

# DECONSTRUCTING FALSE IDENTITY: EXPLORING GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND ROLE-PLAYING IN *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 much 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 analyzed in order to see how these elements complement each other. Also, 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, identity crisis

**Abstrak:** Mahesh Dattani, adalah dramawan India Inggris avant-garde yang dikenal dengan tema dramatis radikal dan non-konvensional. Dramanya ditandai dengan temperamen yang sangat sensitif yang menggali seluk-beluk sifat manusia dalam usahanya untuk mengekspos kemunafikan kehidupan pada masyarakat terdidik di

perkotaan. Makalah ini membahas dramanya *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* sebagai pencarian identitas yang hilang. Makalah ini membuka pengertian terhadap tema yang mendasari diskriminasi gender, kebencian terhadap wanita dan role-playing yang dramawan gunakan untuk menunjukkan berapa banyak kejahatanyang merajalela di antara masyarakat kelas terdidik Secara khusus, makalah ini mengeksplorasi 'dekonstruksi' identitas protagonis yang diciptakan oleh dramawan, selain mengkaji implikasi teknik yang dipakai pada narasi dramanya. Interkoneksi antara peran para pemain dan tema yang membahas tentang diskriminasi gender juga dianalisis untuk melihat bagaimana unsur-unsur ini saling melengkapi. Selain itu, makalah ini juga komentar tentang khasiat drama radio sebagai media untuk menangani tema sensitif seperti ini.

**Kata kunci:** pencarian identitas, diskriminasi gender, kebencian terhadap wanita, krisis identitas

## INTRODUCTION

*The Girl Who Touched the Stars* is a radio play inspired by the life of Kalpana Chawla, 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. Since this form of drama lacks visual elements, it has also been defined as a “theatre for the blind” (Brandt, 2002, p. 630). George Brandt (Radio Drama, 2002) writes about Radio Theatre as follows:

But the listener’s ‘blindness’ is not just a handicap. It is often said that radio drama paradoxically gives us the best pictures. It appeals to the imagination, conjures up different images in each listener’s head and thus enjoys the advantages of multivalence and fluidity. It has the greatest freedom in the handling of time and space. A purely aural medium, it gives enormous value to the actor’s vocal expressiveness, which has to convey character, intention and feeling without any facial or gestural signals. Radio drama is particularly well suited to rendering inner processes: it easily accommodates the monologue. (p. 631)

Unfortunately, Kalpana could never make it back to Earth as her space craft exploded on its way back. Mahesh Dattani, “described as one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English by

Alexander Viets in the International Herald Tribune” (Chakraborty, 2014, p. 17), has used this tragic incident to create a rather disturbing and unnerving play that primarily focuses on exposing the social evil of gender-discrimination, misogyny and female oppression. Quoting Bijay Kumar Das from *Form and Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays*:

Mahesh Dattani ... deals with the theme of social exclusion in his plays not on the basis of caste but gender. How gender relationship based on sexuality causes social exclusion becomes a prime concern for him in some of his plays. (Das, 2008, p. 83)

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. According to Hogg and Abrams, the term identity refers to the “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (1988, p. 2) while Jenkins defines identity as “... the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (1996, p. 4). According to another definition:

Identity is a socially and historically constructed concept... [comprising] of ideas, ideologies, and ways of seeing the world around us... [that are] learned and internalized ... over the course of our lives from family, peers, role models, organizations, government, etc... Our gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and class can... shape our life experience, how we’re treated, whom we meet and become friends with, what kind of education and jobs we get, where we live, what opportunities we’re afforded, and what kind of inequities we may face. (“Social construction, ideology, and identity”)

Dattani in this play takes up the issue of identity as a social construct in relation to gender/sexual orientation as he depicts its implications on the psychology of the protagonist Bhavna and how she copes with the reality by assuming a different identity. Dattani uses memory as a tool to transcend the boundaries of time and space in order to reveal many secrets of the past that play an instrumental role in solving the conundrum of her present life and bringing about the denouement. The play is a tribute to all such women who

are victims of gender discrimination and who in spite of realizing their potential in a misogynistic patriarchal world still fail to find acceptance, respect and love. 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. 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. Commenting on the efficacy of the aural medium that the radio drama uses, McWhinnie (1959) says that the radio performance works on the mind in the same way as poetry does; it liberates and evokes. It does not act as stimulus to direct scenic representation; that would be narrow and fruitless. 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. The Oxford Dictionary defines identity crisis as "a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society" ("Identity crisis"). Further expounding the term, Lerner and Ashman state:

An identity crisis may be elicited by the emotional upheaval provoked by ... strong societal and personal mandate for role adoption, if it occurs at a time in the person's life when he or she cannot find a role that fits. To resolve this crisis and achieve a sense of identity ... [the person] must find an orientation to life that not only fulfils the changing biological and psychological attributes of the self but one that is also consistent with what society expects of a person. (2006, p. 42)

This is exactly what the protagonist Bhavna does 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. Dattani uses a simple plot in a single act

using a handful of characters that comprise of Bhavna, her younger self, father, mother, two fellow astronauts, three journalists and a reporter. What starts as a voyage to Mars for space exploration soon turns into a psycho-exploration into Bhavna's past life. 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. Somewhere in her mind, she is not sure if it was her own dream to travel in outer space or was it imposed upon her by someone else in her childhood. So in order to find out the truth about her dreams, she begins a voyage into her past life using her childhood self as a medium as she is heard instructing her childhood self in these lines; "Deeper into your thoughts. That is the only real space for us right now. So that is where I will have to look for answers" (Dattani, 2010, p. 64). These deep burrowings into the layers of her memories and digging up the shards of her childhood life become for Bhavna the space to explore the real source of her dreams. 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. According to Dr. Chittaranjan Misra (2006, pp. 187-188):

Gender is a representation and Dattani's theatre is a representation of representation. 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.

Further quoting Judith Butler from her book titled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Butler, 1990, p. 22)

Trying to vie for the love and acceptance only reserved for a male child has a devastating effect on Bhavna's psychology as she puts on an identity of the preferred male sex thus losing her own self in the process. This subsequently has a detrimental effect on her psychology and complicates her sense of identity as she grows up into an adult. Commenting on the effect that identity formation has on an individual, Erikson as cited in *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance between Self and Other* by Jane Kroger says, "Identity depends upon the past and determines the future: rooted in childhood, it serves as a base from which to meet later life tasks" (2004, p. 19). 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. So he creates a deliberate confusion about the father's role which is only revealed towards the end of the play creating an interesting climax as exemplified in this conversation between Bhavna and her younger self:

*Young Bhavna:* Are you suggesting that it is my father who wants me to go to the moon?

*Bhavna:* I don't know-

*Young Bhavna:* I can tell you right away that's not true. Don't you remember? Or maybe I shouldn't ask that question ever. Father never wanted me to study further. He wanted me to marry his best friend's son when I was twenty-two and live in Bhuj for the rest of my life! How can you even think that this was his dream? Do you see that image? You know it doesn't lie. That's me dreaming of touching the stars. (Dattani, 2010, p. 65)

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.

*Young Bhavna:* So if I think of my father, you feel we will get somewhere?

*Bhavna:* Yes. Somewhere. If we get a fix on space we will get a fix on time as well. We have spent enough time speculating whose time we are in. Now we can spend some space on that question. Whose space are we in? Tell me the space, don't tell me the time. Tell me the space. Tell me the space. Tell me the space... (Dattani, 2010, p. 65)

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.

*Young Bhavna:* That's the day, all right. I had a stomachache the whole day. I thought I would get away from class and get away from the punishment of not having done my homework.

*Bhavna:* I felt different from the rest.

*Young Bhavna:* I climbed the tree.

*Bhavna:* It was my escape from ugliness. (Dattani, 2010, p. 71)

Coincidentally, as Bhavna climbs the highest branch on the tree, she begins menstruating, a sure sign of her turning into a 'woman'. This causes her immense shame and embarrassment and soon she wants to hide herself from the world. She detests being the weak and timid woman that she has just become and feels utterly unwanted and ugly. 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. Here, we notice once again a transcending of time; the past and the future aren't regarded as different times but rather simultaneous and parallel as Young Bhavna says, "I asked you to show me the future! Not the past. Please! Take him away", to which Bhavna replies, "It doesn't work that way. Future. Past. It's all the same now. As random as our thoughts." (Dattani, 2010, p. 71)

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 unraveled layer after layer, 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. Equally strange is the fact that her father not only fails to recognize the young Bhavna but also denies knowing her at all.

*Father:* Who is she?

*Young Bhavna:* Don't you remember me?

*Father:* Do I know you?

*Young Bhavna:* No...You don't

*Father:* Bhavna, what is this girl talking about?

*Young Bhavna:* I am your daughter.

*Father:* That's not true. (Dattani, 2010, p. 75)

This intriguing piece of conversation gives us an insight into the minds of the characters. However, there surely is a certain amount of ambiguity involved here. 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. Thus, the mother undoubtedly plays a saviour for the girl child.

First, she lies about the doctor's report that confirmed her being pregnant with a healthy girl child, and then she is often heard singing lullabies addressing her as a baby 'boy'. Besides, the father is so blinded by his desire to have a male child that he can't see through the pretension of his wife treating her own girl as a boy.

*Father:* I didn't know. She tricked me. For five years.

*Bhavna:* That is not true. You knew. You pretended you had a son. Of course you knew all along!

*Mother:* But I loved you. I was scared.

*Father:* It didn't matter. When I found out.

*Father:* That is my son! (the little girl laughs. The father and mother join in.)

*Mother:* Look at the stars! He wants to touch the stars!

*Father:* When Bhuvan grows up, he will become a pilot and fly near the moon!

*Young Bhavna:* And when I wore a skirt for the first time, you never told me that I will go to the moon.

*Father:* I did educate you, I did encourage you to study, didn't I?

*Young Bhavna:* Tell me father. If you had known...If mother had told you the truth, that the doctors said that she will have a healthy girl... you would have...

*Father:* No!

*Young Bhavna:* -- killed me. (Dattani, 2010, p. 76)

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. It is for the first five years of her life when she is treated like a boy called Bhuvan and given all attention

by her father reserved only for a male child that she starts dreaming like one. However, as she is 'discovered' later to be an unwanted gender, all the attention and privileges that were once bestowed upon her are taken away. Consequently, unable to comprehend this loss of special status, she grows up to be the shadow of a male child. That probably explains why she loves climbing trees and wants to be a pilot and fly to the moon! Bhavna's mind as a child is weighed down by the almost unbearable craving to be the 'Bhuvan' that she could never become. 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. Therefore, she grows up being skeptical of herself, her dreams and feeling utterly unwanted.

*Bhavna:* I walked on it, Mummy. The moon. Not what I imagined it to be, but then... It sort of takes away a part of you. The part that believes in Chanda Mama. Uncle Moon.

*Bhavna:* It takes away all that, but... it puts in something else. You look at things, in a special way. You look at yourself... It wasn't the moon, really, that made me think in that special way. It was the earth. (Dattani, 2010, p. 76)

Here, Bhavna talks about disillusionment, about chasing a dream the whole life only to realize its sheer futility in the end. She definitely learns a few more things towards the end of her dialogues with her memories. She finally accepts her own identity in the end when she says, "You look at things, in a special way. You look at yourself..." 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. This realization heals her soul and frees herself from the bondage of her father's dream that was imposed on her since she was a child.

*Bhavna:* Out there. Somewhere no Indian woman has ever been. Getting to the moon was no longer a dream. But then I was dreaming again, about being a part of the Earth. The same magic that I believed in about the moon, I began to see it in my own world! How lucky I was to belong to that magical planet.

*Young Bhavna:* Where nothing weighed you down. Not even the weight of your own pain. (Dattani, 2010, p. 77)

## CONCLUSION

Bhavna is thus able to exorcize herself of the guilt and pain that she experienced being a girl. She realizes that the root of this pain lay in her neglect and denial as a girl child for which the discriminatory attitudes of the society are to be blamed. 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.

*Bhavna*: Thank you for talking to me, Bhavna. At this moment, when I thought of you. My last thought. I am burning; but it is no longer hell. My body is torn apart; but I no longer feel pain. My blood once again spills on the Earth. The Earth is one big mango tree and I am on top of it. I never have to come down again. (Dattani, 2010, p. 77)

Bhavna is thus able to regain her whole identity that finally redeems her conscience, freeing it from the aspirations of her father and his likes.

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