

# Child Abuse in Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* and Mahesh Elkunchwar's *God Son*

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## Abstract

Children, child abuse, and child rights constitute a triad of one of the most ignored subjects in politics and culture. In literature, children are perhaps most marginalised in theatre. *Tara* (Mahesh Dattani) and *God Son* (Mahesh Elkunchwar), however, are two plays that place the child at the centre. More importantly, they focus on the abused child. This paper examines the representation of child abuse in its varied forms in *Tara* and *God Son* to show how the trauma caused to the child protagonists amounts to 'soul murder,' a term used by Leonard Shengold to describe the extreme abuse of children. It concludes by arguing that the subject of child abuse needs to be brought out of the shadows by more plays such as *Tara* and *God Son*, and a greater critical focus on child rights in academia.

**Keywords:** Child abuse; Child rights; Theatre.

## Introduction

"Children are generally seen and heard in the theatre only as necessary evils," writes John Ditsky, about the absence of children in theatre (4). Taking umbrage with American playwright Edward Albee, who claimed that a child on stage cannot carry a message very well, Ditsky argues that "the child can *be* the message" (4). Mahesh Dattani and Mahesh Elkunchwar, two of India's prominent playwrights, each wrote plays in which the child *is* the message. Dattani's *Tara* and Elkunchwar's *God Son* are both informed by the trope of the abused child. The eponymous female twin in *Tara* is surgically separated from her brother in a way that endangers her life and eventually causes her death, while the adopted orphan boy in Elkunchwar's *God Son* is mercilessly tormented by his adoptive parents, and then killed by his adoptive mother. What has escaped critiques of both plays thus far is a child rights-based perspective, a much-ignored

subject in Indian literary studies. This paper begins with a brief look at child rights in relation to international charters such as the Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It then provides an overview of child abuse in India before it turns to its primary focus—the portrayal of child abuse in *Tara* and *God Son*—to show how the plays represent a theatre of cruelty that depicts ‘soul murder,’ a term used by Leonard Shengold to describe the extreme and unrelenting abuse of children, in particular.

### Children’s Rights

The universal belief that childhood is a time of innocence, joy, and play is, more often than not, a myth. As Jo Boyden writes:

Yet there is growing evidence globally that childhood is for many a very unhappy time. International media coverage of the young paints an especially stark picture, of innocent and vulnerable child victims of adult violence and maltreatment; of ‘stolen’ childhoods in refugee camps and war zones. (188)

Awareness of how children’s lives are fraught with horrific forms of abuse has brought the 21<sup>st</sup> century to a point where “the political and social condition of whole societies is now gauged by the status of their children” (Boyden 188). For this reason, children’s rights are much discussed today, and amid national and global discourses on human rights. While there is much that is heartening, not all is well in the evolving world of child rights. A document such as the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, for example, has received criticism from some quarters because the rights it promised “were little more than a collection of general moral entitlements and few—the right to love and understanding, for example—could be guaranteed” (195). For this reason, many of the rights assured in the Declaration are still viewed as mere “manifesto rights” (O’Neill 460).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force in September 1990, was seen as an improvement on the Declaration because it was more than a simple declaration of “good intent”; it was an instrument that was legally binding on the states that had ratified it (Boyden 195). Article 18 of the Convention states that, while fulfilling their parental duties, parents must give primacy to the best interests of their children (Convention on the Rights of the Child 7). Not only did the Convention recognise children as a part of the human family, but it also identified them as a distinct group in need of rights unique to them. Fur-

thermore, the Convention sought to ensure that the state did not violate children's rights, and mandated that state parties protect children from others who might interfere with their rights (Todres and Higinbotham 63). Yet, even as the Convention marked a historic commitment to the world's children, it has not succeeded in ending their suffering. The brief overview of child abuse in India (outlined in the next section), for example, belies the hope that the Convention has transformed the tenuous lives of children oppressed, not so much by the vagaries of technology or the apathy of governments, but by the tyranny of their own parents.

### **Child Abuse in India**

Children's rights are not common knowledge. Few are aware of either the Convention or its cardinal principle, "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration," stated in Article 3, 1 (Convention 3). The 'best interests' tenet seems simple and uncomplicated, but that is not the case. The stipulation that State Parties should consider the rights and duties of parents and legal guardians, as articulated in Article 3, 2, for example, jeopardises efforts to privilege the rights of children (3). Once the rights, not simply duties, of parents or legal guardians are related to the best interests of children, matters become complicated, mostly because of the widely divergent views about what constitutes parental rights vis-a-vis children's rights in cultures across the world. Child-rearing methods, usually left to the individual preferences of parents, may not always be in accordance with a constitutional body of rights enshrined in documents such as the Declaration or the Convention. Indeed, in some parts, the very notion of children having any rights at all, least of all those that could supersede parental authority, is bewildering, if not laughable.

Children's rights receive little attention in the Indian subcontinent, even though 19% of the world's children live in India, and four out of every ten people in the country constitute people below 18 years of age (Kacker, *Study on Child Abuse: India 2007*, 5). Moreover, India has a dubious record of having the world's highest number of working children, and the world's largest number of sexually abused children: a child below 16 years is raped every 155th minute, and a child below 10 every 13th hour (7). Furthermore, one in every 10 children is sexually abused at any point in time (7). There is no doubt that child abuse exists everywhere in the world, but while other countries recognised and addressed the problem by developing and implementing better laws and policies for children, the subject of child abuse in India has been shrouded in "a conspiracy of silence" (Kacker, *Study 73*). India does not even have a "legally accept-

able definition" of physical abuse as yet (Kacker, *Childhood Betrayed: Child Abuse and Neglect in India* np).

This shroud of silence was lifted in some measure when the Government of India, under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, initiated a National Study on Child Abuse in 2005. The study found that children aged 5–12 years were at the greatest risk of physical abuse, and that two out of every three children had been physically abused (Kacker, *Study* vi). Moreover, out of 69% of the children found to have been physically abused, 54.68% were boys (vi). In addition, 88.6% of those abused within the family had been abused by their parents (vi). It was also found that every second child had faced emotional abuse, and in 83% of the cases, the abusers were the child's parents (vii).

Statistics of this kind, disturbing though they are, have little impact when buried in unpublicised, little-known government documents. When Loveleen Kacker writes that the shocking statistics revealed by The Child Abuse Study of 2007 "exploded like a bombshell on Indian sensibilities," she overstates the case (*Childhood Betrayed* np). The medium of theatre, however, has far greater potential to underscore the angst of suffering children in comparison with any government-initiated study or survey. It is a risk, however, for playwrights to implicate, and thereby alienate, the very audience that patronises their theatre, but it is a risk well taken by Dattani and Elkunchwar.

### **Child Abuse in *Tara* and *God Son***

Child abuse, as represented in *Tara* and *God Son*, could well be described as 'soul murder,' a term Leonard Shengold uses to describe a crime committed particularly against children (4). He defines it as "instances of repetitive and chronic overstimulation alternating with emotional deprivation that are deliberately brought about by another person" (235). Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg used the term before Shengold, describing it as "the deliberate or careless destruction of another person's identity and capacity for happiness" (236-237). This paper aims to show how soul murder aptly describes the abuse of the child protagonists in *Tara* and *God Son*.

Based on her study of child abuse in India, Ravneet Kaur reports that although adults tend to paint an "idealised" and "romanticised" picture of childhood, the image does not correspond with the lived experiences of children (161). Kaur's observation is borne out in both *Tara* and *God Son*. The adopted boy in *God Son* is treated as anything but the 'God Son' he is

supposed to be. The mother claims to adhere to the book on child psychology to learn how best to raise a child, but her treatment of the boy is cruel in the extreme. Dattani's *Tara*, meanwhile, highlights gender discrimination through a story about a pair of conjoined twins born with three legs. Tara's mother and grandfather decide that the surgical separation of the twins should favour Dan, the male twin; thus, Dan receives the third leg at the expense of his sister Tara. In both plays, the parents exert absolute control over every aspect of their children's lives under the guise of acting in their best interests. When Dan tells his father, Patel, that he would like to stay at home with Tara after her surgery, even if it means missing a year of college, his desire to support his sister is summarily dismissed. Dan is also dissuaded from pursuing his passion for music and writing, and sent abroad for higher studies, instead. In a similar vein, the father in *God Son* declares that he will send his son to London to "make" him "an FRCS Foreign-returned doctor" (Elkunchwar 70). The authority the parents assert over their children is unrelenting, despite its disastrous consequences for the children. Elkunchwar highlights the tyranny of parents with his characteristic use of dark humour. The absurdity of the parents' behaviour is underscored each time they berate the boy for not knowing basic multiplication, even though he is right and they are wrong: the mother claims that two times three is seven, while the father declares that it is five. The boy is beaten regardless of the answer he gives. Toward the end of the play, the mother cuts off the boy's tongue for misspelling 'science,' although she was the one who did not know the correct spelling.

Comparable to the parents in *God Son*, many of the parents Kacker encountered in her study strongly believed in strict disciplinary measures (*Childhood Betrayed* np). Scolding, shouting, slapping, beating with a stick, locking children in a room, denying food, withdrawing affection, and such punishments were found to be the norm in most Indian households (Kacker, *Childhood Betrayed* np). The mother in *God Son* is shown to take recourse to a similar variety of punitive measures to discipline the adopted boy. She terrorises him for the smallest of things, going so far as to tell him that God will turn him blind and cause him to lose his tongue.

Anne Phillips declares that corporal punishment is about bodily integrity and the rights of the child, not about who owns the child's body (728). In other words, corporal punishment is wrong, irrespective of who administers the punishment or whose body is at the receiving end of the punishment (728). Children, however, are denied agency over their bodies; hence, when faced with the prospect of severe punishment, they prefer to comply than to protest (Kaur 167). The fictional children in both *Tara*

and *God Son* reflect this phenomenon: they refrain from defying their parents for fear of retribution. Although Patel is nowhere as abusive toward his children as the father in *God Son*, the twins obey him because his behaviour toward them, though never actually physically abusive, nevertheless carries the threat of it.

The harsh punishments routinely inflicted on children reflect the common belief that children are the property of their parents. Indeed, it is "a significant characteristic found in almost all parents who emotionally abuse children" (Kacker, *Childhood Betrayed* np). Emotional abuse takes different forms: constant criticism, verbal assault, belittling, and even blaming children for what goes wrong in their parents' lives (np). The father in *God Son*, for example, vents his frustration on the adopted boy as if to imply that the child is somehow responsible for his non-existent career as a doctor. In *Tara*, emotional abuse is perhaps most evident in how the parents ignore the matter of the children's twinship. Separating them surgically was perhaps a necessary evil, and certainly this was not a decision that the twins could have made since they were only three months old at the time, but the parents remain completely oblivious to the psychological trauma the twins suffered post-separation. When Emily Jackson interprets Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) as a story that carries "echoes of conjoined twins," metaphorically speaking, she claims that Jekyll acts as the autosite twin who represents not only the mother figure giving birth to its "second self," but also "the living person carrying the parasite twin that is Hyde" (72, 74). Thus, if Jekyll kills himself after the death of his autosite protector, it is because he cannot survive without him (74). The case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde can be compared with the case of Tara and Dan because of how Tara (the autosite) is sacrificed to enable the survival of her brother Dan (the parasite). Despite his best efforts, Dan cannot forget his sister after her death, for she was still "lying deep inside," even if "out of reach" (324). Their mother's belief that compared to Tara, Dan was more "self-contained," shows how little she understood the emotional damage the separation had caused the twins (340).

Where twinship is at the heart of Dattani's play, *God Son* focusses attention on an adopted child detested by his parents because he is not their biological child. The parent's behaviour, however, indicates their dislike of children in general, possibly the result of their feelings of inadequacy as parents. Caring for the boy is made out to be a colossal sacrifice and a painful duty. Childhood itself seems an abomination to the parents. Because they are themselves without love or joy, the boy is denied the sim-

ple pleasures of childhood. They react with horror and disapproval when they hear him sing songs from films, or see him smiling at himself in the mirror. Such childlike acts signify to the parents, the boy's evil nature, and provide a basis for inflicting inhuman punishments such as cutting off his tongue or stitching his mouth. The physical and emotional abuse of the boy ends only when he is killed: to his mother, it was the only way to end the perversion and sin that she believed he harboured within.

The play exacts revenge on the tyrannical parents, however, by having them morph into the boy at various moments in the play. Each time they turn into the boy, they are forced to experience the trauma they put him through for minor, sometimes imaginary, misdemeanours. The final punishment comes at the end of the play. Soon after they have been felicitated for adopting an orphaned child, the parents slump to the ground, and "creep" to the opposite ends of the stage, unable to do anything more than "stare at each other with helpless, pitiful eyes" (Elkunchwar 85). The image of the parents, crushed and desolate, resembling a pair of terrified children, affords some degree of catharsis at the same time as it restores faith in divine retribution for the dead boy.

In contrast to physical abuse, verbal belittling of children tends to be taken less seriously, despite its debilitating effects on children's mental health. Instances of verbal abuse, rife in both *Tara* and *God Son*, underscore the insensitivity and cruelty of parents. In *Tara*, Patel calls Dan a "sissy" when he thinks that Dan is helping his mother with her knitting (Dattani 351). As for Tara, although she is never called by any derogatory names, the sentences her parents leave unfinished whenever they speak to her suggest that she represents an unspeakable abomination to them. Verbal belittling is also seen in *God Son*, and in greater measure than in *Tara*. The adopted boy is subjected to a whole repertoire of denigratory labels such as "dumbo," "absolute mutt," "duffer," "bullock," and many more. He is even forced to call himself demeaning names such as "stupid," "lazy-bones," and a "sinner." The compelling need to shame the boy can be seen as a re-enactment of the parents' own low esteem. The boy represents the mirror in which the parents find reflected their own failures; hence, the more they destroy his dignity, the more they restore their own.

Neglect is another prominent form of child abuse. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines neglect as "the failure to provide for the development of the child in all spheres—health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter, and safe living conditions" (Kacker, *Childhood Betrayed* np). In both plays, one finds that the parents fulfil only the most

basic needs of their children but still affirm the 'good parent' image. The boy in *God Son* is denied the nutrition he needs, but is told that it is in his best interests to eat salt and rice instead of butter or chapatis. The physical deprivation he is subjected to is compounded by constant reminders that he is undeserving and unworthy of basic rights, such as food, clothing, education, and medical care. The issue of medical neglect, particularly of a girl child, is more keenly addressed in *Tara*. Kacker claims that although medical neglect is usually related to poverty, some parents withhold medical care despite being able to afford it (*Childhood Betrayed* np). One could compare the case of the fictional Tara with the real-life example of conjoined twins Saba and Fara; unlike Bharati and her father in *Tara*, Saba and Fara's parents opposed the separation of the twins only for fear of the risk to the lives of one or both of the twins ("India Conjoined Twins Face Uncertainty" np). All that the parents asked for, was financial assistance since they hailed from a lower-middle-class background. Saba and Fara's parents offer a stark contrast to Tara's family, who knowingly endangered her life because of a patriarchal mindset, not financial constraints.

The culturally-sanctioned abuse of girls in the state of Rajasthan hovers uneasily around the edges of *Tara*. Bharati and her father re-enact the cultural legacy of killing baby girls when they deliberately favour Dan over Tara in the matter of the surgical separation. Viewed against the real-life practice of murdering girl children by offering them poisoned milk, Bharati's insistence that Tara should drink milk acquires eerie overtones. It also raises questions about her overt maternal gestures. Is offering Tara milk a reflection of Bharati's unconscious desire to kill her daughter because she believes that it would be better for the freak girl child to die now than survive to face hardships later? Indeed, Bharati seems convinced that, as a disabled girl, Tara will suffer more than Dan. She anticipates on Tara's behalf "the pain she is going to feel when she sees herself" as an adult of 30, 40, or 50 years of age (Dattani 349). When Tara says, "Mummy's knitting and I'm helping her sort out her mistake," is Tara herself the "mistake" that her mother needs to "sort out" (351)? The Indian psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar, remarks that Hindu mothers prefer sons over daughters because bearing and raising male children is proposed to be their goal (Sharma 16). Bharati embodies this ideology, at least partially, given how she slides ambiguously between two stereotypes; the nurturing mother deeply concerned about her daughter, and the monster mother out to annihilate her creation gone horribly wrong. Either way, Bharati impedes her daughter's best interests. Yet, she differs from the woman in *God Son* in her remorse and in her effort to compensate for the damage she has done to her daughter. Her mental breakdown and death a few years af-



ter Tara's death is, arguably, the direct result of her guilt. The mother in *God Son*, on the other hand, has no qualms about murdering the boy, although her collapse at the end of the play suggests that she is not entirely unaware of what she has done. In the final analysis, however, the deaths of both the child protagonists, Tara and the adopted child, are the direct result of parental neglect and abuse.

What can explain the rejection of the child protagonists in these two plays? Could it be that the children represent monsters of a kind to their parents? Writing about monsters and monstrosity, Georges Canguilhem declares, "The monster is the living being of negative value" (188). He adds that monstrosity "is the limitation from inside, the negation of the living by the non-viable" (188). The behaviour of the parents in *Tara* and *God Son* indicates that more than death, it is monstrosity that confounds the human imagination. The parents in both plays, bewildered and revolted by their children, see them as freaks of a kind. The adopted boy is demonised by his mother as "an evil omen" that sits on her chest (Elkunchwar 68). The boy repulses her because she did not give birth to him; however, given her aversion to sex and her belief that the human body can produce "Only filth," a child of her own might have been 'filth' to her just the same (79). Tara and Dan are also viewed as monsters, but because of a physical deformity. Indeed, for centuries, anatomists have referred to conjoined twins by the "vulgar name" of "monster" or "freak" (Bland-Sutton 1). Looked upon as objects of horror and fascination by not only the medical world, but also their families and the world at large, the twins cannot help but see themselves as freaks, or "wandh taras" (odd ones) (Dattani 339). For Tara and the adopted boy, the punishment for not conforming to the image of the ideal child is nothing less than death.

### **Parental Authority and Parental Conflict in *Tara* and *God Son***

Kacker's study found that elders in the family, especially fathers, expected unconditional obedience not only from the children but also from the women in the household (*Childhood Betrayed* np). Indeed, the mothers were themselves found to be afraid of the male members of the family, although they still tended to validate the authority of the father by instilling fear of him in their children. The mothers' complicity in maintaining unconditional respect for and awe of the father meant that abuse, in the form of harsh punishments, was usually ignored (Kacker, *Childhood Betrayed* np). In *Tara*, Patel and his father-in-law, the archetypal patriarch of the family, both exude such authority. Patel expects unconditional obedience from his wife and his children. Bharati's desire to donate her kidney

to Tara is harshly resisted by Patel; he argues that she is in no condition to make major decisions because of her precarious mental state (Dattani 344). Disregarding Bharati's right to determine the best interests of their children, Patel obtains a commercial donor for Tara without her consent or approval. Bharati is infantilised, and the law of the father is laid down: "You will have to obey me," says Patel to his wife (344). He slaps her when she protests and threatens to tell the children the truth about her role in bringing about Tara's misfortune. Because she refuses to relinquish her right to make decisions for her children, Patel brands her as an irrational, hysterical woman who needs to be controlled by him—the rational and logical man of the house. The twins are also forced to bear the brunt of their father's sexist thinking. Patel insists that as a boy, Dan must accompany him to the office, "Just to get a feel of it" (328). Patel's belief that Dan must start preparing himself for the business he will join later in adulthood illustrates what Kaur calls the "futura perspective," in which parents see their children as future investments, and hence, induct them into adult roles as early as possible (172). Such unrealistic expectations, constituting a form of abuse in themselves, are a common trait of excessively authoritarian parents, who "expect children to take on responsibilities beyond their years, perform tasks far beyond their capacities, excel in school, give up TV and games for household work and make no mistakes. In short, be perfect adults!" (Kacker, *Childhood Betrayed* np).

Ditsky notes that "in drama of even the newest sort, the dramatic function of childhood . . . is the direct embodiment of the conflict of forces which is the marriage of mother and father" (4). *Tara and God Son* embody this truth well, for child abuse goes hand-in-hand with marital discord in both plays. Both sets of parents pretend to have a harmonious marriage, but it is not long before the image of a happily married couple crumbles before the spectators' eyes. Patel and Bharati refer to the twins as 'my children' instead of 'our children.' Furthermore, Patel never loses the opportunity to express his contempt for Bharati's mothering. He accuses her of making Tara overdependent on her, and holds her responsible for letting Dan get away with "rotting at home" (Dattani 351). He openly admits to his wife that if he does not want her to donate her kidney to Tara, it is because she should not "have the satisfaction of doing it" (344). The squabbles between Patel and Bharati are related to their inter-caste marriage and Patel's belief that Bharati is more loyal to her father than to him. Moreover, he resents her for not having included him in the decision about the separation of the twins. In *God Son*, it is the woman's sexual prudery that is at the heart of the hostility between the couple. Her distaste for sex precluded the possibility of having a child of their own, and led to the adoption of the or-

phaned boy. Yet, she blames her husband for having “plonked him [the boy] down” on her chest (Elkunchwar 65). Moreover, she tries to mask her disgust for her husband under the guise of a devoted wife, a “pativrata,” deluding herself into believing that they are a deliriously happy couple, even though she has been beaten with a belt by her husband (74). She had mistakenly thought that if they adopted a child, he would stop demanding his conjugal rights. Also, the couple had wanted a child only to escape societal mockery, for childless couples are an anomaly in most cultures, including India. On the whole, the bitter bickering between the parents in both plays reveals the fault lines in their respective marriages. Meanwhile, the children bear the brunt of the friction and hostility between the parents over matters that have little or nothing to do with them.

### Conclusion

*Tara* and *God Son* delve into the malaise of child abuse in the Indian family. In etching the suffering child for the stage, the plays highlight the many facets of child abuse. Torn between the matrix of culture on the one hand, and their private struggles on the other, the parents in both plays manage to fulfil only the most basic rights they owe their children, and sometimes, not even that. The message underscored in both plays is that more is required for good parenting than fulfilling the basic fundamental rights of children. As Onara O’Neill argues, it is preferable to prioritise obligations over rights, because more than rights, it is the fundamental obligations that demand that we “refrain from abuse and molestation of children, whether or not they are specifically in our charge” (447). As O’Neill explains, “Fundamental obligations that are not universal (owed to all others) are, when considered in abstraction from social and institutional context, *incomplete* or *imperfect*” (448). Had the parents in *Tara* and *God Son* focussed on fulfilling their imperfect obligations, by treating their children with kindness, love, and respect, their treatment of them would have been very different. As things stand, however, the fate of the child protagonists is akin to that of Victor Frankenstein’s monster, who was rejected only because his creator found him too hideous to behold.

O’Neill urges those who care about children’s rights to “address not children but those whose action may affect children” (462). In writing plays such as *Tara* and *God Son*, Dattani and Elkunchwar have used theatre as the medium of choice to draw child abuse out of the shadows, and situate it under the full glare of the stage. Elkunchwar admits to belonging to that tribe of experimental playwrights who “search for new ways to express new areas of human experience” (Pande para 29). While Dattani

does not claim to be an experimental playwright or a “social activist,” he declares, nonetheless, that he is “strongly affected by social issues, especially when it comes to power-play in class and gender” (qtd. in Banerjee 166). Plays such as *Tara* and *God Son* illustrate how theatre can act as a tool of intervention and inspire affirmative action by making child abuse a talking point. Literary criticism, however, must do its part by adopting a more perspicacious focus on children’s rights, not only in theatre, but in all forms of literature.

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