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Undoing Gender: Mahesh Dattani's *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*

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Gender is a deeply embedded layer of the socio-cultural identities of a person. It displays a host of conceptual meanings from both biological and sociological domains. The traditional terms that see gender as a biological product, conveying the bodily distinction of male and female, are often counterpoised by the sociological perception where gender is identified as a 'doing' or a 'becoming'. The situation, seen from the Indian context, has even more harrowing glimpses as a rural woman has a different experience of gender bias as compared to her urban counterpart. The difference here is not about the ideology of gender bias, rather, about the politics of representation. Mahesh Dattani's *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* challenges this 'doing' of gender roles, but, at the same time, questions the progressive and educated parenthood which cares for the daughter but certainly craves for a son. The present paper analyses the dilemma of an urban girl child who knows that her existence is that of a less preferred and more ignored individual. She tries hard to challenge the mindset but fails as it is her loved ones who make her feel 'ugly' and so the ugliness pervades till she takes her last breath.

Gender in India has remained a site of the negotiated evaluations by the patriarchal codes. India nurtures a culture which carries a deep rooted preference for a son, 'a preference which has scarred the psyche of generations of women' (Kakar & Kakar 42). The tradition is as old as the Vedas when prayers were offered for son and grandsons, male descendants and male issues but never for daughters. Even today, to be born a girl is a reflection 'that perhaps with your birth you have brought less joy to those you love, to feel that sinking of the heart when adult eyes glow at the sight of your baby brother' (Kakar & Kakar 43).

However, the discrimination in the name of gender manifests itself through different lenses of social dimensions. To study the layers of gender discrimination is, in one way, to see the difference between the patterns of discrimination between the women of urban class as compared to their rural counterparts. The play of difference between the two is not the difference of ideology, rather, it is the pretence of respect, idealization, concern, protectiveness or passion for providing a proper development to the girl child. Our folk traditions confirm the practice of this difference which rests upon the local customs along with the socio-economic status. 'A rural girl and an urban girl, a Dalit girl and an upper-caste girl, a slum dweller and a bungalow dweller do not have the same everyday cultural experiences, yet they seem to share essentially the same cultural positioning' (Sen 132). The pronouncement of such a mute discrimination almost convinces the educated middle class woman about the camouflage of an equal status in the family, and so, when she grows up, observe Kakar & Kakar, 'her experience of gender based discrimination in her family is substantially less than the developmental fate of her traditional counterpart' (57).

The critical lexicon of gender discrimination in an urban educated family is a slippery site that often produces surprising inflections of meanings. Everything that appears liberal is hidden under a veneer of pretensions. Mahesh Dattani's earlier play *Tara* finds an uneasy extension in

Bhavna's story in *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*. The two lives echo with each other in many respects, though Tara's life is a trajectory of an unfulfilled aspiration, whereas Bhavna has already set out to 'touch the stars' and is ready to actualize her dream.

It is 2025 and Bhavna, along with the two male astronauts, leaves for the Mars. Tracey Neale, the producer of this radio play, calls it a tribute to Kalpana Chawla, the first Indian woman to reach the outer space. Yet, it isn't a mere retelling of Kalpana's success. Mahesh Dattani, through this play has carved a fictional space inhabited by every girl child who confronts an inner turmoil of whether to accept or reject the reality of her being. This is the conflict '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 the 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' (Neale 53).

One may easily sense the blueprint of the cultural metaphor that percolates down the title. An unparalleled task like touching the stars gains an undue furor when it is a girl to do so. Dattani could have named the play anything but his projection of defying the gendered roles would then appear blurred. Bhavna is not an ordinary girl who enshrines her craven adaptation to a socially accepted and well-adjusted position. She disregards herself being portrayed as wired in banal domestic routine and self-abnegating care-giving. She is not a girl like Tara who does not receive any opportunity to tap her dream. It is Bhavna's story who, unlike many girls, has proven her worth in life. Bhavna proudly asserts, 'you are thinking of going where only men have been before. I am going where no man has gone. To Mars' (*GWTS* 61).

The gender variable, polarized as woman and man, reflects an un-nuanced series that conventionalizes bodies, sexuality and social location. This social polarization breeds stagnant notions about things that only men can do and which fall out of the reach of women. Such an ideology caters to a binary opposition between the two genders. French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, argues that 'all forms of binary categorization are in themselves oppressive, since they put limits on what we are expected and able to do. To call somebody a "man" or a "woman" is to compel them to act and be in certain ways' (Bradley 21).

Jasbir Jain in *Indigenous Roots of Feminism* (2011) explores the historical sources across India's composite culture that have shaped the polarized identities of man and woman. The understanding and ideology of the female body relies heavily on the cultural constructs of behaviour, relationships, identities, responses and epistemologies. The knowledge of and the responses to the outside world is governed largely by these cultural constructs. Thus, as Jain suggests, 'if the Indian woman's attitude to her body is different, then this too will affect her self-image' (1). This construction of the female self image is an important one for all relationships and institution like marriage, family and education. Jain persuasively puts up the idea that true equality can only be attained when 'women are able to rise above the body and move about less conscious of themselves as bodies to be seen, that is the object image. Freedom of the body would allow the intellect to gain supremacy' (Jain 4).

This vision of 'undoing gender' reflects in Bhavna's life, which has succeeded in dispatching the pesky phantasm of her gender identity. Also reflects with this radical feminist picture, a weird uneasiness and several questions as why would a woman want to prove herself a better performer than her male counterpart. Why would a woman, unless critically told of her

fragility, want to do something that no man has done before? Isn't it a dangerous fall into the trap of valorizing the reality and accepting polarization? Why would a girl like Bhavna, who has been born and brought up in an affluent, urban and educated family look for a space for herself and asks, 'Whose space are we in? Tell me the space. Don't tell me the time. Tell me the space...' (GWTS 66)?

Dattani triggers these questions with a potential hint that gender worms its way in every social being, whether educated or illiterate, rich or poor, in ways that we may not be conscious of, and in ways that we may not be able to change, no matter how much we try. Bhavna, who has been trying to elude these questions all through her life, now vulnerably falls a victim in facing her childhood self in a situation that is a writer's prerogative. Just after the take-off, the space craft explodes, and drags Bhavna to encounter and come alive with her repressed childhood memories. Dattani's fictional situation puts Bhavna into a Freudian repression problematic whose essence, as Freud concedes, 'lies simply in turning something away and keeping it at a distance away from the conscious' (Freud qtd. in Boags 8). Bhavna tries for an escape but in vain, and now stands tall the perplexing question of whose dream she actually has been living and what for:

I rebelled. I went to NASA against all odds took all the jibes, passed all the tests, passed the physicals and finally my dream comes true. I am taking a journey that no human from this earth has taken. It is the biggest moment of my life and...I have a doubt. Is this really what I want? Is this my dream? (GWTS 64).

The fragile fabric of familial bond gradually gets ripped apart with each new question and its answer that Bhavna always knew but never accepted to herself.

Identity informed by the normative gender role expectations and dominant ideology, strains individuals for conforming to a narrow and unrealistic idealized role. Due to the complex interplay between the dominant cultural norms, social status and individual internalization of the stereotypical gender norms, many women across different cultures share similar relationship to femininity. Femininity is not static, and as a woman matures, she realizes the demand of femininity as well as masculinity and modifies herself in or out of sync with the two notions. She integrates new expectations into her self-image which she projects onto her environment through self presentation.

Bhavna, since her childhood, navigates between the personal and political self representation. She tries hard to unmold her feminine identity by trying out different things like climbing the tall mango trees because she doesn't feel in tune with her feminine identity, and thus, feels 'different from the rest' (GWTS 71). It isn't just an act of feeling boyish, but as Bhavna accepts before the young Bhavna, 'it was my escape from ugliness' (GWTS 71).

This ugliness pervades through the mindset and absorption of the notions of gender where parents want their daughters to be trained in domesticity and their sons to earn fame to the family by doing something unexceptional. Bhavna's father is no different from Patel, Tara's father, and wants his daughter to marry his best friend's son and settle down in Bhuj for her entire life. He had a dream for a son who would grow up and become a pilot. The dichotomy of the uneven and discriminatory expectations leaves the little girl with bruises on her soul and out of a strongly felt vengeance, Bhavna flushes out this ugliness through her act and accepts, 'I became a woman, standing on the highest branch of the tallest mango tree in my school yard.

Looking down at the world... they were all there at break. The girls who called me a tomboy. The boys. They were there under the tree, opening their lunch boxes' (GWTS 71). Moreover, the self-nurtured masculinity in Bhavna, at one point, fills in her a strong feeling of detest when she finds herself bleeding and her mother sympathizes, 'all girls go through this' (GWTS 72).

Revisiting the past is painful for Bhavna and inflicts a whiff of distress when the narrative shifts to her mother. The hatred and rebelliousness, in case of Bhavna, plays an even greater havoc because she finds her mother playing an equal politics of difference in her life. Mothers, quite often, are the agents who nurture this politics of difference. As Ferguson puts it, 'There must be a "we" for any kind of politics to exist. Where does this "we" come from? Who are the individuals who become political agents who act in the political arena' (Ferguson qtd. in Hekman 97)?

Bhavna's mother, like many others, craves for a son while expecting her first child, and sings a lullaby to her unborn baby boy. She is, undoubtedly, the agent of this political arena but certainly, not the leader. The leaders are the male patriarchs of the family who threaten the expecting mother of throwing her out of the house if she delivers a girl child. 'You know, your father told me he would have me thrown out of the house if I did not give him a grandson' (GWTS 75), confides Bhavna's mother to her husband. The fear propels her to hide her girl child from everyone in the garb of a baby boy with the name Bhuvan, and until Bhavna is five years old, both the parents want to see their son become a pilot when he grows up.

When Bhavna becomes Bhavna and lives her actual identity, the dream dies for both the parents. Bhavna fights back this ugliness by trying out all the boyish things or opting for a career so far reserved as a male prerogative, but loses all battles at her familial front. The dilemma of her life is who she fighting with and what for. Her parents have given her care, love and education because they cannot have another child. Mahesh Dattani has created a newer version of *Tara* with Bhavna's tale, but at the same time, has tried to make up for every hiatus and leaves an underlying message with this play that Young postulates, 'No woman's identity will escape the markings of gender, but how gender marks her life is her own' (Young 734).

Dattani who deters back from a crusader's role attempts to picture the genuine images of women. If he points the vulnerable women as Bharti and Shanta, he also presents the new women as Tara, Mala and Bhavna who know how to fight back. In one of his interviews, he admits the justification for his contradictory poles. This picture '... seems to be fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self, which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It's subsumed yes? It is marginalized, but it fights back' (Dattani 2000).

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