

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fluidity of Gendered Identity in Mahesh Dattani's Play

Tara

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Accepted version published on 5 March 2026

 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18863628>

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's play *Tara* (1990) is a two-act play. The play is about Tara and Chandan, two Siamese twins who were physically separated as infants. Even after their unjustified and manipulative division, which violates the law of nature, they remain emotionally united. Both of them share similar mental agony, which is delineated by Chandan when he grows to be called Dan. The psyches of both the twins are intertwined throughout the play. On the surface, *Tara* (1990) is a story about two conjoined twins who are surgically separated yet remain entwined. The personality of each twin is revealed within the context of the twins' unified selves. That is the frame of reference, the axis around which the entire script revolves. It can be interpreted as the twins sharing a single 'self' that is split between the masculine and the feminine. Symbolically, this 'self' can be taken as a metaphor of gender fluidity. The present paper attempts to study the mingled self of both the twins in terms of fluid identity, which gives another dimension to the problematic of gender discussed in the play. The present paper consults the gender issues from a theoretical perspective. The paper is analytical, descriptive, and theoretical in nature.

Keywords: Gender; Fluidity; Identity; Mingled self

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is an accomplished screenplay writer and film director whose efforts in *Mango Soufflé* and *Morning Raga* have been highly appreciated. Mahesh Dattani's dramatic works express his beliefs without being didactic. His plays question all kinds of discrimination, including religious prejudice, gender discrimination and homosexuality. Dattani's plays are written for the stage. It is the visual quality and dramatic effect which are of paramount importance. Though essentially rooted in the Indian settings, they can be staged anywhere in the world. He can merge the past and the present, as well as geographical locations, using multi-level sets. *Tara* (1990), Dattani's third play, takes a serious look at the status of the girl child who is unwanted and discriminated against in a male-child-obsessed society like ours. The structure of the play is characteristic- moving fluidly between past and present, slowly unravelling a secret buried in the past which must be faced.

Tara (1990) is a riveting play that questions the role of society that treats the siblings Chandan and Tara with double standards. The plot revolves around conjoined twins, and an operation to separate them at birth leaves Tara crippled for life. The fact that the injustice is perpetrated by the victim's own mother, whose preference is for the male child, suggests the complicity of women in perpetuating patriarchal norms in our society. Chandan and Tara are "conjoined twins" who were separated when they were three months old. The twins had three legs and were joined from the breastbone to the pelvic region. The doctors performing the surgery thought that the third leg would be more suited to the girl child. However, their mother Bharati and her father favoured the boy child. They had a private meeting with Dr Thakkar to give the third leg to Chandan, which he did in exchange for setting up his private nursing home in Bangalore. Chandan had two legs for just two days, as he had no use for the dangling second leg, which was eventually amputated, leaving the twins with one leg each. They were then given an artificial leg, the famed Jaipur foot, with which they live for the rest of their lives. This shows how the male child is preferred to the female child in our society. *Tara* (1990) centres on the emotional separation that grows between two conjoined twins following the discovery that their physical separation was manipulated by their mother and grandfather to favour the boy over the girl. Dattani sees *Tara* (1990) 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'. Tara and Chandan are two sides of the same self rather than two separate entities, and that Dan, in trying to write the story of his own childhood, has to write Tara's story. Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected hall of

himself, as a means of becoming whole. Dan's remark about their being "inseparable" is noteworthy: "The way we started in life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out...And separated" (Dattani 66). The present paper seeks to examine the inseparable essence of Chandan and Tara through the lens of gender fluidity.

Fluidity of Gendered Identity

Gender fluidity, commonly referred to as gender fluid, is a non-fixed gender identity that shifts over time or depending on the situation. These fluctuations can occur at the level of gender identity or gender expression. A "gender fluid person may fluctuate among different gender expressions over their lifetime, or express multiple aspects of various gender markers simultaneously" (Cronn-Mills 24). Gender fluidity is "different from gender-questioning, a process in which people explore their gender in order to find their true gender identity and adjust their gender expression accordingly" (Katz-Wise 50). A person's gender identity can be anything other than the preconceived gender stereotypes of male and female. The definition of gender fluidity is not apparent in *Tara* (1990) as there is no shifting of one's gender identity throughout the play. The play does not deal with non-binary, transgender or cisgender identities. However, the symbiotic selves of Chandan and Tara can be interpreted as the merging of male and female selves into one entity, which fits into the category of non-binary identity.

The famous psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, proposes the inward face of psychology based on the theory of Freud's psychoanalysis, Anima and Animus. The archetype of Anima is the female psyche of a male, and the archetype of Animus is the male psyche of a female. Everyone is born with certain qualities of the opposite sex, not only because biologically men and women produce male and female hormones in the same way, but also because, psychologically, human beings tend to have emotions and attitudes on different aspects of gender (Tong and Cheng 21). This kind of trait ensures harmony and understanding between the two sexes. Only when the persona and Anima or Animus reach a balance and coexist harmoniously can the harmony between the individual's internal personality and the perception of individual psychology be achieved. Both Chandan and Tara can be read as Anima and Animus existing into one 'self.' The rift between them brings destruction to both of them. *Tara* (1990) is a play about the male and female selves. The male self is preferred (if one is to subscribe to conventional categories of masculine traits and female traits) in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst. The play explores the typical Indian mindset that has preferred a boy child over a girl child from time immemorial. It depicts the triumphs and failures of the

parents and their twin children coping with the trauma. Through the metaphor of gender fluidity, Dattani focuses on the cultural emphasis on masculinity and how the characters conflict with it. The parents, the grandfather, the neighbour- they are all, in that sense, in tension with their own sensibilities, as opposed to the cultural sensibilities that they may have knowingly or unknowingly subscribed to. In the case of Chandan and Tara, the harmonious relationship between the Anima and Animus was broken, and for this reason, the 'self' could not sustain itself. Chandan is the male psyche in Tara, and Tara is the female psyche in Chandan. The fateful leg, which was the cause of Tara's continued ill health, could not be given to Chandan as it became useless after a couple of days. It would have been a complete success with Tara's body. It would have not only saved her life but also made her a complete person.

In the context of gender fluidity, the word "androgyny" is worth mentioning. The origin of the word "androgyny" can be traced back to ancient Greece, where the words "andro" (male) and "gyny" (female) form the current spelling "androgyny." At the same time, in Western mythology, the concept of androgyny is also involved. For instance, Athena, the legendary goddess of victory, is an androgynous representation of both masculinity and femininity. Modern psychology also discusses the concept of "androgyny." Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, points out that "there is no pure man or pure woman in the psychological or biological areas and the gender consciousness of human beings has features beyond its own characteristics" (Tong and Cheng 34). Even Judith Butler summarised that "there is no pure natural gender in society; what we call gender is the result of various social norms and conditions imposed on us" (13). Gender is a performance; there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; identity is constructed through performance by those who express it, which is thought to be its result. From an androgynous perspective, gender is constructed by social norms. Although it seems that "we are free to choose our gender, in fact, once we are biologically identified as a male or a female, we have to abide by all the social rules for acting a male or a female, whether we want to or not" (Yazdani and Chenraghi 469). When Chandan helps his mother knit a sweater, Mr Patel became furious and shouted at his wife for making Chandan help with his household chores. Mr Patel remarked, "Chandan, leave that damn thing alone!" (Dattani 76). In fact, we are all trapped in this ingrained system of gender stereotypes. Androgyny means that the two genders are equal, each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and their values complement each other. Chandan and Tara were very close during their growing-up years. They are both lively and cheerful. While Tara is more feisty and aggressive, Chandan is laid

back and, in fact, we are all trapped in this ingrained system of gender stereotypes. Androgyny means that the two genders are equal; each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and their values complement each other. Chandan and Tara were very close during their growing-up years. They are both lively and cheerful. While Tara is more feisty and aggressive, Chandan is laid back and easygoing. They share the same interests and pursuits and are always together. Though surgically separated, they remain “inseparable” till the end. Every human mind is “governed by two forces, one female and one male. Only by thinking from both genders' perspectives can artistic creation be fully expressed. Compared with monosexual brains, hermaphroditic brains are more empathic, more able to express their feelings without obstacles” (Taxidou 120). Chandan and Tara’s twin ‘self’ and Chandan’s support and compassion towards Tara exemplify this.

Conclusion

Butler’s theory of gender performance explains the process of body construction and the possibility of its reconstruction. First of all, there is no pure natural body in society; the “body” we usually call is the result of repeated, multiple social norms that rely on social compulsion. In other words, gender, as a social norm, creates the subject through performance. Norms (gender), performance (quote) and subject (body), which complement each other, theoretically can be distinguished, but “actually are a complete process of continuous flow of self-consciousness, which means gender names reference themselves to perform the subject, performance theory postulates the existence of a subject who can change genders at all” (Butler 13). A person should have both a brave, rational and strong character of the male, and a gentle, sensitive and tolerant disposition of the female. Only when the masculine and feminine qualities are in harmony within one person is that person at his or her best, and only then can he or she establish a complete outlook on life and the world. Chandan and Tara together represent that harmonious whole. However, that wholeness is hampered by society's stereotypical thinking. The bonhomie and camaraderie between Chandan and Tara continue until Tara eventually fades away and dies. Tara lost her life, and Chandan could not recover from his guilty conscience. Chandan wears several masks in London to get over his guilt from his years in England, but he is compelled to peel them off one by one to confront the reality of his situation: he is inextricably linked to his twin sister. The play ends with the twins hugging each other tightly. This union between the male self and the female self can be understood symbolically as a solution to the problem of female dependency, aimed at promoting gender equality. This scene presents a vision of the future way for males and females to get along. Apparently, *Tara* (1990)

is a play that questions the role of a society that treats the children of the same womb in two different ways but the framework of gender fluidity and the union between masculine and feminine selves running undercurrent throughout the play challenge the dichotomous structure of male and female adding another dimension to the play which goes beyond the traditional gender identity system.

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