



Intersectionality Of Disability And Gender In Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*

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Abstract: Offering an in-depth examination of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* (1990), this paper explores how the play depicts the intersections of gender and disability in modern India. At its centre are twins Tara and Chandan, surgically separated shortly after birth; their family's decision to attach the third leg to the boy underscores persistent patriarchal son preference. Grounding the analysis in intersectionality—an analytic framework devised by Black feminist scholars to study the interplay of identities such as gender, race, class and disability, the study contends that the play indicts patriarchal norms and ableist perceptions. Recognising this approach is crucial because early feminist discourse often neglected disability; through his portrayal of a disabled girl, Dattani demonstrates how interlocking oppressions intensify disadvantage. The narrative also draws on the social model of disability, revealing that impairment arises from social responses rather than inherent limitations. Tara endures dual discrimination as a woman and a disabled person, yet she declares her own worth and meets derision with sharp wit. Her resilience underscores the presence of agency in hostile environments. The discussion locates the play within the Indian socio-economic milieu, where disability intersects with class and caste and underscores Dattani's critique of customs that privilege male, able bodies. By integrating insights from intersectional feminism and disability studies, the paper argues that *Tara* functions as more than a domestic tragedy; it becomes a plea for dismantling patriarchal and ableist structures and for affirming the humanity of disabled women. The drama continues to resonate with contemporary debates on gender equity, disability rights and social inclusion, demonstrating the capacity of theatre to stimulate reflection and inspire change.

Index Terms - intersectionality; gender; disability; Indian theatre; Mahesh Dattani

I. Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the leading voices in Indian English theatre, known for unfolding the silenced and marginalized voices of Indian society. His plays confront taboo issues such as alternative sexualities, patriarchy, and communal tensions, bringing to the stage characters who reside on the margins. *Tara*, first staged in 1990, stands out for its exploration of disability and gender. The play centres on Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan, joined at birth at the hip and sharing three legs. During surgical separation, the twins' mother and grandfather conspired with the doctor to give the viable leg to the male child. The decision is motivated not by medical necessity but by apparent gender discrimination reflecting a patriarchal ideology that devalues daughter over son. Dattani uses this narrative to expose how ableism and sexism converge within an upper-middle-class family in Bangalore, illustrating that oppression can thrive even among educated elites.

The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a powerful framework for understanding Tara's story. Intersectionality posits that social identities such as gender, race, class, and disability interact to produce unique experiences of marginalization and privilege. Tara's position as both female and disabled results in a "double disadvantage," a fact that feminist disability theorists argue is often overlooked in mainstream feminist or disability-only analyses. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri notes that

while the “normal male child is nurtured and schooled to be a doctor, the ‘abnormal’ girl child is left to wallow in her incompleteness” (p. 225). The result is a narrative that illuminates how gendered ableism affects all aspects of Tara’s life, from her bodily autonomy and social opportunities to her emotional and sexual relationships.

This paper analyses *Tara* through an intersectional lens, drawing from gender theory and disability studies to show how Dattani’s play dramatizes the compounded oppression of disabled women and calls for inclusive social change. By integrating evidence from scholarship and the play, the article argues that *Tara* not only exposes how patriarchal bias and ableist prejudice reinforce each other but also articulates modes of resistance and alternative futures for disabled women.

II. Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality and Disability

Crenshaw developed intersectionality to challenge single-axis analyses of oppression, emphasizing that people experience discrimination differently depending on the interaction of multiple identities. Intersectional thinking has since been applied to disability studies, revealing how ableism interacts with other axes of oppression such as racism, classism, and sexism. In the context of *Tara*, this means that Tara’s difficulties cannot be fully understood by isolating gender or disability. Her experiences reflect how patriarchy and ableism mutually reinforce a devaluation of her life. Disabled men might face ableism and non-disabled women might face sexism, but disabled women like Tara face the combined brunt of both.

Intersectionality also provides tools to analyze the power structures within the Patel family. The decision to allocate the shared leg to Chandan is shaped by patriarchal norms that favour male heirs, and by ableist norms that view a disabled female body as less valuable. Patel confesses that the decision to give third leg to Chandan was not based on medical grounds, in fact, the “scan showed that a major part of the blood supply to the third leg was provided by the girl” and the chances were better “that the leg would survive . . . on the girl” (Dattani, p. 381). But the decision was made against medical recommendations purely because of preference for the boy child. Such decisions illustrate how intersectional oppression operates not only at the level of individual biases but through institutional practices (the medical profession) and intergenerational power dynamics (the grandfather’s insistence).

Gender Performativity and Patriarchy

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity challenges the notion of gender as a natural, essential trait. Instead, Butler (1988) argues that gender is produced through repeated acts and social scripts that create the illusion of a stable identity (p. 520). In *Tara*, Chandan is clearly shown to be more passive and enjoys more delicate activities such as knitting or writing, whereas Tara is shown to be more aggressive and witty with a sharp intelligence. Despite their dispositions, Dattani shows how Tara is compelled to perform the role of a dependent daughter while her brother is expected to perform masculinity by forcing him to pursue more “appropriate” profession for male (p. 355).

The Social Model of Disability

Disability studies distinguish between the medical model, which views disability as an individual deficiency to be cured, and the social model, which understands disability as a product of social barriers, attitudes, and environments. Lennard J. Davis argues that the concept of the “normal body” creates the idea of the disabled body as deviant or defective (p. 73). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly notes that disability is socially constructed through the “system of exclusions that stigmatizes human differences” (p. 1557). In *Tara*, Dattani dramatizes these theories by depicting how doctors, family members, and society treat Tara as a problem to be fixed, to be pitied and to be coddled rather than treat her as a person. The medical institution becomes complicit in patriarchal discrimination when Dr. Thakkar accepts a bribe to transfer the leg to Chandan, disregarding professional ethics. The social model exposes how disability is not solely a physical impairment but the result of decisions and attitudes that systematically disadvantage a girl child.

III. Discussion and Analysis

The Surgical Decision: Gendered Ableism

At the heart of *Tara* lies the twins' separation surgery. When medical tests reveal the conjoined twins share a third leg, Tara's mother and grandfather arrange to give the healthier leg to Chandan. Patel recalls how his wife "would risk giving both legs to the boy," even though the blood supply favoured Tara, because the "male child" should take the leg (Dattani, p. 381). This decision reflects deep-seated ableist and patriarchal beliefs that prioritize a son's mobility over a daughter's potential.

The surgical decision reverberates throughout Tara's life. It marks the beginning of her social death, a concept that scholars use to describe the systematic dehumanization of marginalized groups. In a climactic moment, Tara learns that her own mother diverted the stronger leg to her brother because she did not envision a future for Tara as a wife or a mother. By linking gender and reproductive potential, Bharati's choice underscores how patriarchal values shape disability experiences.

Family Favoritism and Educational Inequality

The play underscores that Tara's oppression arises from the intersection of her gender and disability, shaping her marginalization in ways different from those of disabled men. Early in the play, Tara reveals that her father plans an overseas education for Chandan but has "no plans for Tara," underscoring how the family assumes she will stay at home with no future prospects. Tara later laments her father's lack of support, telling her brother, "He hates me" (p. 376), which echoes how her ambitions and aspirations are dismissed. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri points out, "While the 'normal' male child is nurtured and schooled to be a doctor, the 'abnormal' girl child is left to wallow in her incompleteness" (p. 225). Thus, Tara's lived experience illustrates how gender and disability intersect to curtail her participation in education and the wider public domain.

The family's allocation of resources also reveals patriarchal inheritance practices. The twins' grandfather leaves his property solely to Chandan, cutting Tara out of the family's wealth (Dattani, p. 363). This not only deprives Tara of financial independence but also enforces a gendered economic dependency. The interplay of disability and gender ensures that Tara lacks both mobility and economic power.

Dehumanization and Social Death

The concept of social death helps articulate Tara's marginalization. Social death refers to the ways in which people can be treated as dead to society—excluded, infantilized, and denied recognition of their personhood. Tara experiences this when she is repeatedly infantilized by her mother and treated as a perpetual child. Bharati laments that Tara "clings" to her and wishes she would grow up, ignoring the fact that she herself has restricted Tara's social development by isolating her. Bharati treats Tara like a perpetual child, obsessing over her diet and health. Tara often begs her to stop forcing milk on her, but Bharati insists because Tara "must put on more weight" and that she is "much too thin" (Dattani, p. 327). This overprotective, infantilizing behaviour denies Tara agency over her body and daily life. In addition, she bribes Roopa, the spiteful neighbour kid to befriend Tara thus exposing the family's internalized shame and the society's stigma combine to isolate Tara. When Tara tries to visit her mother in hospital alone, the staff prevented her, citing her father's instructions, suggesting she would upset her mother. This gatekeeping denies Tara an adult relationship with her own parent, reinforcing infantilization. The family's constant control over her medical decisions, relationships, and future underscores the idea that disabled women are seen as incapable of self-determination.

Tara's dehumanization also appears in everyday interactions. The twins' so called friend Roopa along with Nalini and Prema, and by extension society, view Tara as a curiosity rather than a person. She refers to Tara as a "one-legged thing" (p. 372), "a real freak of nature" (p. 344) and laughs with her peers about Tara needing a Jaipur leg. Roopa also pryingly pressures Tara to show her prosthesis, symbolizing society's fascination with disabled bodies. The community's fascination with Tara's difference reduces her to a "freak," depriving her of privacy and dignity. Dattani depicts how the public gaze objectifies disabled bodies, aligning with Garland-Thomson's discussion of the "stare" that turns disabled people into spectacles.

Resistance and the Possibility of Alternative Futures

Despite overwhelming oppression, Tara demonstrates resilience and resistance. She uses humour and sarcasm to confront Roopa's cruelty, turning the gaze back on her tormentor. She often uses self-deprecating humor to deflect pity. When Roopa, Nalini and Prema were staring at her and whispering with one another, Tara simply made a play, showed them her fake legs and said to them, "The very best from Jaipur...We get them in pairs. My twin brother wears the other one" (p. 337). Tara refuses to be defined solely by her disability, showcasing resilience through wit. And when Roopa taunts her about her prosthetic leg, Tara retaliates by

exposing Roopa's own insecurities—mocking the size of Roopa's breasts and declaring that she would rather be one-eyed and one-legged than “an imbecile” like Roopa (p. 372). Tara's ability to flip shame back onto her tormentor shows a strong sense of self-worth and resilience. Tara is more than a victim of circumstance: she uses humor to defuse prejudice, asserts her desires and rights, rejects reductive roles and confronts ableism directly. Her resilience lies in both her everyday acts of defiance and her larger refusal to let family or society dictate her sense of self.

Intersectional Oppression in Indian Society

The analysis above shows that Tara's marginalization results from the intersection of gender and disability within a particular cultural context. In many parts of India, son preference persists even among educated families. Dattani's portrayal of a middle-class family sacrificing their daughter's leg for their son exposes how patriarchal son-preference operates across social classes. The play underscores that education and exposure to Western ideas do not automatically dismantle sexist and ableist norms. This challenges assumptions that only rural or uneducated communities practice gender discrimination.

At the same time, *Tara* highlights how disability intensifies gender oppression. The play's depiction of Tara's social death illustrates that disabled women are not only marginalized in mainstream society but also within their own families and disability communities. While Chandan is treated as a “normal” son and given opportunities, Tara's disability justifies her exclusion. The interplay of gender and ableism thus creates a hierarchy in which disabled women occupy the lowest position.

The play also critiques the complicity of institutions in perpetuating intersectional oppression. The medical profession, represented by Dr. Thakkar, colludes with patriarchal values by ignoring medical ethics for financial gain. The legal and inheritance systems reinforce male supremacy by favouring sons in property distribution. These institutional complicities indicate that intersectional oppression is structural, not simply a matter of individual prejudice.

Contribution to Feminist Disability Discourse

Tara contributes to feminist disability studies by centring a disabled female protagonist and illustrating her complex subjectivity. Garland-Thomson argues that feminist and disability perspectives must inform each other to fully understand oppression. Dattani's play accomplishes this by portraying how sexism and ableism converge to regulate Tara's body and restrict her autonomy. The play challenges the stereotypes of disabled women as either victims or inspirations. Instead, Tara is depicted as witty, angry, desiring, and insightful—qualities that resist one-dimensional narratives. By giving Tara a rich interiority, Dattani validates the lived experiences of disabled women and invites audiences to see them as full human beings.

The play also engages in conversation with the social model of disability by showing how disability arises from social decisions. Tara's impairment is created by her family's choice; her marginalization is intensified by societal attitudes. This reinforces the need to shift from individual blame to structural analysis. The feminist disability perspective further reveals that disability is a vector of social construction and can serve as a resource for critiquing oppressive systems. Tara's story thus becomes a lens through which to interrogate patriarchal norms and envision alternative social arrangements.

IV. Conclusion

Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* is a landmark text in Indian theatre that vividly demonstrates how disability and gender intersect to oppress disabled women. By analyzing the surgical decision that cripples Tara, family favoritism, sexual double standards, and dehumanization, this article has shown that Tara's experiences are shaped by patriarchal and ableist structures rather than individual failings. The play dramatizes the concept of social death, revealing how disabled women are denied agency, infantilized, and treated as objects. Yet *Tara* also depicts acts of resistance—Tara's assertion of independence, her rejection of inspirational tropes and refusal to be pitied. These moments highlight the possibility of alternative futures in which disabled women's bodies and desires are recognized and valued.

By applying intersectional theory, gender performativity, and the social model of disability, this study demonstrates that *Tara* is not simply a play about a disabled girl; it is a complex critique of Indian society's intersecting systems of oppression. The play urges audiences to rethink familial and societal practices, to challenge the prioritization of male heirs, and to imagine communities that accommodate and celebrate bodily difference.

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