



Marks over scars: *Taare Zameen Par* as a modern social tragedy

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Abstract

The film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), directed by Aamir Khan, presents a powerful critique of the modern education system and the emotional suffering experienced by children who fail to conform to rigid academic expectations. This paper interprets the film as an example of modern social tragedy. Unlike classical tragedies that depict the downfall of kings or heroic figures, the tragedy in this narrative emerges from institutional pressure, parental aspiration, and the inability of society to recognize individual creativity. The protagonist Ishaan Awasthi, a child suffering from dyslexia, becomes the central figure through whom the film explores themes of alienation, misunderstanding, and psychological suffering. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Aristotelian tragedy, Raymond Williams' concept of modern tragedy, and Arthur Miller's theory of the tragic common man, the study demonstrates how the suffering of an ordinary child can represent a larger social crisis. The analysis also draws on Marxist criticism and Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology to explain the institutional and emotional dimensions of the tragedy. Ultimately, *Taare Zameen Par* reveals how an education system obsessed with marks can suppress creativity and individuality, transforming childhood into a site of psychological struggle. The film therefore functions as both a social critique and a call for empathetic and inclusive education.

Keywords: Social tragedy, education system, dyslexia, modern tragedy, *Taare Zameen Par*



Introduction

Modern society has undergone significant transformation due to processes of modernization, industrialization, and technological advancement. These changes have not only reshaped economic and political structures but also transformed cultural values and social expectations. In contemporary society, success is often measured through competition, productivity, and academic achievement. As a result, institutions such as schools increasingly prioritize examination results and measurable performance over creativity, imagination, and emotional well-being. Within this context, many children struggle to adapt to systems that demand uniform standards of learning and behaviour.

The film *Taare Zameen Par* reflects this social reality by portraying the experiences of Ishaan Awasthi, a young boy who faces severe difficulties in reading and writing because of dyslexia. His teachers and parents initially interpret his academic struggles as laziness and irresponsibility. Rather than understanding his condition, they punish him and attempt to discipline him into conformity. The emotional consequences of this misunderstanding gradually isolate Ishaan and destroy his self-confidence. The narrative therefore exposes the psychological damage that can occur when society fails to recognize individual differences.

While the film is often discussed as a critique of the education system, it can also be interpreted through the lens of tragedy. However, unlike classical tragedies that depict the downfall of kings and noble figures, *Taare Zameen Par* presents the suffering of an ordinary child. This shift reflects the transformation of tragic form in modern literature and cinema, where the tragic experience is no longer confined to aristocratic heroes but extends to common individuals whose lives are shaped by social institutions. In this sense, the film can be understood as a modern social tragedy that reflects the contradictions of contemporary education and society.

Literature Review

The concept of tragedy has its origins in ancient Greek drama. Aristotle, in his seminal work *Poetics*, defines tragedy as the imitation of a serious and complete action that evokes feelings of pity and fear, ultimately producing catharsis in the audience. Classical tragedies typically involve



a noble protagonist whose downfall results from a tragic flaw or error in judgment. These narratives emphasize themes of fate, moral responsibility, and the limits of human power.

Over time, critics and theorists expanded the concept of tragedy to include broader social perspectives. F. R. Leavis argues that tragedy reveals the moral seriousness of human life and intensifies our awareness of ethical responsibility through the depiction of suffering. Raymond Williams further reinterprets tragedy in the modern context by arguing that tragic experiences arise from social structures and historical conditions rather than from divine fate alone.

Arthur Miller's influential essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" marks a significant turning point in the understanding of modern tragedy. Miller proposes that the modern tragic hero can be an ordinary individual who struggles to maintain dignity and identity in society. According to Miller, the desire to preserve personal dignity is the fundamental element that generates tragic conflict. This perspective allows contemporary narratives to focus on the struggles of common people rather than restricting tragedy to royal figures or heroic warriors.

Theoretical Framework

The interpretation of *Taare Zameen Par* as a modern social tragedy can be supported by several theoretical perspectives. Raymond Williams' concept of modern tragedy suggests that social systems often produce suffering among ordinary individuals. In the film, Ishaan's difficulties arise not from personal failure but from institutional structures that fail to recognize his learning condition. The rigid education system becomes the primary source of tragic conflict.

Marxist criticism also provides valuable insights into the film's portrayal of educational pressure. From a Marxist perspective, institutions often reinforce systems of competition and productivity that prioritize measurable outcomes over human creativity. In the context of the film, academic performance becomes a form of social capital, while artistic imagination is marginalized. Ishaan's alienation reflects the broader social tendency to value conformity and discipline over individuality.

Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology offers another important framework for understanding the transformation of Ishaan's character. Rogers emphasizes empathy, creativity, and unconditional



positive regard as essential elements of human development. The character of Ram Shankar Nikumbh embodies these principles by recognizing Ishaan's artistic talent and encouraging his self-expression. Through empathetic teaching methods, Nikumbh restores Ishaan's confidence and demonstrates the transformative potential of humanistic education.

Analysis and Discussion

The narrative structure of *Taare Zameen Par* reflects several elements associated with classical tragedy, including conflict, hamartia, recognition, and catharsis. However, these elements are transformed within a modern social context. The central conflict of the film is not between individuals but between the individual and the institutional system. Ishaan's imaginative personality clashes with the rigid expectations of the education system, which values discipline and examination results above all else.

One of the key tragic elements in the film is the misunderstanding of Ishaan's dyslexia. Teachers repeatedly accuse him of being lazy and irresponsible. His father, influenced by societal expectations of success, believes that strict discipline will correct his behaviour. This misinterpretation represents a form of tragic error, or hamartia, that intensifies Ishaan's suffering. The decision to send him to a boarding school marks the emotional climax of the narrative, symbolizing the complete breakdown of communication between the child and his family.

The turning point of the story occurs with the arrival of Ram Shankar Nikumbh, the art teacher who recognizes Ishaan's condition and understands his emotional struggles. Nikumbh challenges the assumptions of the education system and encourages Ishaan to express himself through art. This moment represents a form of recognition that transforms the narrative from despair to hope.

Through this transformation, the film demonstrates that the true tragedy lies not in the child's learning disorder but in society's inability to understand and support him. The narrative therefore critiques educational systems that prioritize marks and examinations over creativity and emotional development.



Conclusion

Taare Zameen Par can therefore be interpreted as a powerful example of modern social tragedy. The film exposes the limitations of an education system driven by competition and academic performance while highlighting the emotional consequences of misunderstanding children's unique abilities. Through the character of Ishaan Awasthi, the narrative reveals how institutional pressure and parental expectations can suppress creativity and damage a child's confidence.

At the same time, the film offers a hopeful vision by demonstrating the transformative power of empathy and supportive teaching. The character of Nikumbh represents an alternative educational philosophy that values creativity, individuality, and emotional understanding. Ultimately, the film reminds viewers that every child possesses unique talents that must be nurtured rather than suppressed. In doing so, Taare Zameen Par encourages society to reconsider the meaning of success and to create educational environments that allow children to flourish.



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