

**“Resilient Women”: A Feministic Reading of Vijay Tendulkar’s *Kamala*
and Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara***

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Abstract

Feminism is a socio-political movement that was founded on the principle of the emancipation of women. It seeks to establish women’s self-identity within a patriarchal culture. Feminism has had a profound impact on various domains and academic disciplines. Literature is one of the most powerful mediums of manifestation of feminism. The cry for the liberation of women that emerged during the twentieth century also influenced contemporary Indian dramatists. Contemporary Indian drama is enriched with the contributions of several eminent writers like Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Girish Karnad, Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesh Dattani, and so on. These writers moulded the established conventions of traditional Indian drama with a blending of several other traditions. They realistically presented the social veracities in Indian society and pinpointed the harsh realities of life of the marginalized and subalterns. Women who live in the clutches of patriarchal male-dominated culture can be regarded as marginalized groups. This paper attempts a feministic reading of Vijay Tendulkar’s *Kamala* (1981) and Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* (1990). Both the playwrights might be regarded as unacknowledged feminists who used their plays to voice against the inequality and oppression of women in society.

Keywords: *feminism, self-identity, Indian drama, subaltern, patriarchy, oppression.*

Women in Indian literature have been portrayed as the embodiment of self-sacrifice, devotion, and commitment from time immemorial. Religion, culture, and society have always admired and valued feminine virtues. However, feminist critics consider the extolling of womanhood and feministic attributes as a tactic to keep women in subservience. During the post-independence period, the creative writers in Indian literature deconstructed the traditional notion of femininity and represented the self-consciousness and identity of women. As Beena Agarwal observes “In the last few decades, it has become a passion with the creative writers to investigate feminine mystique to relocate the position of woman in Indian society (2008, p.160).

Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are two renowned Indian playwrights. Both the plays by Tendulkar and Dattani share many common traits, including depictions of discrimination against subalterns, persecution of women within a patriarchal system, socio-political injustice, and homosexuality. Vijay Tendulkar is a multifaceted playwright of Indian drama

who occupies a significant position in contemporary Indian dramatic literature. He played a vital role in the firmament of Marathi drama. As Bhagabat Nayak points out, “His changing of theme and technique from traditional Indian drama to the writing of protest elements makes him a household name in Maharashtra. As a creative writer, his individual outlook and insightful observation of life is projected in his plays” (2011, p.67). His most popular and much-debated works always make a woman the central focus. *Kamala* (1981) is a two-Act play that critiques the flesh trade market and gender discrimination.

Mahesh Dattani’s dramatic canvas is composed of unique and unconventional plays that represent contemporary social realities in urban India. He is one of the most versatile theatrical persons. He began his theatrical career with the play *Where There’s a Will* and went on to win the coveted Sahitya Academy Award for his *Final Solutions and Other Plays* (1998). Dattani uses his plays as a medium to communicate with his audience, stating in an interview with Anita Nair, “I see myself as a craftsman and not a writer. To me being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium” (2001). His play *Tara* (1990) recounts the story of an intelligent girl who becomes a victim of sex inequity.

The two plays chosen for the study, i.e., *Kamala* and *Tara*, are the most prominent and popular plays by Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani, respectively. Both of them are renowned plays of the feminist movement in India. *Kamala*, a two-Act play, is a naturalistic-gynocentric play that portrays the flesh trade in India. The plot of the play revolves around the young, well-known journalist, Jaisingh Jadhav, and all of his shady attempts to have a successful career. He is a staunch advocate of patriarchal ideology. Sarita and Kamala are the two-woman characters connected to his life. Sarita is Jaisingh Jadhav’s wife. She is an educated, well-mannered lady hailing from an affluent family background. But, underneath her fanciful appearance, Sarita is a timid, meek, subservient wife who is expected to dance to her husband’s rhythms. As N.S. Dharan observes in “Gyno-Centrism in Silence in Court is in Session and Kamala,” “As a wife she is extremely sensitive to her husband’s needs and tastes, quite eager to pamper to his whims and fancies” (1999, p.42). Moreover, Sarita is supposed to assist with the duties of her husband in addition to her household chores. Her subservient status is evident from her words to Kakasaheb, her uncle.

SARITA: “I have to write down each phone call...If I say they didn’t tell me their names he gets angry with me for not asking” (p.3).

Kamala is another central character of the play, whom Jadhav brings from a village in Bihar for just two hundred and fifty rupees. She is a pawn in Jadhav’s cruel intentions to exhibit her before the press and media as a victim of the flesh trade in India. She is uneducated and ignorant, and she believes everything Jadhav tells her. Jadhav’s motives are revealed when he explains the truth about Kamala to his wife. His hypocritical attitude is visible in his detailed and appealing description of the flesh trade towards Sarita. He didn’t even allow Kamala to dress properly to have a decent look before the Press Conference, instead leaving her in her ragged and filthy attire. Following the success of the Press Conference, Kamala came back to Jadhav’s house and got a chance to communicate with Sarita, which caused Sarita to realize her loss of self-identity and individuality.

KAMALA: Can I ask you something? You won’t be angry?

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SARITA: No, Go on.

KAMALA: How much did he buy you for? (p.34).

Kamala’s question makes her realise that she is nothing more than a slave to her husband. As N.S. Dharan asserts, “Kamala’s question opens Sarita’s eye suddenly and for the first time, she finds no difference between herself and Kamala whom her husband brought to exhibit at the Press Conference. She coolly tells Kamala that Jadhav brought her for seven hundred rupees” (1999, p.46). Kamala’s first outburst against her husband was her refusal to accompany Jadhav to the party, as per his wish. Her words “Aren’t I allowed to have a will of my own? (p.45) establishes her as a strong and assertive woman. The play ends with a picture of a determined Sarita, who gaining voice over her husband Jadhav as his voice “weakens” (p.50).

The play, *Kamala*, is a truly feministic one as it shows the progression and transition of a woman from the clutches of maledomination to a self-independency. Through the play, Tendulkar is trying to reiterate that the loss of self is the root cause of one’s ruin. When they start to protest against their suppression, they start to realize the need for their self-identity and dignity. The play is a stark critique of a male-dominated society’s chauvinistic and selfish attitudes. Dattani also despises the attitude of the modern world towards viewing women as commodities.

On the other hand, *Tara* develops into a play that clearly shows the gender discrimination, power hierarchies, and masculine superiority in the current society. The play opens into the family concerns of the Patel family, portrays the story of Siamese, or congenial twins, Chandan and Tara, who are separated through surgery. The surgery, which was conducted by Dr. Thakkar, was in the name of giving a new life and hope to both Chandan and Tara. But the real horror was disclosed when the surgery turned out to be beneficial solely to Chandan, the male child. Mr. Patel, the father of both Chandan and Tara, seems to be a domineering figure who wants the surgery only to benefit his son, Chandan, while ignoring and adopting a cold-eyed attitude towards Tara. He is presented as a hegemonic, authoritative figure who determines and prejudices the status of women in society. He thinks that women are supposed to handle only domestic chores and men should provide opportunities for learning and career development. His biased attitude is shown when he proposes Tara must concentrate on ‘knitting’ and allows Chandan to go to college and work.

Bharati, the mother of Tara and Chandan, is one of the prime culprits behind Tara’s misfortune. She wants the surgery to be beneficial only to Chandan. She is well aware of the consequences of her actions, but Bharati is a woman who has been socially conditioned to patriarchal ideologies. She is controlled and tamed by her husband. Both Tara and Bharati thus become the victims of patriarchal authoritative attitudes. Bharati feels guilty as she realizes that she is one of the responsible ones for the ill fate of her daughter, but she was deliberately silenced by Mr. Patel. Unlike Mr. Patel, Bharati feels happy for Tara’s intelligence, and she appreciates her talents. She says, “she has her talents, she can be very witty and of course is intelligent” (CP, p.348). She is even willing to donate a kidney to Tara in order to save her life. But, since she lacked the right to express herself, she kept her desires to herself. As Beena Agarwal points out,

Bharati emerges as an image of a subjugated woman but she is aware of her decisions and gathers courage to assert herself for the sake of Tara. She is not free in the conventional society but she is conscious that a girl should also be provided every opportunity for self-development. However, the contradiction is seen in her attitude also. She fights for the happiness of Tara but is helpless to get rid of the myth...Through the conflict of Bharati, Dattani establishes that women being committed to family and society can't go beyond it...Bharati in her reflection identifies herself with the smiles of Tara. She is an image of sensitive wife and sensitive mother caught in the whirlwind of social conventions. She bears an irrational authority of Mr. Patel but by the end of the play, she gathers her strength to compromise with reality (p.162).

Tara is more intelligent and talented than Chandan, yet she falls into the hands of an apathetic society. Tara stands as a symbolic image of entire womanhood, chained by patriarchal notions. Tara's persona becomes more self-contained after her death, since people like Bharati and Chandan bear the responsibility for her death and lament for her. Tara can be considered a symbol of a new woman. Even after being a victim of the selfish deeds of a hypocritical society, she was still powerful enough to assert her individuality. She challenges the male superiority despite her fragile health condition and she questions Chandan and shows her rage towards him. She wants Chandan to apologize to her for being unjust towards her. The final apology of Chandan, "Forgive me Tara...Forgive me for making it my tragedy" (p.380), makes the image of Tara an empowered one. Her name, Tara, is a suggestive one because she is just like a "tara" or "star" which always stays bright. Through the play, Mahesh Dattani celebrates womanhood while criticizing the gender bias and hypocritical attitudes of society.

Both the plays, *Kamala* and *Tara*, demonstrate the social commitment of Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani in exposing the problems of women in contemporary society. They explicitly condemn social evils towards women. Both these playwrights intended to empower women by presenting powerful and assertive female characters. They despise a society that has double standards for men and women and through these plays, they boldly target a society that considers women as commodities.

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