

Psychoanalytic Study of an Artist's Mind in Mahesh Dattani's Play *Tara*

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ABSTRACT: *This research focuses on the psychoanalytic study of an artist's mind in Mahesh Dattani's play Tara. Dan's guilt is the cause of his failure as an artist. His misdirected assumption that his sister Tara lost one leg because of him makes him an escapist thus resulting in the phase of "incubation," which in turn has a negative effect on the stages of "illumination" and "verification" that follow it in the creative model proposed by Wallas and Smith consulted from the article entitled "Creativity." Due to his ensnaring guilt Dan does not realize that in the process he reconstructs himself as an object also, thus making it his tragedy as well. The analysis argued from the perspective of post-structuralist concepts discussed by Catherine Belsey in Critical Practice reveals that Dan is unable to justify his position as the "grammatical subject" as a result of the conflict initiated by his "subject-position" of a brother. The emphasis is to argue that Dan's authority over the "subject of enonce" is possible only when he resolves his conflicts within the "subject of enunciation."*

Keywords: Indian drama psychoanalysis creativity; Wallas stage model; subject of *enonce*; subject of enunciation; subject-position; grammatical subject; guilt; preconscious; incubation; illumination;

Mahesh Dattani is one of the few Indian playwrights who have written their plays originally in the English language. He is one contemporary Indian playwright for which Alyque Padamee says, "At last we have a playwright who gives sixty million English speaking Indians an identity" (Sharma, sec. 1.3). His works and criticism on these is helpful in probing into universal issues like homosexuality, child sexual abuse, communalism and middle class ("A Preview;" Sharma, "Social Issues"). Dattani successfully traces these and a host of other issues in contemporary Indian society.

Dattani's play *Tara* is another example of his art of probing into – *art* – yet another issue that has a universal appeal. *Tara* raises questions about art and what goes into the making of it. Evident from Dattani's play is one of the major pre-occupations of artists and critics alike, to know exactly how a finished piece of art comes into being. Since art lives permanently as it shows a unique approach of a person towards life and its phenomena so appropriately enough, the major character Dan in the play is writing a play. Dan's history, in Dattani's story, shows that literature as a form of art deals with creativity and mental processes that are not considered to be attributes of an ordinary individual.

Tara shows that every finished piece of art is the result of a long process – a process which is manipulated by the artist. Through Dan's character we can certainly have a peep into an artist's mind to see how the personality of a creator affects his creative process. Consequently to show the obstructions that can be a hindrance to art and creativity, thus reinforcing the point of the critics on Dattani's work that the past has to be realized for what it was in order to have a successful present and future ("A Preview").

Apt to this critique is the structure of the play where the past, present and future merge in the reality of Dan's mind. In the very first scene Dan and Tara are shown walking with a limp as both of them do not have one leg. However it is only later in the play that one gets to know the reason for this condition of the twins; Dan and Tara were born as Siamese twins, separated by a surgery. Throughout the play readers can notice the special bond that exists between the twins. They think of their defect as a natural one. However, the reality emerges to be a bit different.

Throughout the play one also notices a conflict between the

parents of the twins. The root cause of this conflict is revealed in the very end though, when the mother of the twins falls sick. It is told that the twins had a third leg as well which had more connection of the blood arteries to Tara. But the mother and the grandfather of the twins decided to give the third leg to Dan as he was the “son” in the family. By bribing Dr. Thakkar, the surgeon in charge, they succeed in doing so without the consent of the father. But the leg is later amputated. Dan is *guilty* because he knows that were it not for the fact that he was given preference over his sister, Tara would have stood the chance of having both legs. Thus, even though it was not his fault, he becomes the cause of his sister’s crippled condition.

This guilt however does not come to the forefront until Dan looks at it artistically. Dan’s views and imagination formulate the eye through which one looks at the incidents in the play. So along with seeing Tara as a victim of other people’s will, one is forced to look at Dan’s tragedy in all the situations. Though Tara is the focal point of the tragedy that Dan is trying to write, the play *Tara* itself keeps Dan as its focal point. The play begins with his mental frustration; it is propagated through his imagination and memories; the tragedy *Tara* finishes with the ‘unfinished’ play “Twinkle Tara” by Dan (233). The present which consists of a monologue from Dan, is constantly cut from scenes of the past so that one is kept aware that it is Dan’s story, that it is Dan’s history. Because of this constant focus on the character of Dan which is attributed to him by the structure of the play, the readers question his position with reference to all the incidents, i.e. his position as the “grammatical subject,” since he is the operating subject, the one that is *supposed* to have authority over his actions (qtd. in Belsey 52). But we see through the course of the play that he is also a “*subjected being*” (qtd. in Belsey 52), a position which is ensured him by his “mutually incompatible subject-positions” (qtd. in Belsey 51) of that as a brother and as an artist – the gap of which lies in his “identity” (qtd. in Belsey 51) being disrupted by *operational guilt*. According to Catherine Belsey’s analysis in *Critical Practice*, of the “subject” in post-structuralist sense:

Subjects are subjects of particular forms of knowledge, which may construct mutually incompatible subject-positions. ‘Identity’, subjectivity, is thus a matrix of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent, or even in contradiction with one another. The subject, then, is linguistically and discursively constructed and displaced

across the range of knowledges in which concrete individual participates. It follows from Saussure's theory of language as composed of differences that the world is intelligible only discursively: there is no unmediated experience, no direct experience, no direct access to the raw reality of self and others. Thus, As well as being a system of signs related among themselves, language incarnates meaning in the form of the series of positions it offers a subject from which to grasp itself and its relations with the real. (Nowell-Smith 1976-26).
(Belsey 51-52)

Since Dan is the authoritative "subject" when he tries to write a play about *Tara*, the play *Tara* exists because of the fact that Dan is trying to write a play in it, and the play *Tara* exists as a tragedy because Dan fails to complete his play which in turn is the outcome of Dan not being able to have authority over the "subject of *enonce*" (qtd. in Belsey 53). In Belsey's analysis of the "subject" in the Lacanian sense:

The mirror stage, in which the infant perceives itself as other, an image, exterior to its own perceiving self, produces a split between the I which is perceived in the mirror and the perceiving I that identifies with it. The entry into language necessitates a secondary division which reinforces the first, a split between the I that speaks, and the I we speak of, between the subject of the enunciation, the speaker, on the one hand, and, on the other, the subject of the *enonce*, the utterance. There is thus a distinction between the conscious subject represented in its own speech, and the subject which is only partly identifiable there, the subject that speaks. In the gap formed by this division we may locate the unconscious. According to Lacan, the unconscious is constituted in the amount of entry into the symbolic order, at the same time as the construction of the subject. As the repository of the drives that impel the little human organism, repressed in obedience to the discipline imposed by language and culture, the unconscious is a constant source of potential disruption of that obedience. (Belsey 53-54)

In Dan's case, the *guilt* that is a hindrance to his *operations* essentially is the unconscious force that potentially disrupts his creative process, and the one that makes him repressed in obedience to the discipline imposed by his "subject-position" of a brother, imposed in other words by the "subject of enunciation." The narrative leaves gaps to constantly keep the readers in question. The disruptive and non-linear structure of the play highlights the 'guilt' and 'mental disruptions' in the mind of Dan. The tension between the loving memory of the sister and the guilty feeling that Dan has over Tara's death is the linear strand which one can trace through the convoluted and haphazard presentation of incidents in the play.

In the process of accomplishing the goal of writing a play about the tragic fate of his sister, Dan gives way to all his repressed guilty feelings. The way in which Dan's *guilt* interferes with his creative process can be understood by analyzing the five stages in the "Wallas stage model" which explain the mechanism of "creative insights" and "illuminations" ("Creativity"). These different stages can also be traced in the dialogues of Dan throughout the play so that this dimension of the play is highlighted and we see him not as a physically handicapped individual but as a "handicapped intellectual" (233).

"Wallas stage model" describes "preparation" to be the first step in a creative process. "Preparation" is defined as "preparatory work on a problem that focuses the individual's mind on the problem and explores the problem's dimensions" ("Creativity"). This initial step takes place only when Chandan or Dan is fifteen years old; a time when Tara is alive in the play. Tara says, "He writes about people he knows" and ". . . he is going to write a story - about me . . . Strong. Healthy. Beautiful" (237-238). The next step is that of "incubation" "where the problem is internalized into the unconscious mind and nothing appears externally to be happening" ("Creativity"). As far as Chandan's position is concerned, he falls into the phase of "incubation" because he wants to escape from the *guilt* of being the cause of his sister's handicapped condition ("Creativity"). Consequently, this phase disturbs his creative process as it is *guilt-ridden*.

In the process of "incubation" ("Creativity"), the thought of the sister and the 'guilt' associated with this thought remain "preconscious" in the mind of Chandan. "In Freudian psychoanalysis, the word "preconscious" is applied to the thoughts which are unconscious at the

particular moment in question, but which are not repressed and are therefore available for recall and easily capable of becoming conscious" ("Preconscious"). For many years Chandan remains in the phase of "incubation" and the process of his creativity comes to a halt ("Creativity"). When the play begins Chandan is shown to be coming out of this phase. He resumes his activity and retakes what he thinks is the best material for his tragedy i.e. his own sister Tara. He says, ". . . I had even forgotten I had a sister . . . Until I thought of her as subject matter for my next literary attempt. Or maybe I didn't forget her" (233). Dan comes to the third phase, known as "intimation" in the "Wallas stage model." In this phase "the creative person gets a 'feeling' that a solution is on its way" ("Creativity").

The incidents in the play that take place in the past are seen through the imagination of Dan as they are seen ". . . only in memory" (232). All his imagination that he tries to convert in the form of a play in the present signifies the phase of "illumination" which is the fourth stage in the "Wallas stage model." "Illumination" or "insight" is "where the creative idea bursts forth from its preconscious processing into conscious awareness" ("Creativity"). Dan faces great difficulty in this stage as he is unable to get rid of his *guilt* and have authority over his work as an artist. A conflict is shown in his personality between his "subject-position" as a brother and that as an artist (qtd. in Belsey 61). He says, "Try distancing yourself from that experience and writing about it! A mere description will be hopelessly inadequate. And for me . . . I have to relive that charge over and over again" (232). Dan's mind knows that the memory he wants to recall is a troubling one so his mind applies defense mechanism and stops the memory of his sister becoming a conscious one. He says, ". . . what is hard is to let go. Allow the memories to flood in" (233).

The interesting aspect is that Dan is not *consciously aware* of his own condition. Dan tries to bring those memories into "conscious awareness" ("Creativity") which are already in the form of a conflict. He wants his anguish to find vent in the form of drama, to "masticate . . . memories in . . . mind and spit out the result to the world in anger" (232). This monologue shows that he wants the "verification" of the problem which is the final stage of a creative process. According to the "Wallas stage model" "verification" is "where the idea is consciously verified, elaborated, and then applied" ("Creativity"). Dan just thinks of presenting the problem instead of doing psychoanalysis of his own personality to know where and why the problem lies. This is the reason

why his thought process is dominated by *guilt* which is constantly reflected in the process of “illumination” (“Creativity”).

The fact that the ghostly image of Dr. Thakkar constantly disturbs Dan’s mind and that his conversations remain a persistent disrupting feature in Dan’s imagination show that Dan is haunted by the ‘guilt’ of using his sister as a commodity like every other character in the play. Dan says in the end, “Like the amazing Dr. Thakkar, I must take something from Tara - and give it to myself” (281). Though Dan is *guilty* of his actions yet, he tries his best to justify his position as the “grammatical subject” (qtd. in Belsey 52). In his imagination when Dr. Thakkar says to him, “The twins are of different sexes. Very, very rare,” Dan says, “A freak among freaks. Now I know I’ll be a really brilliant writer” (240). As a child Dan was able to fit in the roles of a brother as well as that of an artist because he was in full control of himself as the “grammatical subject” as he did not know the truth of his sister’s pathetic condition then. Even in the present scenario he has been successful in writing other plays which do not bring the conflict in his personality to the front. But when it comes to writing a play about Tara, Dan remains in the illusion of being a “grammatical subject,” as he himself is controlled by *operational guilt*.

In the end of the first act when Chandan and Bharati are “unraveling the knitting,” Chandan says, “I’m helping her sort out her mistake” (256). This dialogue could be taken symbolically for the fact that Chandan was always Tara’s “wonderful brother” (261). Dan was always the one taking care of Tara but he fails to realize that it was not his, rather his mother’s mistake because of which the whole family suffered. In his dialogues his ‘guilt’ and ‘false accusations’ towards himself is constantly reflected. He says, “Poor Tara. Even Nature gave her a raw deal” (260). Dan focuses on Tara’s condition to such an extent that he fails to realize that Nature also gave him a raw deal as he was also crippled. When Chandan is talking to Tara about Prema and her friends, he says, “They are not the ugly ones. We are” (272).

Readers realize that Dan is forced to see only Tara as a victim. The reason for this is her severe condition that is foretold, which includes various surgeries that she had to go through all her life. The fact that the mother’s guilt on the decision of not giving the third leg to Tara which was naturally hers is reinforced when she sees Tara in the pathetic condition of going through her “seventh prosthesis and kidney transplant

in the same month" (260) implies that Tara's present condition is a direct result of her mother's decision. It is also implied that Tara's death is a result of the shock which she gets with the knowledge of her abnormal condition, though it might also be a result of her constant surgeries. In any case Dan in the end remains with the *guilt* of being the cause of his sister's tragic fate as he was the one who once owned a life giving part of his sister's body.

Although shown to a lesser and somewhat implicit manner, yet equally important, is the fact that Dan was also just an object and a commodity in the hands of others. No one asked him whether he wanted the third leg at the expense of the life of his sister; no one asked him whether he wanted all the property of his grandfather; even his father doesn't ask him whether or not he wants to go to College without Tara. What Tara says for herself could also be said for Chandan, ". . . Why is it wrong for *me* to be without feeling?" (273) He suffered just like Tara, perhaps even more because in the end he remains to bear the weight of truth and loneliness. On a latent level he is aware of this fact and of the *unjustified guilt* that he has, but he doesn't realize it completely. He says, "This isn't fair to Tara. She deserves something better. She never got a fair deal. Not even from Nature. Neither of us did" (238).

Thus, it is more of an *operational guilt* as the secondary division of the artist is imposed on the first where Dan and Tara are *split*, forcing Dan to think of himself as *different* from even Tara. The split does not contain itself in the surgery, rather in the *realization* of the subject-position of a *guilty brother*, the cause of Tara's tragedy. The tragedy that Dan is trying to write *reinforces* the first where he remains the cause of Tara's tragedy.

Though he sees his act as a cruel one yet in the end he says, ". . . Make capital of my trauma, my anguish, and make it my tragedy" (281). His *guilt* arises out of his love for Tara. So he addresses her in the end and says, "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (282). Dan would have been successful in his attempt of writing a play about Tara if he had gotten rid of the *guilt* that he uses her as a commodity which was possible only if Dan would have realized that in the process of "illumination," he reconstructs himself as an object as well, as is the case in reality.

The proof to the fact that somewhere at the back of his mind Dan knows that it is his 'guilt' that is restricting him from the actualization of

his desire of writing a play can be seen from his dialogues at the end where he knows that he wants “freedom” from something (281). Though he does not define it but it is the freedom from his ‘guilt’; “freedom” is his desire to be reconciled to the idea that he shares the same position as Tara; the position of being an insignificant thing in the hands of others. He fails as an artist precisely because of the fact that he remains unable to realize that it is his ‘guilt’ that is the regulating and the dominating factor in the whole process of his creativity. He says in the end:

The voice is all that will remain. No writing. No masterpiece. Only a voice - that once belonged to an object. An object like other objects in a cosmos, whose orbits are determined by those around. Moving in a forced harmony. Those who survive are those who do not defy the gravity of others. And those who desire even a moment of freedom, find themselves hurled into space, doomed to crash with some unknown force. (281)

Dan finally accepts his failure and so he says, “I no longer desire that freedom. I move. Just move. Without meaning” (281). Tara’s memory persists in the form of a conflict in Dan’s mind so he seeks escapism again. He says, “I forget Tara. I forget that I had a sister...” (281). He is unable to reach the stage of “verification” because of conflict at earlier stages in the process of his creativity. Dan’s tragedy not only lies in the fact that he is unable to be with his sister but also because he fails as a playwright. Thus, the third leg which is wasted becomes a metaphor for his unfinished product i.e. his tragedy.

As a result of ‘guilt-ridden’ consciousness, Dan is unable to articulate his problems and desires into the “signifying system” (qtd. in Belsey 45) of his choice i.e. ‘Drama’. The resultant situation is the frustration of an artist, thrown in turmoil because of the conflicting “subject-positions” (qtd. in Belsey 53). It can be concluded that Dan would not be able to get authority over the “subject of *enonce*” (qtd. in Belsey 54) unless he resolves his conflicts within the “subject of enunciation” (54). Consequently, through Dan’s example one can argue that it is necessary to realize one’s past and be reconciled to it if one wants to have a successful present and future. Since this issue regarding art and creativity has been discovered in *Tara*, one can look for similar concerns in all of Dattani’s works to add another major perspective to Dattani’s dramatic world.

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