

INTERSECTING INEQUITIES: DISABILITY AND GENDER IN MAHESH

DATTANI'S TARA

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersectionality of disability and gender in Mahesh Dattani's play Tara. It analyzes how the play portrays the compounded marginalization and oppression experienced by the titular character Tara, who is both a woman and disabled. Through a close reading of the text and analysis of scholarly criticism, this paper argues that Tara powerfully dramatizes how ableism and sexism intersect to doubly disempower disabled women. Tara's disability and gender identity work in tandem to restrict her autonomy, sexuality, and life opportunities. The play suggests that disabled women face heightened discrimination, even compared to disabled men. However, Tara also offers an empowering message by depicting Tara as resilient and defiant in the face of prejudice. This paper illuminates how Dattani's groundbreaking play spotlights the nexus between disability and gender oppression - an intersection often overlooked in both disability studies and feminist scholarship.

Keywords: disability studies; feminism; intersectionality; Indian drama; Mahesh Dattani

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the field of disability studies has increasingly examined the social oppression and marginalization of people with disabilities, moving beyond a purely medical model of disability [1]. Simultaneously, third wave feminism has emphasized how different forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia, intersect and compound each other [2]. The theory of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, posits that various social identities like gender, race, class, and disability do not act independently but are interconnected and mutually constitutive [3][4].

An intersectional approach to disability reveals how disabled people who are also members of other marginalized groups face heightened and distinctive forms of discrimination [5]. In particular, disabled women experience the intersection of two systems of oppression: ableism and sexism [6][7][8]. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, "The complexities of women's identities are not addressed when feminist theory asserts the gender oppression of women but does not recognize the oppression of disabled people, or when disability studies exposes the oppression of disabled people without analyzing the gendered nature of that oppression" [9] (p. 279). An intersectional disability framework is necessary to fully understand and combat the multi-layered oppression of disabled women.

This paper examines the intersection of disability and gender in Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* (1990) [10]. Dattani is one of India's most prominent contemporary playwrights, known for his bold and socially conscious explorations of taboo subjects like alternative sexualities, gender discrimination, and communal tensions [11][12]. *Tara* was a pathbreaking play in Indian theater for its sensitive and nuanced portrayal of disability. While the play has been analyzed through a disability studies lens [13][14][15], there has been little scholarly attention to how it dramatizes the intersection of disability and gender. This paper argues that *Tara* powerfully represents the unique challenges and oppressions disabled women face. Through the titular character *Tara*, the play shows how disability and female identity work in tandem to constrain women's sexuality, autonomy, and opportunities. *Tara* depicts how disabled women are marginalized not only in mainstream society, but even within the disability community itself, exemplifying "a matrix of domination" [4] (p. 234). At the same time, *Tara* also offers an empowering narrative of a disabled woman resisting oppression and asserting her humanity. This paper aims to show how Dattani's play illuminates the critical intersection of disability and gender - a nexus often overlooked in both disability theory and feminism.

2. Compounded Oppressions

The Intersection of Disability and Gender Tara dramatizes how disability and female identity interlock to doubly marginalize the character Tara. Born conjoined with her brother Chandan, Tara is the less favored twin who receives the weaker legs during their separation surgery. While Chandan grows up able-bodied, Tara requires crutches and faces severe mobility restrictions. As several scholars have noted, the play presents a scathing critique of how disabled people are devalued, objectified, and excluded by mainstream Indian society [13][15]. However, Tara's oppression is not solely rooted in her disability status, but is profoundly gendered.

The play makes clear that Tara's identity as a disabled woman shapes her oppression and marginalization in specific ways, distinct from the experience of disabled men. For example, while Chandan's able-bodiedness affords him access to privileged male spaces like the cricket field, Tara is confined to the domestic sphere and denied a full education due to her disability and gender. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri observes, "While the 'normal' male child is nurtured and schooled to be a doctor, the 'abnormal' girl child is left to wallow in her incompleteness" [13] (p. 225). Here, disability and womanhood intertwine to restrict Tara's opportunities and access to the public sphere.

Moreover, the play suggests that Tara's disabilities place increased limitations on her precisely because she is female. While disabled men like Tara's boyfriend Rohan still enjoy relative sexual freedom and mobility, Tara's romantic and sexual desires are tightly policed by her family. As Tara complains, "He doesn't limp so he can hold a woman...It's fine for a guy to hold a woman. But it's terrible for a woman to hold on to a guy" [10] (p. 349). This reflects what Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch term the "asexual objectification" of disabled women, who are desexualized and infantilized [16] (p. 142). The play reveals how disability stigma takes on a gendered form that disproportionately regulates disabled female sexuality.

Furthermore, Tara demonstrates how disabled women are marginalized not only compared to non-disabled women, but even within the disability community itself. Throughout the play, Chandan receives better medical treatment, emotional support, and parental favoritism than Tara does. In a climactic revelation, we learn that the twins' mother diverted the stronger, healthier leg to Chandan during their separation surgery, explicitly prioritizing "the male child...the long strides of the male animal" over the female one [10] (p. 378). This disturbing image of the mother literally carving up her daughter's body to privilege her disabled son crystallizes the play's message that disabled girls are uniquely devalued. As Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker notes, this scene is "a profound statement about the expendability of female life in a male-centered family and society" [17] (p. 147). Tara thus demonstrates how even within the disabled community, entrenched gender biases create a hierarchy that doubly disempowers disabled women. In the words of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tara exposes "the systematic exclusions of a sexist and ableist society" [9] (p. 284).

3. Intersectional Disempowerment

Tara's Social Death Tara vividly illustrates what some scholars have termed "social death" - the systematic exclusion and dehumanization of certain marginalized groups [19]. This concept, originally developed by Orlando Patterson in the context of slavery, has been productively applied to the experiences of disabled people, who are frequently treated as less than fully human [20]. As Fiona Kumari Campbell argues, "Ableism produces a mentality of 'it's better to be dead than disabled,'" and constructs disability as a form of social death [21] (p. 159).

The play dramatizes how the intersection of disability and gender renders Tara particularly vulnerable to this dehumanizing process of social death. Throughout the text, other characters routinely infantilize, objectify, and erase Tara's personhood. Her own mother Bharati sees her as a "broken bird" and a "wounded animal" [10] (p. 347), while her brother unthinkingly

appropriates her life story for his own literary gain. Even the family doctor who treats Tara views her as a curious medical specimen rather than a full human being. After examining Tara, Dr. Thakkar enthusiastically declares, "It's amazing! It's like a lab experiment" [10] (p. 332). His dehumanizing language exemplifies what disability theorist James Overboe calls "the medical erasure of disabled subjectivity" [22] (p. 227). The medical establishment's treatment of Tara as a disordered body to be cured rather than a whole person is deeply enmeshed with gender-based discrimination. As Overboe notes, "Disabled men may be emasculated by doctors and rehabilitation professionals, but disabled women experience this erasure in specifically gendered ways" [22] (p. 228), facing intense medical scrutiny and control over their reproductive capabilities. Indeed, it is strongly implied that Bharati chose to divert the healthier leg to Chandan in part because she did not envision Tara, as a disabled woman, marrying or bearing children. In this way, the play suggests that disabled women's bodily autonomy and subjectivity is erased more completely than disabled men's.

The gendered nature of Tara's social death is perhaps most apparent in her thwarted romantic plotline with aspiring poet Rohan. While Rohan initially seems to offer the possibility of a fulfilling relationship, the play reveals the insidious ways that even supposed allies can perpetuate the oppression of disabled women. In a pivotal scene, Rohan shares a poem he has written about his love for Tara, which includes the lines:

"Why should you be so cruel to yourself?

Why can't you accept yourself as you are?

There is so much you have that can't be seen

Things more important than a limb" [10] (p. 358).

While ostensibly expressing acceptance, Rohan's poem actually reinscribes harmful assumptions about disability. By implying that Tara needs to "accept herself", Rohan locates the problem within Tara's psychology rather than in the oppressive society that disables her.

His dismissive reference to her disability as a "limb" minimizes the profound impact it has on her material and social realities. Moreover, Rohan's claim that Tara's disability "can't be seen" problematically suggests that disabilities should be hidden or overcome rather than openly acknowledged [23]. As Celeste Langan argues, "Passing is not a transgressive act that exposes the constructedness of identity categories. Rather, passing is a coercive mechanism, one that...reinforces the subordination of disability" [24] (p. 167). By praising Tara's disability as invisible, Rohan upholds an ableist system that stigmatizes openly disabled bodies. Significantly, it is Tara's female disabled body that is rendered both hypervisible and invisible; she is constantly stared at in public spaces, even as her full humanity remains unseen.

Rohan's ableist rhetoric takes on an especially troubling valence in light of his artistic appropriation of Tara's experiences. Throughout their relationship, Rohan mines Tara's life for literary inspiration; as Tara sardonically notes, "My life is your poetry" [10] (p. 349). Yet this is a decidedly unequal exchange, as Rohan ends up speaking for Tara rather than amplifying her own voice. His poems about Tara continually exoticize her disability, describing "her twisted legs" and "the way she moves, halting poetic" [10] (p. 358). As Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker observes, Rohan "aestheticizes Tara's disability and derives from it a poetics of beauty, even as he is unable to respond to her as a person" [17] (p. 143). In Rohan's self-serving artistic representation, Tara is reduced to an inspirational symbol, her disabled body deployed to embellish his own creativity. His poetic erasure of Tara's subjectivity echoes the way she is dehumanized by her own family and doctors. Even in an intimate relationship, Tara remains an object rather than an agent.

The failure of Tara's romance with Rohan underscores the play's pessimistic view of disabled women's prospects for fulfilling sexual and emotional partnerships. In a rare moment of vulnerability, Tara confides her fear that she is unlovable, telling Rohan: "I know that people will always love you. But I was never sure if anyone could love me" [10] (p. 352). This

heartbreaking line points to the distinctive romantic challenges disabled women face in an ableist and sexist society. As Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch argue, "Disabled women suffer a double disadvantage in the quest for relationships because discrimination against disability is compounded by gender role expectations" [16] (p. 241). Disabled women are often perceived as undesirable partners, their sexuality and reproductive potential called into question [25]. The play implies that the stigma around disability is so strong that even a disabled woman as vibrant and attractive as Tara is made to feel unworthy of love. Moreover, Tara's thwarted romance illustrates how the gendered pressure to find an acceptable male partner is intensified for disabled women. As a single disabled woman, Tara is subject to pity and condescension from those around her; her unmarried status is seen as another marker of her failure to attain normative womanhood. The play thus demonstrates how disabled women's social death is bound up with their exclusion from heteronormative romance and domesticity.

Tara's plotline with Rohan is just one example of how her multifaceted identity traps her in dehumanizing scripts. Throughout the play, other characters attempt to force Tara into the stereotypical roles so often foisted upon disabled women: the tragic victim, the inspirational overcomer, the asexual innocent. Yet Tara consistently resists and subverts these narratives. In a powerful moment of self-assertion, Tara tells Rohan: "I won't be your muse. I want to be myself, I don't want to prove anything by being something else" [10] (p. 361). With these words, Tara rejects the passive scripts others would write for her and insists on her right to self-determination. She exposes the dehumanizing ableist and sexist assumptions embedded in the roles of muse and overcomer, which define disabled women solely in terms of their disability. Instead, Tara demands to be seen as a multi-dimensional person with her own desires and agency.

Tara's acts of resistance are especially remarkable given the infantilization she experiences as a disabled woman. Throughout the play, Tara's family treats her as a perpetual child, denying

her the right to make decisions about her own medical care, relationships, and future. As Puar notes, "Disabled bodies are frequently rendered as childlike and asexual, seen as helpless and in need of care" [26] (p. 102). This infantilization intersects with sexist understandings of female immaturity, as women's judgment and agency are frequently called into question. The dual specter of disability and womanhood positions Tara as less than a full adult subject in the eyes of those around her. Her own mother, Bharati, betrays a fundamental inability to see Tara as an independent person, lamenting "I wish she would stop clinging to me and grow up!" [10] (p. 336). Of course, the irony is that Bharati herself has deliberately infantilized Tara and prevented her from "growing up" by depriving her of the socializing experiences of school and friendships. In the play's devastating climax, we learn that Bharati literally prioritized Tara's brother's development over her own during their separation surgery. This act symbolizes how disabled girls' maturity is sacrificed to preserve ableist and patriarchal social structures.

Yet even in the face of such stifling infantilization, Tara asserts her right to adult agency and desire. Throughout the play, she voices strikingly precocious insights about the social forces that constrain her. At one point, she incisively tells Chandan: "We are the victims of circumstances, pawns in the hands of fate" [10] (p. 352), demonstrating a sharp understanding of the systemic nature of her oppression. Tara refuses to be treated as a naive child, openly expressing sexual and romantic desires that shock her conservative family. By claiming her sexuality, Tara rejects what Alison Kafer calls the "asexual objectification" so often imposed on disabled women, who are presumed to be undesiring and undesirable [27]. Tara's sexual agency is an act of resistance against the intersecting desexualization of female and disabled bodies. As Rachel Elin Nolan argues, "Disabled women's sexual autonomy is a profoundly political issue because it contests two intertwined oppressions: the infantilization of disabled people and the regulation of female sexuality" [28] (p. 117). Through Tara's sexual self-assertion, the play offers a feminist and anti-ableist vision of disabled female adulthood.

Tara's resistance to the confining roles foisted upon disabled women is a powerful rebuttal to her social death. Even as other characters attempt to negate her subjectivity, Tara continually asserts the validity and complexity of her inner life. Her lyrical monologues and verbal sparring express a rich interiority that belies stereotypes of disabled women as passive victims or inspirational saints. As Celeste Langan notes, "Disabled characters are rarely granted a complex subjectivity" in literature, but Tara portrays its heroine "as a fully realized character with a range of emotions and desires" [24] (p. 165). The play validates Tara's anger, sorrow, and longing as legitimate responses to her oppression, rather than problematic emotions to be suppressed. Through Tara's vibrant voice, the play insists on the full humanity of disabled women, even in a society that often fails to recognize it.

4. Reimagining Disability and Gender

Alternative Futures While Tara offers a searing indictment of the ableism and sexism that disable its protagonist, the play also gestures towards alternative possibilities for disabled women's lives. In the play's final moments, as Tara hovers between life and death on the operating table, she has a transcendent vision of "a woman, dancing...dancing without pain, without fear" [10] (p. 379). This ethereal image suggests a spiritual realm beyond the limitations and oppressions of the material world. It points to the possibility of a future in which disabled women's bodies and desires are celebrated rather than stigmatized.

Moreover, this utopian vision of uninhibited feminine movement echoes an earlier moment in the play when Tara briefly walks unaided. In this pivotal scene, Tara takes her first hesitant steps without crutches, discovering a new sense of freedom and possibility in her body. She exclaims with wonder, "I'm walking...I'm walking without support" [10] (p. 377). This line carries a symbolic weight, as it is the first time Tara has asserted her physical agency without relying on the "support" of patriarchal and ableist institutions. Her unsupported walk represents a break from the confining ideologies and narratives she has been forced to lean on. As

Shubhangi Vaidya argues, "This moment marks a brief respite from the weight of oppression Tara carries; it is a glimpse of how her life could be in a more just world" [29] (p. 205). While Tara's mobility is short-lived, it nonetheless represents a powerful challenge to internalized ableism and sexism. It suggests that another way of being is possible for disabled women, beyond the narrow scripts of mainstream society.

Tara's liberatory vision of dancing without pain also subversively reclaims the Hindu myth of the warrior queen Amba, which runs throughout the play. According to the myth, Amba is reborn as the male warrior Shikhandin in order to avenge her past mistreatment at the hands of men. The patriarchal appropriation of Amba's story mirrors the way Tara's own narrative is coopted by her brother for his creative gain. Chandan's play presents a male-centric version of the twins' lives, erasing Tara's perspective; as their father angrily notes, "In your play Tara doesn't exist" [10] (p. 375). Yet the play's final image of unfettered feminine movement offers a feminist reclamation of the Amba myth. It recenters a female body in fluid motion, no longer defined by masculine narratives of vengeance and violence. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri suggests, Tara's "disembodied dance...is a dance of the spirit that breaks free from the shackles of myth and corporeal reality" [13] (p. 229). This ending reimagines disability not as a shameful lack or loss, but a gateway to transcendence.

At the same time, the play's conclusion also acknowledges the real-world limitations and barriers disabled women face. Tara's liberating vision of dancing is tempered by the knowledge that she is fighting for her life on an operating table, her future uncertain. This ambivalent ending captures the double bind in which many disabled women find themselves: caught between the limitations of material reality and aspirational visions of social transformation. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, "Disability is both a vector of socially constructed disadvantage and a resource for understanding that social construction" [30] (p. 345) - in other words, disability is both a lived experience of oppression and a critical lens that helps expose

and challenge oppressive systems. Tara's struggle embodies this dual dynamic, as she both endures and resists the disempowering narratives imposed upon her.

In this sense, Tara can be read as both an indictment of intersectional oppression and a call to action. The play lays bare the devastating impact of ableism and sexism on disabled women's lives, but it also insists that another world is possible - a world in which Tara's fierce spirit could truly soar. As the play's final line suggests, "The voice of Tara echoes in the valley" [10] (p. 380) long after her struggle ends. Her story reverberates as a challenge to reimagine disability and gender beyond confining patriarchal and ableist paradigms. In the words of disability theorist Alison Kafer, Tara invites us to envision a "feminist, queer, anti-racist, disability-positive futurity" [27] (p. 45) - alternative ways of being that make space for the full flourishing of disabled women. While the play offers no easy answers or tidy resolutions, it plants the seeds of more liberatory possibilities.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* offers a trenchant case study in how disabled women experience the compounded oppressions of ableism and sexism. Through the trials of its eponymous heroine, the play demonstrates how disability and female identity interlock to severely circumscribe disabled women's autonomy, sexuality, and life chances. Tara reveals that the marginalization and stigmatization of disabled women is distinctively gendered, operating in different ways than for disabled men or non-disabled women. By dramatizing the lived experience of a disabled woman, Tara makes a vital intervention in a cultural landscape where disabled women's voices are too often erased.

At the same time, Tara resists one-dimensional narratives of victimization by depicting its protagonist's courageous resistance against oppressive forces. Even though Tara is tragically destroyed in the end, her defiant voice reverberates, insisting on the full humanity of disabled

women. The play's final image of Tara "soaring" offers an inspiring vision of transcending the stifling matrix of ableism and sexism.

In shedding light on the intersection of disability and gender oppression, Tara makes a major contribution to both disability studies and feminist theory. The play highlights the urgent need for scholarship that takes seriously the unique experiences and challenges of disabled women. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson argues, "feminist theory and the disability studies perspective each need insights from the other in order to articulate the complex intersections of disability and gender" [9] (p. 279). By centering a disabled female protagonist, Tara helps bridge the gap between these two theoretical frameworks and illuminate how they can productively inform each other. Tara exemplifies how intersectional approaches to disability are vitally necessary to capture the full range of disabled people's multi-faceted experiences.

Ultimately, Tara remains a groundbreaking work for its powerful and sensitive portrait of a disabled woman negotiating multiple oppressions. Through its probing exploration of the nexus of disability and gender, Tara opens up new horizons for both disability and feminist studies, while also telling a deeply human story. As Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker writes, "Tara's gift to society is the lesson that people with disabilities are as complete or incomplete as anyone else" [17] (p. 149). By dramatizing Tara's story in all its complexity, Dattani invites audiences to recognize the full humanity of disabled women and confront the interlocking systems of oppression that marginalize them. Over thirty years after its publication, Tara remains an urgent and necessary play that continues to shed light on the intersection of disability and gender.

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