



Gender Issues in Mahesh Dattani's *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*

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Abstract:

*Mahesh Dattani is an avant-garde Indian English dramatist known for his radical and unconventional dramatic themes. His plays are characterized by an extremely sensitive temperament that delves into the intricacies of the human nature and strives to expose the hypocrisy of the urban life and society. This paper discusses his play *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* as a quest for a lost identity. In doing so, the paper sheds light upon the underlying themes of gender discrimination, misogyny, and role-playing that the playwright uses in this play to show how these evils are rampant even amongst the educated classes of the society. Specifically, the paper explores the 'deconstruction' of identity of the protagonist as employed by the playwright and examines the implications this technique has on the narrative of the play. The interconnection between the role-playing and the inherent theme of gender discrimination is also analysed in order to see how these elements complement each other. The paper comments on the efficacy of radio drama as a medium for handling a sensitive theme like this.*

Key words: quest for identity, gender discrimination, misogyny, radical, and evils

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I. Introduction:

The Girl Who Touched the Stars is a radio play inspired by the life of Kalpana Chawla who is the first Indian woman in outer space. Radio drama, also called the audio drama, audio play, radio play or Radio Theatre is a form of theatre based entirely on acoustic performance and is played on radio or published on audio media. This paper attempts to discuss the play as a quest for lost identity for Bhavna, a victim of gender discrimination and misogyny, who has to pay a heavy price for being born a girl by losing her very identity. The entire play revolves around an exploration of her lost identity, which continues to haunt Bhavna even after she loses her life, and in the process, exposes the ugliness and diseased state of the patriarchal society. Identity as such is a complicated term which has myriads of interpretations and implications. Dattani has introduced a twist in the tale thereby deconstructing the story to expose what might have lain hidden behind the façade of a seemingly successful story of realizing one's dreams. In his apparent endeavour to deconstruct the story, he has creatively added a supernatural element in his play by making Bhavna's soul communicate with her childhood-self after she dies in the space explosion to create a dramatic conflict skilfully exposing the themes of gender discrimination, misogyny and identity crisis. *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* is an ample proof of Dattani's ingenuity and artistry in handling a sensitive theme and his choice of medium for presenting the same is impeccable. Beena Agarwal says: "In this respect, the multiple dimensions of conflicts integrated in the psyche of a lady like Kalpana Chawla provided ample opportunity for the creation of this suggestive play. It reconstructs Kalpana, the woman, Kalpana the aviator and Kalpana, the individual. Here, Dattani ventures to investigate the infinite space of the ambitions and aspirations of feminine consciousness."(141)

The aural medium seems apt for the play as Dattani exploits it to the best to depict the psychological turmoil and tension of the protagonist as she transcends the boundaries of physical space and time. It makes possible a universe of shape, detail, emotion and idea, which is bound by no inhibiting limitations of space and capacity. Equally interesting is the way in which Dattani has handled the theme of gender trouble and identity crisis in the play. In order to cope up with shattered identity, she assumes a new identity that of a boy in order to be accepted by her father. As her space shuttle explodes moments after the take off, she finds herself

transcending the boundaries of time and space as she confronts her childhood self and begins exploring her past life to find the cause for this voyage. It is at this point that Dattani skilfully brings in the patriarchal perspective into the plot. Since the plot is based on the theme of gender bias, the father as the representative of patriarchy is introduced into the plot as the figure responsible for sowing seeds of dreams that Bhavna grows up nurturing and dies realizing. Gender is not a product of different properties of bodies but is a product of social behaviour and practices. The media, the schools, the families, the courts, literature and art – all construct the notion of gender and Dattani seems to unearth the excesses and repressive forces behind such constructions. This constant striving to be the 'gender' that she is not splits her personality forcing her into an identity crisis wherein she is not even sure as to whose dream she is trying to realize; her own or that of her 'wannabe' self. However, Dattani's real artistry lies in the subtle manner he weaves the tale to implicate Bhavna's father. He does not do so directly. Perhaps that would have made the plot much too obvious and dull. Bhavna seems confused about the whole affair. So she explores her memories further. Slowly, she creeps into the mind of her childhood-self to get more insight into her past life. Probably there is a missing link somewhere to be found. Therefore, Dattani intricately builds the conflict that is taking place purely on the level of thoughts transcending the boundaries of time and space at the same time. The journey into the mind exploration continues and bit by bit, truth is revealed as Bhavna through her childhood-self burrows deeper and deeper into the reality of her past. Her father and mother keep appearing and reappearing sometimes simultaneously, other times taking turns.

This kind of technique seems apt for a radio play wherein the audience only gets to hear the voices that are nothing more than the thoughts generating in the mind of the only character who is actually dead. In addition to transcending time and space, Dattani thus manages to blur the boundaries of reality and unreality as he effortlessly takes his audience across different dimensions of time and space constantly mixing the earthly with the spiritual realms thus lending a mystical element to the play. Initially, Bhavna, or her soul, supposes having a brother who was favoured over her by her father but soon realizes after probing into the mind of her childhood-self reflecting on a memory involving her father that that was not the case. Yet she continues to feel unwanted and discarded, and this feeling of restlessness forces her to probe further. Now it is the mother's turn. Her mother hums a lullaby meant for a little boy. This brings the play to one of the important episodes, the tree-climbing episode. Bhavna grows up as a tomboy and enjoys adventurous and seemingly tough activities such as climbing trees. She does this to counter what she calls "ugliness", probably of being a girl. Climbing a tree makes her feel like a boy and gives her an escape from being the unwanted creature she is as a girl. This incident confirms to her miserable mind her suspicions about being spurned by her family and the world. Bhavna regresses further into her past to the time when her mother was yet expecting her. Once again, the haunting lullaby about a baby boy continues in the backdrop. The young Bhavna resists this regression for a while saying that it is the future that she'd rather see. This reluctance about going into her past reflects the kind of discomfort and pain she relates with her past. It is where the root of her fear lies; the fear of denial and rejection, perhaps the moment of rupture in her identity, which has ultimately led to this exploration into her own psyche, and perhaps the memories of her parents. As the past is connected to the present, one begins to understand the cause of her fear and the truth about her dreams.

This probably explains her habit of climbing trees and being a tomboy: a veneer she puts on only to escape her gender and be the other which is more valued and preferred by her father. This also leads her to dreaming about reaching to the moon. She grows up with this burden of proving herself constantly striving to achieve all that her father had desired a son for. Though her father cares for her and provides her all she needs to realize her dreams, yet he fails to accept her for who she is: a daughter. He fails to give her the identity that she is born with that of a woman's. Here in lies the tragedy of her life and the root cause of her identity crisis. Regressing further, the play reaches its climax as Bhavna realizes that she has died in the shuttle explosion and her mother is gone too. Finally, her father enters into a dialogue with Bhavna realizing at the same time that she is dead and that he is only having an imaginary conversation with her in his mind. Since this dialogue takes place in the mind of a person who has just ceased to be alive, one cannot be sure about whether it is Bhavna's perspective or her father's actual thoughts. Dattani keeps this stylistic confusion alive to deal with Bhavna's confusion about her gender identity and her father's initial reluctance to accept a girl child. One cannot deny the possibility of Bhavna imagining her father denying her childhood self as he wanted a son, and never a daughter. One wonders where this conversation is taking place and who's talking to whom. Dattani, it seems, deliberately creates this confusion by blurring the boundaries of time, space and reality in order to get to the bottom of the whole affair. As the drama progresses towards its end and Bhavna regresses in her memories to her infancy, the mystery is finally unravelled. Bhavna's mother had played the trickster by lying to her husband about having conceived a girl child since she was threatened by her father-in-law to be thrown out of the house if she failed to produce a grandson for him. Therefore, she lied and carried this trickery on for five long years in order to keep her place in the household. Dattani here doesn't explicitly blame the father for her plight but does implicate him by exposing his gender bias for the girl child.

The very fact that Bhavna's mother hid the truth about giving birth to a girl child from her husband and kept it hidden for five long years is sufficient a proof of how prejudiced he was against a girl child. She certainly could not trust him with the truth; therefore, she chose to lie. Through this dialogue, Dattani exposes the father's hypocrisy by stripping all the covers of pretension under which he is hiding his gender prejudice as it turns out to be that the very creator of Bhavna's life would have destroyed her had he come to know of her true identity. Yet he makes claims of being a good father, of providing his only daughter with all she needed to grow up and realize her dreams or rather his dreams. This desire to be accepted, to escape the ugliness of her real self- the girl/woman self, and to prove herself against herself poisons her entire being as she never can be free again. Such understanding makes her look at herself in a new light, through a vision that is no longer blinded and limited by her dreams and cravings or prejudices of her father and selfish machinations of her mother. She realizes the true cause of her pain that lay in trying to realize someone else's dreams, in trying to live someone else's life, trying to be what she was not. The greed for the male child has crippled the society by threatening the survival of female children. Many become victims of female foeticide before they can even breathe their first breaths, and the fortunate or rather the unfortunate few who survive, like Bhavna, have to strive hard to live up to the most unreasonable expectations of an insensitive and cruel male dominated world. What's sad and disheartening is the fact that Bhavna can find her salvation only in her death. As long as she is alive, she is continuously tormented by the burden of living someone else's dreams, dreams dreamt for the boy child that she can only fail to achieve after attempting to become one. Her tragedy and annihilation are almost certain. She is suffocated as the world closes in upon her, with insatiable demands and expectations. Yet she remains unwanted in the end; denied, refused, and rejected. *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* succeeds in asking questions that are disturbing and painful, yet most urgent at the same time. It attempts to unmask the cruel face of mankind or rather the 'unkind-man'. A woman has to pay a heavy cost for acquiring her little space and freedom in the society; often she has to pay with her life. From the womb to the grave, it is a never-ending battle for her; a battle she is bound to eventually lose. Thus by exploring gender discrimination, misogyny and rupture of identity and by deconstructing the memories through transcending space and time, the playwright has created a unique psychological drama that penetrates deep into the labyrinths of the protagonist's mind, thereby completing her quest for lost identity.

Work Cited:

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