feminine side of oneself in a world that always favours what is 'male'" (xiii). In spite of being a lively and sensitive girl, Tara does not get the opportunities which his brother, being a male, enjoys, and eventually she wastes away and dies. It is of course true that Mr. Patel did not support the immoral operation

after their birth, but he too ignored Tara's prospects. He might engage Tara in some meaningful endeavour, but such a thought never occurred in his mind. As a father Mr. Patel is very much concerned over the education and career of Chandan, but he is hardly worried about Tara even if she prefers not to go to the college. As a stereotypical Indian woman, Tara is supposed to have the fulfilment of her life within the four walls of the domestic sphere. Tara smartly quips at this by saying that the "men in the house were deciding on whether they were going hunting while the women looked after the cave" (8). Dattani exhibits how the life of a positive girl like Tara is spoiled by domestic deprivation and social injustice. Mr. Patel makes his wife Bharati responsible for everything and thus merely manages an escape from his responsibilities. This may be taken as another form of male chauvinism. Although Bharati now loves Tara a lot, her subjugation to the expectations of the society and her preference for her son only proves how she succumbs to the demands of the typical Indian patriarchal society. Besides, her public display of excessive love and attention for Tara is a screen to shield her guilt and to comfort her guilty conscience. Apart from Tara's father and grandfather, Dr. Thakkar is another patriarch who, going against his medical ethics, executed the unfair operation for his greed of power and money. The doctor was bribed to make the boy the privileged child. Thus Tara was destined to die at an early age due to domestic-social injustice.

The way Dattani portrayed the character of Tara helps exposing all these bizarre truths of Indian society. Sadaf Fareed's comments in the article "Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*: a Voice of Voiceless" are relevant in this context:

Tara's potentiality was sacrificed at the altar of gender. Identity crisis becomes a chain with which a female is bound when the question of choice between male and female comes up. If we think, why is she killed? The answer is crystal clear that Tara is not wanted, because she is a girl. In our society, 'Girls' are not wanted. For a moment, if we imagine that Tara's mother had preferred her at the time of operation instead of Chandan. Would she have forgiven? No, Never! Because she also is a Woman. (5)

Irrespective of what Tara's mother must have wished, she was bound to submit to the wishes of Tara's politically and economically powerful grandfather. The

excerpts within the play in the context of the film *Sophie's Choice*, that the "Nazis will only allow her to keep one child" while the "other one would be taken away to a concentration camp", obliquely and ironically hit at the Indian patriarchal society in which a son is usually preferred to a girl (Dattani 44). The Patels, it is mentioned in the play, are said to kill the girl children by drowning them in milk. One leading theme of the play is, in fact, the sacrifice of the girl child Tara for the sake of the boy Chandan. Tara's mother herself did this injustice to her own daughter.

In course of the play, Tara has been repeatedly referred to as a 'freak'. M. K. Rukhaya in the article "An Analysis of Mahesh Dattani's 'Tara': The Other Side" significantly notes:

The term 'freak' has been conventionally used to refer to a person who has something unusual regarding their appearance or behaviour. The older usage of the word 'freaks' refers to the state of being physically deformed, or characterized by rare diseases and conditions. The word was utilized to suggest 'sideshow performers.' In such an instance, the word 'freak' represents the state of Women, who are marginalized. The female race who are not congenitally deformed but are so as society forces the handicap upon them. Just as it is presented in concrete terms in the play: Tara's leg is callously separated from her to render her twin brother normal, defying the tenets of Nature. (4)

So, if Tara is a 'freak', she has only been made so by those who are around her. Nature was all in her favour. But the society to which she belonged was against her. Her biological mother and grandfather were against her.

In fact, the Indian society holds some pre-conceived notions about the roles men and women ought to play in society, and people are not expected to deviate from such roles. Thus, truly speaking, the Indian society has yet to travel a long way to be a society of free-minded individuals, not stereotyped males and females. Gender discrimination can be seen in almost every sphere of the society. While it affects women in the worst manner, men are also sometimes found to be victims of it. For centuries gender stereotyping prevented men from choosing dancing or nursing as usual professions, and women from

such works as military services or a sailor's job. Even when women started working outside domestic spheres, certain jobs such as nursing, teaching etc. were earmarked as suitable for women. And it is needless to say that the working women, besides their daylong activities in the working places, have to bear the burden of domestic chores. Though theoretically taken, boys and girls (or men and women), are supposed to enjoy equal rights, the reality always tells a different tale. In most Indian families, deviations on the part of boys are often pardoned or softly handled according to the norm that 'boys will be boys'. It is expected that boys will be spirited and naughty, while girls must be obedient and submissive. Till today, the birth of a son is treated with joy and a daughter is still considered as *paraya dhan* ("the property of the in-laws"). Women at present are indeed competing with men in every field. We find women as doctors, engineers, soldiers, astronauts and whatnot. But the important point is that, not merely the socially and economically backward women, but even such educated, confident, financially self-supported and independent women as Tendulkar's Miss Benare have to suffer the qualms of gender discrimination. And such discriminations are very often practised by the educated people like Tara's family, not to talk about the prejudiced illiterate villagers. Tara is intelligent, but man "cannot accept the woman's intellect, and gets intimidated by her intelligence", and therefore, "Tara's victory at the card game is seen as thorough cheating and Chandan is ashamed to admit her victory" (Rukhaya 4). While Chandan "sees her as a good businesswoman as she cheats at cards", he attributes it not to her positive business acumen, but to her negative shrewdness (4). This is because it is conventionally believed that the "best woman was intellectually the inferior of the worst man" (Woolf 45).

The dramatisation of the challenges and helplessness of Miss Benare and Tara by their respective creators thus reveal the essentially crippled, and even perverted, mentality of the modern Indian society behind the guise of the so-called liberality and advancement. All the noble promises of equality of both the sexes and of equal opportunities to women in all the fields with men turn out to be sheer mockery on the fields of reality, as is evidenced in the case of Tendulkar's Miss Benare. Dattani's *Tara* also artfully tears the masks off the faces of the Indian politicians and educated upper-class people. On the one hand, they promise security for women, education for girls and prevention

of female foeticide, but on another level, they are hypocrites and quite conservative in their domestic spheres. When the question of a choice between a grandson and a granddaughter arises, Bharati's powerful father at once insists on Chandan (even after knowing that the granddaughter should have been a natural choice). He even leaves his entire property to Chandan and not a single penny to Tara. The social norms, economic standards and cultural factors have been responsible for manifold sufferings of and injustices against women. All these factors combine to create the social system in which the women have to take birth, suffer and die. Miss Benare and Tara may be taken to represent innumerable other Indian women who have to suffer within a nepotistic society that shapes and controls the minds and actions of people in favour of men. Thus, as Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes in *The Second Sex*, one "is not born, rather becomes, a woman" due to the treatment of the collective social system, wherein 'woman' becomes equivalent to 'victim' (14).

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