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The Intersection of Gender and Disability: Double Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990) is a significant work in Indian English drama that interrogates the socio-cultural prejudices embedded in gender and disability. The play presents the tragic story of Tara Patel, a conjoined twin who becomes a victim of patriarchal preference and medical manipulation. This paper explores the intersection of gender and disability in *Tara*, arguing that Tara experiences a dual form of marginalisation: first, as a disabled individual in an ableist society, and second, as a girl child subjected to patriarchal discrimination. Drawing on feminist disability theory, the study examines how the female body becomes a contested site of power, ethics, and cultural violence. Tara's physical impairment is not merely biological but socially produced through oppressive structures that privilege masculinity over femininity. The play ultimately exposes the ethical failures of family, medicine, and society in sustaining gendered injustice and silencing the disabled female subject.

Keywords: gender, disability, intersectionality, patriarchy, marginalisation, violence.

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INTRODUCTION

In the traditional socio-cultural imagination of India, disability has often been understood through the lens of the doctrine of karma, wherein physical or mental impairment is perceived as the consequence of deeds committed in a previous birth. Such a belief system has historically contributed to the moralization and stigmatization of disability, locating it within a framework of fate, punishment, and spiritual deficiency rather than recognizing it as a social and human condition. The persistence of these deeply entrenched prejudices continues to shape societal attitudes even in contemporary times, resulting in the marginalisation and exclusion of persons with disabilities across multiple spheres of life, including education, employment, family relations, and social participation. Consequently, disability in the Indian context cannot merely be understood as a biological or medical condition; rather, it must also be examined as a socially constructed category shaped by cultural beliefs, institutional discrimination, and systemic inequalities.

Discrimination against persons with disabilities is deeply intertwined with patriarchal social structures that privilege ideals of physical perfection, productivity, independence, and masculine strength. In patriarchal societies, the human body is often evaluated according to its utility, efficiency, and conformity to socially constructed norms of "normalcy." Consequently, disabled bodies are frequently perceived as weak, dependent, or deficient, leading to their marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream social life. Patriarchy

further intensifies disability discrimination through gendered expectations. Men are traditionally expected to embody strength, authority, and economic productivity, while women are valued according to ideals of beauty, domesticity, and reproductive capability. Disabled individuals who fail to conform to these rigid norms are therefore doubly marginalized. Disabled women, in particular, experience layered oppression because they are discriminated against both as women and as persons with disabilities. They are often denied autonomy, education, employment opportunities, and even emotional recognition within family and society.

In Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*, this intersection between patriarchy and disability becomes especially evident. Tara is denied equal treatment not because of her disability alone, but because patriarchal values that prioritize the male child over the female child. The family's decision to privilege Chandan's future reveals how disability discrimination operates within a broader framework of gender bias and male preference. Thus, the play demonstrates that the oppression of disabled individuals cannot be understood in isolation from patriarchal power structures. The play is a profound critique of patriarchal power structures and their role in shaping familial relationships, gender identities, and bodily autonomy. The play reveals how patriarchal ideology operates not only through overt male dominance but also through deeply internalized social values that privilege masculinity over femininity. The character of Bharati (the mother) becomes a tragic embodiment of what feminist theorists often calls

internalized patriarchy. Her decision to favor the male child, Chandan, in the surgical separation of the conjoined twins is not merely a personal moral failing but a reflection of a larger socio-cultural conditioning. Patriarchal values, which privilege the male body as more “useful” or “worthy,” have been so deeply ingrained that Bharati unconsciously reproduces them, even at the cost of her daughter’s life and well-being. This complicates the moral framework of the play. Mahesh Dattani does not allow the audience to comfortably attribute injustice solely to male authority figures. Instead, he demonstrates how patriarchy sustains itself by permeating familial relationships, shaping maternal instincts, and distorting ethical judgment.

This narrative is not simply a personal tragedy but a reflection of larger socio-cultural structures where disability and femininity intersect to produce compounded oppression. Tara’s suffering illustrates what feminist disability scholars describe as “double marginalisation,” wherein disabled women experience discrimination both as women and as disabled subjects. This paper investigates how *Tara* dramatizes the intersection of gender and disability, exposing the cultural politics of bodily normalcy, patriarchal inheritance, and gendered ethical violence.

In *Tara*, the mother’s preference for the male child is not only gendered but also *ableist*. Disability studies critiques the way societies privilege “normal,” able-bodied forms while devaluing bodies perceived as impaired. Tara’s body—as a female and as a conjoined twin—occupies a doubly marginalized position. The decision to allocate the stronger leg to Chandan reflects an implicit hierarchy: the male body is imagined as more deserving of wholeness, mobility, and social participation. Disability studies has increasingly challenged the medical model that views disability purely as an individual defect. Instead, the social model argues that disability is constructed through societal barriers, cultural stigma, and institutional exclusion. Feminist disability theory further complicates this by examining how disability is gendered. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues that the disabled female body is often marked as “other” within patriarchal norms that idealize femininity as beauty, completeness, and reproductive potential. Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality provides a crucial lens to understand how multiple identities—such as gender and disability—overlap to create unique experiences of oppression.

Tara’s disability is therefore not accidental but culturally produced. Her impairment becomes an outcome of patriarchal injustice. Dattani critiques how even maternal figures become complicit in reinforcing male privilege, demonstrating that patriarchy operates not only through men but also through internalized social conditioning. Tara’s tragedy reflects the systemic devaluation of the girl child in Indian society, where sons

are often prioritized in inheritance, healthcare, and opportunities.

Beyond gender, Tara’s life is shaped by ableist structures that define disability as lack, tragedy, or burden. Tara is constantly reminded of her difference, not only through her body but through societal attitudes. The play reveals how disability becomes a form of social exclusion. Tara’s marginalisation is intensified by the family’s secrecy and guilt. Rather than empowering Tara, her parents attempt to protect themselves from moral responsibility. Tara is denied the truth about her own body, reflecting how disabled individuals are often denied agency over their narratives. The play suggests that disability is not merely an individual condition but a social identity shaped by discrimination, silence, and stigma.

Tara’s body becomes a contested space where patriarchal and medical power intersect. The unethical surgery represents the violation of bodily autonomy, particularly of the female subject. Tara’s physical incompleteness symbolizes the cultural incompleteness imposed upon women through systemic injustice. In patriarchal societies, women’s bodies are often controlled, regulated, and sacrificed for familial or social honour. Tara’s case reveals a brutal form of this control: her very limb is taken away to benefit her brother. Thus, Tara embodies what can be termed as the “gendered disabled subject,” whose suffering exposes both misogyny and ableism.

Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* presents a strong criticism of the patriarchal mindset that exists in Indian society. The tragedy of Tara begins even before she can understand what is happening to her. When Tara and Chandan are born as conjoined twins, the doctors discover that the third leg can be given to either child. Although Tara is physically stronger and has a better chance of benefiting from the operation, her parents decide to give the leg to Chandan. Bharati plays an important role in this decision because she believes that her son needs the leg more than her daughter. Her attitude reflects the traditional preference for sons, where a boy is considered more important because he is expected to carry forward the family name and support the parents.

What makes Dattani’s criticism particularly significant is that Bharati herself is a woman. She becomes a victim of patriarchal thinking, but at the same time she also contributes to it by accepting the belief that Chandan’s future is more valuable than Tara’s. Her decision shows how deeply social attitudes can influence women themselves. Tara is treated as less deserving simply because she is a girl, and her physical disability is made worse by the discrimination she experiences within her own family. The play therefore suggests that patriarchy is not maintained only by men; it can also continue through women who have unconsciously

accepted the same values and pass them on within the family.

The consequences of this discrimination are tragic for both Tara and Chandan. Tara loses the opportunity to live a normal life, while Chandan is left with guilt and emotional suffering because he knows that his sister was sacrificed for him. Through their story, Dattani shows that gender discrimination harms everyone involved. *Tara* therefore goes beyond being a story about a physically disabled girl and becomes a criticism of a society in which sons are often given greater importance than daughters. By portraying Bharati's role in Tara's fate, Dattani effectively exposes the way patriarchal values can become so deeply rooted that even women themselves may participate in the unequal treatment of other women.

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* shows how disability and gender discrimination can come together and affect a person's life. Tara and her brother Chandan are born as conjoined twins, and they share a third leg. When the doctors suggest that the leg can be separated and given to one of them, Tara is actually the stronger child and has a better chance of benefiting from the operation. However, the decision is made in favour of Chandan because he is a boy. Tara is therefore denied an equal opportunity, not because she is less capable, but because of the belief that sons future is more important than daughters.

Tara's physical condition makes her vulnerable, but her gender makes her situation even worse. Her family knows that she will face difficulties because of her disability, yet instead of giving her equal support, they allow patriarchal thinking to influence their decision. Bharati, Tara's mother, is also involved in this decision, which shows how deeply the preference for sons can be rooted in society. Tara is treated as someone whose future is less important, while Chandan is given the opportunity to lead a more normal life. Through this, Dattani shows that disability becomes more painful when it is combined with social prejudice and gender inequality.

The tragedy of Tara lies not only in her physical disability but also in the discrimination she faces because she is a girl. She is intelligent, confident and capable, but society does not give her the same chance as her brother. Chandan also suffers because he later understands that his advantage came at the cost of Tara's happiness and future. Dattani therefore uses Tara's story to question

both the treatment of disabled people and the traditional preference for male children. The play makes it clear that disability does not make a person less worthy; it is society's prejudices and unequal attitudes that create the real tragedy.

While Tara suffers physical disability, Chandan suffers psychological trauma. His survival is marked by guilt, and his identity is fractured by the knowledge that his wholeness was achieved through injustice. This reinforces the idea that patriarchy harms not only women but also men, though in different ways. However, the key difference remains: Chandan has mobility, opportunity, and social privilege, while Tara is confined within both bodily limitation and cultural neglect. Tara's death signifies the ultimate erasure of the disabled female subject, while Chandan's narrative survives, highlighting gendered imbalance even in memory and storytelling.

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is a powerful exploration of the intersection of gender and disability, demonstrating how patriarchal ideology produces not only gender inequality but also bodily injustice. Tara's life reveals a dual marginalisation: she is oppressed as a disabled individual within an ableist society and as a woman within a patriarchal structure that privileges masculinity. The play critiques the ethical failures of family, medicine, and culture, exposing how discrimination is embedded in intimate decisions and institutional practices. Tara's tragedy ultimately becomes a social testimony against gendered violence and the silencing of disabled women. By foregrounding the disabled female body, *Tara* compels readers to confront uncomfortable questions about justice, ethics, and the cultural politics of survival.

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