

## TREATMENT OF MISOGYNY IN THE GIRL WHO TOUCHED THE STARS BY MAHESH DATTANI

ZEBA SIDDIQUI

Assistant Professor, ASL, Amity University, Madhya Pradesh, India

### ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani, the first and the only Indian English dramatist to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award, is the most powerful playwrights of contemporary era. With his multifaceted personality, innovative bent, radical and unconventional themes, artistic perception and originality of vision, he has redefined the conventional concept of Indian English Theatre. His plays are a synchronized blend of traditional and post-modernist issues. This paper throws light on the treatment of misogyny in **The Girl Who Touched the Stars**, a radio play by him. The playwright presents arguments against the parents' preference for the male child at the cost of girl child. The play gives an insight in the present time especially when the inhumane practice of female foeticide is still rampant in our society.

**KEYWORDS:** Mahesh Dattani, English Dramatist

### INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most famous of modern Indian dramatists writing in English. He speaks for the oppressed and the disposed. In his very short but extremely evocative radio drama, *The Girl who Touched the Stars*, he raises the voices of the Indian girls; those girls who have broken the limits of traditional restrictions and have surged forward with the development of science and economy in India. But it is more importantly the story of how these women still face conservatism and drawn again and again into the past, a past of oppression and stifled voices. Writing about the genre and topic of the drama, Dattani writes:

“We could explore the dilemma that confronts a woman when she wants to hold on to reality and the present but finds herself drawn back into the past – when she feels a need to understand why she has become the woman she is and why she was so eager to reach out and be the girl who touched the stars.”<sup>1</sup>

Radio drama is a genre in which the play is dramatized and is a purely acoustic performance. It is broadcast on radio or published on audio media, such as tape or CD. With no visual component, radio drama depends on dialogue, music and sound effects to help the listener imagine the characters and story:

“It is auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension.”<sup>2</sup>

*The Girl who Touched the Stars* is a futuristic story in which Bhavna, an Indian astronaut becomes the first woman to go to Mars. She is hailed as a success. But the space shuttle explodes in the space and the dream becomes a nightmare. However, the situation turns comical as Bhavna finds herself in dialogue with her childhood self. Actually Dattani uses this unique plot in his radio drama to highlight the reality of an emancipated woman in 2025 and the baggage of her past, (which is the present in real time). She is conflicted and does not really want to remember her past, but is made

to. The story was inspired by the tragic demise of Kalpana Chawla but is not the story of Kalpana but Bhavna. Kalpana Chawla was an Indian American astronaut. She and six other astronauts were aboard the space shuttle Columbia when it exploded over Texas on February 1, 2003. She along with all six of her astronauts died in the explosion. They were returning from space after completing their mission.

The story of Bhavna is different from Kalpana Chawla. Just before takeoff, she is plodded with questions from the journalists on earth. She is hailed as a great inspiration to Indian women, to which she reacts only in a lukewarm manner. When the journalist asks how much her parents mattered in her success, she is suddenly overcome by a scene from the past, which reminds her that she was also in danger of getting forcibly married to an unknown person, like a majority of Indian girls are:

“Bhavna! Don’t hide! Okay, I promise you may marry the man of your choice when you grow up, okay?”<sup>3</sup>

Thought she hides what happened in her past and tells the journalist that it is because of them that she became successful. Just moments after the spacecraft takes off, it explodes and Bhavna finds herself in space, floating along with her young self, the Young Bhavna. The two start conversation and soon they realize that two things could be true: either Old Bhavna is imagining Young Bhavna and it is really 2025 and the explosion has taken place, or maybe Young Bhavna is dreaming in 2006 and is actually dreaming what might happen in the future.

Dattani plays with post-modernist tones in this radio drama and unhinges the play from the anchor of time and also place as the main scene takes place with characters floating in space. Doing this, he breaks the fourth wall of Bertolt Brecht. The fourth wall is the imaginary ‘wall’ at the front of the stage in a traditional three-walled box set in a proscenium theatre, through which the audience sees the action in the world of the play.<sup>4,5</sup> The idea of the fourth wall was made explicit by philosopher and critic Denis Diderot and spread in 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre with the advent of theatrical realism, which extended the idea to the imaginary boundary between any fictional work and its audience.

This mode of breaking the illusion of the audience in drama later grew to take the form of Epic Theatre. One of the most important techniques Brecht developed to perform epic theatre was the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the ‘making strange’ effect. The purpose of this technique was to make the audience feel detached from the action of the play, so they do not become immersed in the fictional reality of the stage or become overly empathetic of the character. Flooding the entire theatre, the stage and the audience too, with bright lights; having actors play multiple characters; having actors also rearrange the set in full view of the audience and ‘breaking the fourth wall’ by speaking to the audience are all ways he used to achieve the *Verfremdungseffekt*.

Acting in epic theatre requires actors to play characters believably without convincing either the audience or themselves that they have ‘become’ the characters. Actors frequently address the audience directly out of character and play multiple roles, thus breaking the fourth wall. Brecht thought it was important that the choices the characters made were explicit, and tried to develop a style of acting where it was evident that the characters were choosing one action over another. ‘Breaking the fourth wall’ is a technique of meta-fiction, as it penetrates the boundaries normally set up by works of fiction.

Although *The Girl who Touched the Stars* is a radio drama and it does not involve stage or acting, but still there is a wall between the actors and the audience. Dattani has beautifully broken that wall by unhinging his characters in time

and place and making the young and the old self of Bhavna talk to each other in a place which exists both out of time and out of place, at least our own place on this spaceship Earth.

As the drama progresses, young Bhavna is forced to look towards reality by the old Bhavna. She gets to know that she was an unwanted child. She comes to know that her father did not want a girl. He wanted a boy. Even her mother did not want a girl. But as they did not ascertain the gender of the child, they ended up with her. Young Bhavna remembers an evocative scene where her father is in the hospital with her mother just after her birth. He thinks that she has given him a boy child, but he is shocked to discover that it is a girl child.<sup>6</sup>

Even her mother seems to be ashamed of the fact that it was a girl that was born to her. Bhavna's grandfather had told her mother that he would throw her out if she gives birth to a girl and that is why even she did not want a girl child. Dattani makes Bhavna realize in the play that even her mother loved her only because she did not have, could not have, a son. If she had, then all that love would have been lavished on the son and not her. This becomes evident by the fact that when young Bhavna remembers a childhood scene, she remembers her mother singing a lullaby for a boy to her.<sup>7</sup>

So, what Dattani is trying to show here is that Bhavna's mother brought her up thinking of her as a boy (Bhuvan in the alternative universe and the imagined reality of her parents) and was not prepared when she first had her periods. She also did not prepare Bhavna for what was going to happen and it was a traumatic experience for Bhavna.<sup>8</sup>

These things come up when the two Bhavnas discuss about whose dream was it to become an astronaut? The old Bhavna of 2025 is going to Mars, but the young Bhavna just dreamt of going to the Moon. The old Bhavna makes her realize that it was not her dream but the dream of her father which made her desire to go to the Moon. There is a lot of hot discussion between the two over this and the young Bhavna first denies that this was the case. She keeps claiming that her father wanted her to marry at the age of 22, a boy whom he had chosen for her.<sup>9</sup>

The old Bhavna makes her realize that her father expected to have a son and he wanted his son to become a pilot. But when she was born, he never asked her to become a pilot, but the subconscious and underlying pressures in the home made her dream of becoming a pilot. As it turns out, she becomes an astronaut instead and goes to Mars instead of just the Moon. But the fact remains that she lived the dreams of her father and not of her own.

*The Girl who Touched the Stars* is the depiction of how a girl can be secretly unwanted even while her parents are not abusing her or telling her straightaway that she was unwanted. The undercurrents of the family will not let her be independent in the real sense as the desires and aspirations of the father and the ambitions of a baby boy will be foisted upon her as her own. Dattani stresses that sometimes even the girl child becomes disillusioned and starts thinking that her dreams are her own and not that of her parents. Even the mother is roped into the feeling of the undesirability of the girl child and the cycle continues, until one brave girl breaks it.

## CONCLUSIONS

The social issues of gender-bias and sexuality are very well portrayed and redefined in Mahesh Dattani's dramas. The radio-drama *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* depicts misogyny of a girl by her parents and sufferings, agony and dilemma when she confronts the bitter truths she has tried to ignore all her life. To conclude, the gender biases and prejudices which exploit the lives of girl child even in the upper class society which claims to be modern and liberal in their thoughts and actions, is aptly portrayed by Dattani.

**REFERENCES**

1. Dattani, Mahesh. *Brief Candle: Three Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2010, p. 53.
2. Tim Crook: Radio drama. *Theory and Practice*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 8.
3. Dattani, Mahesh. *Brief Candle: Three Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2010, p. 58.
4. Bell, Elizabeth S. *Theories of Performance*. Sage. 2008, p. 203.
5. Wallis, Mick & Shepherd, Simon. *Studying plays*. Arnold. 1998, p. 214.
6. Dattani, Mahesh. *Brief Candle: Three Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2010, p. 75.
7. Ibid. p. 69, 73.
8. Ibid. p. 71, 72.
9. Ibid. p. 65.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dattani, Mahesh. *Brief Candle: Three Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2010, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Crook: Radio drama. *Theory and Practice*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Dattani, Mahesh. *Brief Candle: Three Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2010, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, Elizabeth S. *Theories of Performance*. Sage. 2008, p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> Wallis, Mick & Shepherd, Simon. *Studying plays*. Arnold. 1998, p. 214.

<sup>6</sup> Dattani, Mahesh. *Brief Candle: Three Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin India. 2010, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 69, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 71, 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 65.