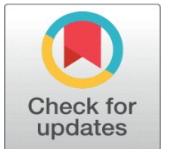


ECHOES OF A BROKEN PAST: READING MAHESH DATTANI'S TARA AS A MEMORY PLAY

Prachi Singh ¹, Shikha Singh ²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, India

² Professor, Department of English Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, India



ABSTRACT

The story of Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* exemplifies his skill in delving into memory, which is another theme of the play with broad appeal. *Tara* poses inquiries concerning memory and the processes involved in it. Dan's past demonstrates how literature, as an art form, deals with creativity and thought processes that are not often associated with the average person. The play illustrates how each completed work of art is the outcome of an extended process that the artist manipulates. Dan's persona gives us a glimpse into the mind of an artist and demonstrates how a creator's personality influences his creative process. Here, the story of the Patel twins is told through flashbacks and the characters' perspectives. It primarily explores Dan's innermost thoughts. In his memory, the entire play is a multi-layered web. With Dan, the play's male protagonist, giving a speech at the beginning, it highlights how delicate and subtle emotional relationships are. The play represents a journey where complex and fractured events occur that affect the mental states of the characters. The play is not realistic; it is a mushy piece about memories. Stated differently, we observe a person's distorted recollections rather than an objective reality that reveals what actually occurred. To remind us that what we are witnessing is, in fact, recollection and not reality, Dattani employs deft and imaginative methods throughout the play. The aim of the present study is to investigate the various ways in which memory functions in the play *Tara*.

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"Memory is the diary that we all carry about with us." - Oscar Wilde

"Every genuinely important step forward is accompanied by a return to the beginning...more precisely to a renewal of the beginning."

Only memory can go forward."

M. Bakhtin



1. INTRODUCTION

A multifaceted genius, Indian playwright in English, Mahesh Dattani also works as an actor, playwright, director of stage, scriptwriter, dance teacher, and theoretical personality. His plays focus on a wide range of pertinent issues that arise in Indian society. He writes about religious tension, gender inequality, and marginalized communities of society, such as women, minorities, LGBT people, and transsexuals. Through his works, Dattani challenges the patriarchal systems and conventions that uphold injustice and inequality against women, warranting the attention of all. He continues to serve as the era's reflective mirror. His works deal with the story of the modern man, who is present everywhere. In his writings, he addresses the psychological issues that contemporary man faces, the political system, and the societal system that ensnares him, his fear of losing something, and his innermost aspirations and desire to have everything.

Mahesh Dattani established Indian drama at the international level through his experimentation and innovation in the art of drama. John McRae has aptly remarked: Dattani is the "Voice of India" and his plays "are the plays of today, sometimes as actual as to cause controversy, but at the same time they are the plays which embody many of the classic concerns for world drama"(McRae: 2000).The fundamental element of Mahesh Dattani's dramatic art is the presentation of extreme conflict resulting from a clash of motives. He is quite skilled in stagecraft and theatrical art. In the 'Preface' to his Collected Plays (2000), Dattani states: "I know that I am an artist. I don't need to underline it in my works. I write for my plays to be performed and appreciated by as wide a section of the society that my plays seek to and are about...I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my times, place and socio-economic background" (XIII-XV).

Regarding his presentation, it has been accurately said that "He is a presenter of stark realities of urban life. His characters are suffering from the past guilt and sin. So his dramatic art provides a space for redemption of their mind and soul" (Bipin Parmar:123).Through performance, both the actors and the audience become insiders of the dramatic experience in his dramatic constructions. Regarding this aspect of drama, he says: "The play turned out to be liberating and learning experience for everyone involved, especially for the actors who had to delve deep into unexplored areas of themselves in order to connect truthfully within the material of the play..."(Dattani, Collected Plays: 136).

Tara, the third play of Mahesh Dattani, is a two-act stage drama that was originally presented as Twinkle Tara on October 23,1990, at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall in Bangalore by Dattani's Playpen Performing Arts Group. The play originally assigns the title to the female lead, but as Angelie Multani so eloquently states- "It is Chandan's story, the story of his guilt at discovering the story of his alienation from his sister, family, and homeland and the story of his search to tell that story-his artistic and creative frustrations" (Multani,2002: 118). It was later presented as Tara at Sophia Bhabha Hall by Theater Group, Bombay on November 9, 1991, and won the prestigious Sahitya Kerala Academy prize for that same year.

Tara, a pungent and poignant play, unveils the notions and conditions of gender prejudice existing in the society. Through the play Tara (1990), Mahesh Dattani has attacked the evils prevalent in society; it questions the role of society and how it treats two twins growing in the same womb differently based on gender preferences. The narrative of the play centers on a pair of Siamese twins-Chandan and Tara-who were conjoined since birth and were born with three legs,with the

newborn girl's body providing blood circulation to the third leg. Of the twins, only one could have two legs; the other could only have one. Medical tests revealed that the two legs fit Tara's body since her body provided most of the blood and she had slightly better chances of having two legs; yet Chandan received the legs, even though the connected legs finally flaked off because they could no longer support themselves as dead flesh. This choice was made because girl child in Indian society is subjected to gender discrimination and injustice rather than medical considerations. Bharti, who is the daughter of a very famous politician and the wife of an educated person, in spite of having a realization of the horrors of the situation, ruins the life of her own daughter, Tara, at the time of surgery by giving prominence to her son. Here, she strengthens the chain of injustice by giving preference to the beneficence of the male child. However, she later regrets her actions. She tries to overcome her guilt, and to compensate for the wrongs done to Tara, she decides to donate her kidney to her daughter. Tara passed away six years ago, but the circumstances surrounding her death remain unknown. Tara most likely broke away like a shooting star when she learned that her kith and kin had participated in the horrible choice, and that was the end of her. A shooting star is a transient celestial phenomenon that eventually twinkles and fades over time. Tara also appears for a short time before vanishing forever. This undesirable standard is the outcome of a girl's potential being sacrificed on the altar of gender in this situation, due to the plagued mindset of the perpetrators of the parochial logics of our tradition-ridden society, when a female's role is equally indelible. In the play, we see how Tara, a lively girl, falls victim to the evils prevalent in society and is doomed to suffer for reasons that are beyond the control of her imagination. Gender-related concerns are also fundamental to the play, as Dattani has acknowledged himself. In one of his interviews, with Laxmi Subramaniam, Dattani asserted, "I see Tara as a play about the male self and the female self. The male self is preferred in all the cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst"(Dattani,2002: 134).

By definition, a memory play is a play that is detached from reality. Here, the characters have memories and flashbacks to the past. In this kind of drama, memory can be a source of strength or even torture, depending on the situation, which leaves the characters with a confused and unsettling present. Maybe Ibsen and Strindberg deserve credit for bringing the modernist memory scene to life. Numerous authors who created memory plays and made a significant impact on the genre include Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, Robert Sherwood, Thornton Wilder, and many more. Tennessee Williams, however, is credited with coining the phrase to refer to non-realistic dramas where the audience is taken back in time through the narrator's memories, complete with imagery and music. Instead of being a static process, memory is manipulated throughout time, and memories shape speech and guide the dialogue of the characters in many ways. In Tara, Dan recalls the play's events through the prism of his experiences. He drops a major clue for the audience in his introductory monologue. His perspective tints every event. What comes out of Dan's mouth at first in the play Tara is "Yes. I have my memories. Locking myself in a bedsitter in a seedy suburb of London, thousands of miles from home hasn't put enough distance between us...Twinkle Tara. A drama in two acts by Chandan Patel"(Dattani: 323-324). It's interesting to note that Dan is unaware of his own situation. He attempts to turn those memories—which are already conflicts—into conscious awareness. He desires for theater to be a way for him to express his agony. He continues by declaring, "I want them to come back. To masticate my memories in mind and spit out the result to the world in anger"(Tara : Collected Plays, 2000: 323-324). His perception of the events of the play is filtered through his

imagination, as they are perceived only in memory. His mind activates a defensive mechanism to prevent the memory of his sister from becoming aware, as it recognizes that the memory he wishes to revisit is a distressing one. He remarks: "But what is hard is hard to let go. Allow the memories to flood in. To tell you the truth, I had even forgotten I had a twin sister"(324).

In *Tara*, Mahesh Dattani creates a stage that is filled with the echoes of a lost and abandoned past. In order to highlight Dan's sorrow, Dattani has masterfully employed the device where the protagonist is trying to write a "play within a play". In the form of flashbacks and through the character's thoughts, the narrative of the Patel twins' is presented. One of Patel's rooms, or a room in the London suburbs serves as the location for the action. "All that happens outside or has happened in the past, is just narrated. The action is one complete whole with nothing superfluous. There are no side stories or diversions. What happens after the birth of conjoined children in the happy house of loving parents-that is the limited theme. The magnitude of the action is absolutely manageable... at the abstract level, which is the genuine dramatic level here, the unities are strictly maintained"(Joshipura,2009: 188-89). Dattani uses monologues to elicit strong feelings from the audience by illuminating the subtle psychological aspects of the characters' mental states.

"Talk about memory," Roth says, "has become the language through which we address some of our most pressing concerns. This is because in modernity memory is the key to personal and collective identity"(Roth, 1995: 8). *Tara* is one of Dattani's most well-known plays because in it he explores the deep, dark corners of the mind, cutting through layers after layers to reveal the hidden reality that one is frightened to acknowledge, even to oneself. It purges the dirt and brings the true feelings to the surface, much like a catharsis. As noted by Ratan Bhattacharjee: "As we read we can experience Dante's Purgatorio-Virgil's role being taken upon by Dattani. At each stage your image is mirrored and you, 'Forgive me, Tara, forgive me for making it my tragedy.' The line brings forth the leitmotif of Mahesh Dattani's two-act drama, *Tara* to the fore"(Bhattacharjee: 2012).

In contrast to the space arts (such as architecture, painting, and sculpture), theater is a "time art," much like music, dance, and literature. As a result, it shares a formal affinity with memory. Though all the muses—not only Thalia, the Muse of Theatre—are purportedly the daughters of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, theater and memory appear to have a unique bond and shared substance. "From rehearsals to memory plays to theatrical memorabilia to theatres themselves-which constitute the exoskeleton of Theatre's memory-theatre can be fruitfully contextualized as an activity of remembering"(Favorini, 2007: 30-31). Due to the play's structure, which attributes the character of Dan to him, there is a persistent emphasis on this character. Dan's "guilt" and "mental disruptions" are highlighted by the play's disorienting and non-linear structure. The play's complicated and disorganized portrayal of events leads one to follow a linear thread that is the conflict between Dan's remorse for Tara's death and his sister's loving memories. Throughout history, memory has been seen as a notion that reflects meditations between the self and the mind, the conscious and unconscious, and the recorded and constructed identities. Memory training and the oral mode of the arts were closely related in medieval society; therefore remembering had a significant role. Memory helps in self-location on a continuum of socially constructed characteristics that are also autonomically and autoethically driven by one's neurocognitive profile and history, much as race, gender, and class aid in one's location in the socially, sexually, and economically constructed selves, respectively. "We have memory but memory

also has us: it tells us who we are”(Favorini,2007:30). Here, the characters speak of bygone eras filled with omissions and unsolved mysteries.

The Greeks used what Aristotle termed "Recognition" to emphasize memory and forgetting by pairing Mnemosyne Lethe or Lesmosyne. Shakespearean plays were also experimenting with memory during the Renaissance period. Shakespeare's Hamlet and Pericles may be analyzed within the framework of Renaissance concepts surrounding memory; yet contemporary theater, according to Brockett and Findlay, is not only a "century of innovation" but also, and especially so, "a century of memoration" (Brockett & Findlay, 1973: V). In a modern play, those pursuing consciousness and journeying towards self-understanding inevitably encounter the memory forest, which is undoubtedly teeming with spiderwebs, disorder, and bewilderment. Modern playwrights have innovated and restored a number of strategies to let the audience feel "not only the pastness of the past but of its presence" (Eliot, 1960: 49) in order to depict the continual flow of the past into the present.

The drama portrays Tara as its main character, even though Dan is the central character in the tragedy that he is attempting to write. The play's story is interwoven between the past and the present. "The past is never totally lost; it coexists with the present as a flow" (Karnad, Three Plays: Introduction:1994). The sequence of events is a combination of flashback and flashforward; following the character's mental chronology is unimportant to the stream of consciousness. In it, anything might suddenly emerge or fade away from the past. The story of Tara, for example, begins in the present, but quickly, through memory, Dan unveils the past. With the power of speech bestowed upon him, Dan continues to occupy a center stage, and what he sees there is his trip down memory lane. He disappears into the realm of recollections, but he suddenly wakes up as though from a nightmare. He complains that his head is clouded with a lot of thoughts: "The mind wanders too unnecessary details, irrelevant characters which do not figure anywhere" (Tara, 2000: 330). Dan's room is where the play takes place on a physical level. The scene changes from London to Bombay as we turn our gaze, and Dan plays Chandan. He is taking on the burden of other people's actions and is not directly to blame for his sister's misfortune. "Forgive me, Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (Dattani, 2000:380). He also does not deserve to be put on the scaffold. However, in order to atone for his sins and cleanse himself, he must also go through purgatory. This makes it a little reflective of "memory lane." His mental frustration initiates the play and spreads through his recollections and imagination.

There is a great deal of time covered. The play contains two facets in terms of time: the past and the present, the virtual and the actual, and the concrete and the abstract. The play's finale depicts Tara and Chandan cuddling in a utopian realm where Tara is free to radiate her beauty and shine brilliantly in the firmament of existence. Nevertheless, Dattani creates the idea that the play is a whole with his extraordinary proficiency in spacecraft. In the words of John McRae, "always adventurous in his way of using theatrical space at his disposal-multiple levels, breaking the bounds of proscenium, wondrously innovative use of lighting to give height, breadth and depth" (McRae, 2000: 46).

A boy's memories of his family serve as the basis for Tara, a study of frustration. The play's structure and content are dictated by a brother's memories. Once he has established the story's setting and period, the other characters are free to act out the somber details of their own lives on stage. When he lets his memories run wild, the play's action starts. As the narrator, the action's organizer, and a participating character, Chandan has three responsibilities to do. Although the

brother is given the responsibility of relaying his narrative, the sister is the focal point of the play. It is anticipated that the narrative will have the effect of relieving the brother of his guilt, which he has been holding inside until the play's conclusion. By the play's conclusion, the play's realistic pattern has diminished. It ends with Dan's heartfelt request to Tara to forgive him. It appears that Dan's request is granted; the audience witnesses the souls of Tara and Chandan embrace symbolically in an unidentified setting. In order to successfully illustrate the barriers that may stand in the way of artistic and creative endeavors, it is essential to bolster the critiques of Dattani's work by acknowledging the past for what it was in order to have a prosperous present and future. The play's structure, which merges the past, present, and future into Dan's mental world, is appropriate for this criticism. However, unless Dan approaches it from an artistic perspective, this guilt remains hidden. Dan's opinions and creativity shape the perspective used to observe the play's events.

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