

GENDER CONCERN IN THREE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PLAYS: HAS SOMETHING CHANGED?

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ABSTRACT

A gender study identifies the difference between male and female in a socio-cultural context and at the psychological level. It addresses the classifying principle and critically uses the discriminatory tool that academicians doing research on human relationship and its implication cannot neglect. Contemporary Indian Drama has attended to issues in socio-cultural setups, questioning the complex nature of creation and continuation of gender study, voicing concern against age old ideologies debated on various structural and thematic paradigms. This study takes up Tagore's Chitra, Dattani's Tara and Padmanabhan's Light's Out with a pertinent standpoint of gender concern, notably exploring transformation in the social mind-set, if any. Where Chitra is a play centered on the difficulty of male consciousness to come to terms with the empowered woman as a brave and intelligent warrior, there Tara deals with preferences of a family towards a male child to the female, born of the same womb as twins. Light's Out is about traumatic horrors of gang rape; an alarmingly growing terrorization, questioning immune reactions to painfully complex yet accepted wisdom of gender injustice.

Keywords: Gender, socio-cultural setup, discrimination, transformation, injustice.

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The *genre* of drama, the theatrical performing art, serves as a meaningful literary tool today and has come very close to peoples' heart since it can connect directly with the live audience. The addressees get an opportunity to rake up within; understand social structure and cultural constitution, human existence and relationships, introspect values and their own identity during interactions as readers and spectators. Noteworthy Indian dramatists have used this potent medium to communicate and express life issues. Contemporary Indian dramaturgy is distinct as a consortium of Sanskrit, Folk and Western influence. Inspired by *Natyashastra*, the fifth Veda in Indian culture, many playwrights have attempted on mythological themes to entertain and moralize. Folk plays have metamorphosed, emerging as social messengers bordering on women empowerment, sanitation, health concerns etc., in the recent years. With Western influence, tradition and modernity have come into close proximity and revolutionary changes in the political and social scene have endowed the *genre* with new recognition. Tagore, who was greatly influenced by the tradition of *Jatra* used the traditional myth, legend symbol and allegory to re-create contemporaneity, whereas a realistic portrayal of existing society was painted by Ezekiel, Dasani and Currimbhoyin the post-independent era. Recognition of Indian drama with immediate universality surfaced with innovative and experimental playwrights like Karnad, Tendulkar, Sirkar, Padmanabhan and Dattani. They reinvestigated history, folklore and myths constructing a germane niche. Along other grave concerns, instability regarding gender identity and gender-divide also caught the attention of equally dedicated dramatists and some very strong voices did emerge with the concept of gender as a discursive construct.

Owing to drastic escalation of crimes against women today, the paper ventures to examine gender concern regardless of growing awareness for gender equality, identity and gradual empowerment. Men and women have co-existed as essential entities since times immemorial but the male connivance to dominate over the other since long has robbed the relationship of its pious vitality. To re-envision this co-existence, understand the gender-divide objectively and study the changes in perspectives and consequences, a reflection of Indian philosophy, which gives ample evidence on the genesis and concept of gender in

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prakrati and *purush*, perceived in ancient times, needs deliberation. The conception finds occurrence in Rig Veda, Kapilmuni's Sankhya Sutra, Bhagwadgita, mythology, Buddhism, Ardhnareshwara concept, Hiranyagarbha concept, Samayin theory, Ajneya Chakra and in Chinese, Greek and Gnostic gospel. An attempt to show as to how something natural (*prakriti* and *purush*) has become a matter of injustice and discrimination, worsening further to extreme criminality has also been made in the paper.

Tagore took the lead in displaying the multidimensional visage of Indian woman as educated, intelligent, unchallenged with potentials of her own to move ahead; a post-modern Indian woman in a male dominated world. Significantly, the verse play by Tagore, *Chitra or Chitrangada (The Manipuri Princess)*, is a perceptible reminder of the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, who said, 'One is not a woman, one becomes one.' The idea was a socio-cultural construct, which further developed from theories in the study of sociology and psychoanalysis influencing the study of gender greatly. The statement by de Beauvoir is regarded more so as practice and something that is performative rather than evolutionary. Women, she asserted, are capable of making choices as men and it is here that *Chitrangada* becomes significant. 'Daughter of a monarch,' her father had wished for a son but it was to be 'Other' wise. His conciliation was in the form of bringing up and training Chitrangada as he would have, for his son – to grow up as a chivalrous warrior, a connoisseur in the strategy of warfare, exhibiting propensity for good governance and above all possessing cherished masculine qualities. What happened next? The initial choice of the father was mutely accepted by the princess yet got transformed by the same princess and then again re-transformed. Why?

Looking back at ancient Indian society during the times of the great mythological epics, desire for a son had existed culturally and traditionally like in most other patriarchal social order. Even the Foreword to *Tagore's Dance-Drama Omnibus* refers to the epic story where, 'Lord Shiva had bestowed the boon that only male children would be born in the family'(88). Therefore, there is nothing unusual in the father's desire for a son. What is impressive is his modernity when he disregards tradition regarding his daughter's upbringing. Obliquely scanned, gender discrimination comes to the fore when he negates his own helplessness of accepting a female child by this disregard. Feminine trait as something natural for the girl child was just unacceptable to him. It is worthy to note here that child bearing and child rearing has often been viewed as cultural rather than biological by the socialist feminists; an idea that supports de Beauvoir's theory.

The play opens with Chitrangada projected as a warrior princess, considered essentially a male domain. Tagore's purpose to draw on a small incident from *Mahabharata* was to reject the submissive image of a woman and bring to the fore a New Woman with a voice. He takes his cue from the remarkable space that the women of the time created for

themselves, despite regulated by defined roles set in limits and administered by patriarchy. He took the opportunity to deconstruct the past and revive the tradition, to review and then renew to recreate a social structure and not break any social norm.

In the dance-drama, *Chitrangada* the princess is on a hunting spree, when she is ensnared by Arjun's handsome deportment, living in exile. She yearns to be his beloved wishing ardently to shrug off her masculinity to facilitate her luring advances by donning feminine charm. 'Leave it, leave it, why's this false game? / On life comes aversion/on myself is the shame.' (Tagore sc.1, 92) Appeased by her prayers Cupid blesses her with two years of feminine charm, resulting in her successful enterprise of wooing the initially reluctant Arjun, who had vowed celibacy in exile. The Companions, playing the Greek version of Chorus are amazed at her transformation in a moment's spectacle, '... old identity blown away? ... Recognizing self very first time?' (sc.2, 93) Enjoying togetherness for sometime has a glitch though. She craves for her individuality and is guilty of betraying Arjun in her illusive garb. She decides to reveal the truth to him, and be her original self, come what may, as she feels that her 'Unreal garland' is deceptive that would one day 'crumble in dust' (sc.3, 103). So, she once again prays to Cupid but now to take away the boon and frees her from this 'pilfered wealth'. Cupid removes all illusion to restore her with 'Beauty beyond beauty' so that her 'lover's eyes should see' (sc.5,110). The play ends after Arjun gives in to Chitrangada's truth and they are happily united.

An investigation into Chitra's changed appearance and then the mental conflict raises inquiry. On meeting Arjun it dawns upon her that she is unhappy about her masculine demeanor. Is it because the man she loves cannot accept her with masculine attributes? Can't she make choices here? Why does she choose to adorn feminine traits to win him? Nonetheless, she feels guilty of betraying him with her beautiful outward exterior when she gets one. Which is her real self? Which is her illusive self? The one she has 'become' since her childhood or the one she dons now –and why this shifting loyalty regarding gender identity? Moreover, at re-enquiry a glaring question stands out; does de Beauvoir's statement 'One is not a woman, one becomes one' fall into place? Or does the gender concern in the play powerful enough to refute it? Has Chitra's choice to 'become one'; either her upbringing as a male or her female role to win and enjoy conjugal pleasures with Arjun, satisfied her in any way? And most important of all, does the concern and this entire enquiry hint at the play voicing a need for change in outlook towards gender bias? It's appropriate to peep into what Judith Butler says in *Gender Trouble*: 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being.' (33)

It is the art of Tagore that answers all queries in very simple terms. Chitra's masculine bearing was her father's choice in the first place, not hers. She had 'becomes one'

but conversely 'a man' according to de Beauvoir's theory. Only after her encounter with Arjun she thinks of her individuality and wants to have it. She makes a choice here and prays for it. She gets it by divine intervention. Here there is no 'repeated act' according to Judith Butler and no 'becoming one' too. This could either be a miraculous phenomenon or an inherent biological realization that refutes both these theories and does not fall into place. In spite of everything, following her happy union she again feels guilty for hiding her real self from Arjun. Tagore's subtle craftsmanship emerges here when Chitra decides to use her inner power to make a final choice. She reveals the truth of her real self i.e., she is all powerful to face the consequences but not ready to live with falsity or with a borrowed mask. Chitra is capable, self sufficient and does not necessarily have to live with her father's choice; donning a male persona. She is a woman with feminine charm, yet strong enough to be a soul-mate, bold and unhesitant, a responsible individual to face any hardships that a woman of her comportment is capable of. In a nutshell she is a complete person, with, or with no gender identity. Her strength of character, her life support comes from her inner self and not by any supportive male identity. Moreover, Tagore has categorically conveyed a change in outlook towards gender bias building a new gender construction. An identity of manhood or womanhood is judged as separate biological and natural creations that are complete, capable and powerful entities in themselves. But before being conclusive, how Dattani's play *Tara* and Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* have fared in recent decades, requires investigation.

Dattani, the voice of present-day India, mentioned in one of his interviews with Lakshmi Subramaniam: 'I see *Tara* as a play about the male self and female self. The male self is being preferred in all cultures. The play is about the separation of self and the resultant angst.' (134) The statement is the key to understanding the play *Tara* where once again the story of the preference of the male self over the female self has been revisited. Dattani's *Tara* is an ironic reality that exposing the double standards of that society where on the one hand female deities or divinities, empowered with divine attributes and strength are worshipped but when it comes to the living feminine gender in flesh and blood, the behaviour becomes ruthless and discriminatory. The problem has been afflicting the minds and souls of *sahrdaya*-s and has found objective representation in Dattani's *Tara*. Probe after probe, patriarchal influence emerged into prominence that has cut across times and taken deeper roots sub-consciously affecting and distorting the human psyche. Before any verdict, an objective overview of ErinMee's idea of the play is a becoming support:

Tara 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 [Chandan] over the girl [Tara]. Tara, a feisty girl who isn't given the opportunities given to her brother [although she may be smarter] eventually

wastes away and dies. Chandan escapes to London, changes his name to Dan, and attempts to repress the guilt he feels over his sister's death by living without a personal history. Woven into the play are issues [. . .], and the clash between traditional and modern lifestyle and values.(Mee 319)

The play is a unique illustration of total discrimination where Tara is doubly victimized; by patriarchy and the supportive socio-cultural mindset where the females dare not revolt, lest they be deprived of economic and social security. In a conformist Indian society, a woman is trained to accept dependency, to remain unassuming and compliant, liable to walk on uneven grounds as long as she lives. Her perennial life support include her father, brother, husband and son in that hierarchical order. Bharati, in *Tara* is trapped in the web of looking for security in her son and searching for her own identity in the patriarchal mentality endorsed by her father's political power and her husband, Patel's silence. Patel leaves no opportunity to bully Bharati and satirize her decision to donate her kidney not for Tara's wellbeing but for herself. Nonetheless, Patel is equally partial with plans for Chandan's education abroad ignoring Tara. Despite her deformity, with all her brilliance and inner strength, the crux lies in Tara's unfortunate elimination; more so when this patriarchal system defeats the very cause it had upheld due to its prejudiced stance. When the second leg, destined by Nature to be Tara's is given to Chandan, becomes futile, neither does Tara survive nor does her brother live guilt free. In the exposure of his mother and grandfather's insistence over the decision, the doctor too becomes a party; bribed, crippling both his patients, rather killing them, crippling the whole system; disgracing professional ethics.

On further examination, an attention grabbing mythological concept of *ardhnarishwar* and *rogynous* (a divine avatar of Lord Shiva; half male and half female, worshipped by many in India) is enlarged under the lens. When from nativity the Gods had ordained them together, on what authority was one subjected to subjugation and the other uplifted? A similar inquiry is articulated in *Tara*:

She never got a fair deal, not even from Nature. Neither of us did. May be god never wanted us separated. Destiny desires strange things. . . but even God does not always get what he wants. Conflict is the crux of life. (Dattani 349)

In a scheming design that finally proved fatal, the concern becomes iniquitously complex, when individuals in the play find themselves chained by socio-cultural mindset. Non-rectifiable separation that brings disturbance in the lives of the conjoined twins living

in 'one comfortable womb' is later realized by Chandan. It is this 'voice of the unvoiced section of society' that becomes the concern projected by Dattani here.

Unlike typecast alienation and marginalization themes, Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is a powerful play that sums up the aggravation caused by repeated and well defined social and psychological attitude towards gender. At a time when the nation jingles of *beti bachao, beti padhao*, it is like a shameful reminder of where we are headed to; into becoming more human or more inhuman? Does not the play prove that the ever amplification of gender discrimination has assuredly taken an extreme shape of human criminality, to utter beastliness? Yes. There is a change indeed; but of what kind? Do we want this change? If not then how can the preferred changes be brought about?

Lights Out is based on a real life harrowing case that occurred in Mumbai during 80's. Leela, a housewife is forced to live in trauma because she cannot swallow the victim's cries, brutally gang-raped on the streets every evening near her building, by unknown men. Bhasker, her husband, is cold fish to Leela's constant pleas to inform the police or take action to save the unfortunate woman.

Leela: I know, I know--- you've told me they're not interested in cases like this, they don't bother about minor little offenses— but I'm frightened! Can't you see that? Isn't that enough?

Bhasker: Go tell the police that you're frightened about noises in the next building! They'll laugh in your face. (Padmanabhan 112)

The persisting incident affects Leela psychologically, amounting to sleepless nights. Leela's repugnance mounts as the anxious evening approaches. With his friend, Mohan's support, Bhasker, unsympathetic to the occurrence, quells Leela's revolting voice. Even with Naina, their neighbor's support, Leela's arguments turn futile. The maid, Frieda symbolizes silent onlooker. Padmanabhan has revealed gender inequality by imparting a dominating voice to the males who subjugates the females and as Dr. D. Gatt aptly comments in his research article:

The play is replete with bizarre and ridiculous conversation and we are led to the absurd world of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter; as Godot never comes

in *Waiting for Godot*, similarly no one will call the police or raise a voice against the molesters and come to the rescue of molested woman. (The Criterion 7)

Invariably, this kind of gender bias is created by human psychological and social attitudinal circumstances. Gender becomes a problem and then a concern when it is aggravated by repetition of these attitudinal circumstances. *Tara* and *Lights Out* validate this. *Tara*, though physically challenged, depicts tremendous strength of mind and to a large extent tries to fight the oddities but gradually gets trapped, victimized and is finally eliminated. Leela and the rape victim in *Lights Out* represent women who are physically and psychologically suppressed unable to rip the tightened shackles of society. Subjected to constraints of biological weaknesses during girlhood, their whole personality gets engulfed in becoming dependent, voiceless and non-existent. Consequently patriarchy gets established, intensifying subjection and suppression.

When compared with *Chitrangada*, the problem does not become a concern, let alone aggravate. Chitra solves it, recognizing her power within, finally emerging complete, in conformity with the ideal one of *dwaparyug*. She represents post-modern empowered Indian woman, complementing her other half. Not compromising with or suppressing her desires, she graces the patriarchal social setup living contented and fulfilled.

As time progressed, division of work, established on biological distinction, began to be looked down upon as discriminatory pertaining to women. They happened to be considered as biologically weak and binary opposites like day-night, sun-moon, active-passive, head-heart, culture-nature, surfaced. History and Scriptures acknowledge complementary position of a woman with man, never subordinate, where man is a provider and her protector. It is time to revisit these superseded notions that endorse progressive and credible explanation. Complementary co-existence of *prakriti* and *purush* concept is one such realization. Mental blocks and attitudinal prejudices need elimination, raising an integrated woman like Chitra. She was her man's companion and comrade outside home, with her sexuality intact; an embodiment of gender equality. Chitra is Tagore's another attempt to justify the role of a woman, not only as a beautiful agent of nature but also as an interpreter of truth. Similarly, collective consciousness can also help initiate a change in the positive direction as shown by Padmanabhan's in *Lights Out* eventually. When Bhaskar, Mohan, Leela, and others come out of their individual shelves, think collectively and are able to act, it is only then that a change is visible. The same elimination of mental blocks and attitudinal prejudices and the same collective consciousness apply to *Tara* where

gender discrimination is a social bias. It is this change that is the need of the hour for making a peaceful and harmonious co-existence possible.

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