



1

Trauma and the Dissolution of Linear Time in Mahesh Dattani's *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*

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- Page No. 1-11

Abstract: *This paper explores the radical non-linear narrative mechanics of Mahesh Dattani's radio play *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* (published in the 2010 collection *Brief Candle: Three Plays*, pp. 51–78) through the exclusive lens of contemporary trauma theory. Moving away from conventional dramatic progressions, Dattani employs an intricate structural architecture of flashbacks and flashforwards that systematically dissolves the boundaries between the terrestrial, analogue past of *Bhuj* (2006) and the cosmic, digital future of a Mars mission (2025). This study posits that the pervasive temporal confusion experienced by both the protagonist, Bhavna Patel, and the audience is a form of a traumatized consciousness. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as an unintegrated, repeating experience, the paper deconstructs how the radiophonic medium serves as an acoustic mirror for psychological fragmentation. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that the play's overlapping timelines prove that for the marginalized female subject, past domestic trauma is never truly bypassed by geographical or technological mobility; rather, it remains an active, disruptive presence that completely messes the chronological reality of the present, finding its final resolution only in a radical, sovereign silence.*

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*, Trauma Theory, Cathy Caruth, Radiophonic Aesthetics.

1. Introduction: The Radiophonic Medium as a Psychogeography of Trauma

In traditional dramatic scripts, chronological time serves as a stabilizing, teleological anchor. It functions as a progressive line that carries characters safely from historical adversity into present resolution, providing the audience with a clear sense of cause, effect, and narrative evolution. In *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*, however, Mahesh Dattani completely shatters this chronological security, presenting a text where time does not march forward but collapses inward. The play tracks the psychological battle of Bhavna Patel as she commands a failing



spacecraft bound for Mars in the year 2025, while simultaneously reliving the domestic oppression and systemic erasure of her childhood in Bhuj in the year 2006. By selecting the purely auditory medium of radio, Dattani deprives the audience of the stabilizing visual cues such as lighting shifts, physical set designs, costume changes, or bodily blocking that typically demarcate transitions between spatial and temporal zones on the proscenium stage. On the radio waves, the past does not wait its chronological turn; it violently and unpredictably erupts into the acoustic present.

This paper focuses strictly on how this flashback-flashforward architecture functions as a structural translation of psychological trauma. Using Cathy Caruth's foundational premise that trauma is an event that is "not fully assimilated as it occurs" and which therefore returns with an insistent, literal frequency, we can decode the structural chaos of Dattani's text as something far more complex than simple avant-garde experimentation (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 5). The confusion the reader or listener experiences regarding exactly where and when the narrative action is taking place is not a formal flaw; rather, it is a deliberate, highly sophisticated aesthetic strategy designed to mirror Bhavna's internal fragmentation. As Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri notes in her foundational critique of Dattani's dramaturgy, the playwright's structural choices consistently force the audience to inhabit the uncomfortable, marginalized spaces of his characters' psyches, breaking down the comfortable distance between the spectator and the performance (114). Through the acoustic medium, Dattani constructs a haunted space-time continuum where the physical cockpit of a multi-million-dollar spacecraft cannot protect the protagonist from the invasive echoes of her patriarchal childhood home.

By analysing the play through an exclusive synthesis of Caruthian trauma theory and radiophonic formalist aesthetics, this study demonstrates how *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* operates as a profound critique of technological determinism and linear models of civilizational progress. The play reveals that the modern, postcolonial obsession with upward mobility, global scientific achievement, and technological acceleration symbolized by the digital future of the Mars mission cannot insulate or heal the subaltern subject from the deep, analogue wounds of localized, domestic violence.

2. Theoretical Framework: Cathy Caruth, Latency, and the Acoustics of the Unassimilated Event

To fully comprehend the temporal disorientation that structures Dattani's play, one must move beyond traditional models of narrative analepsis (flashbacks) and prolepsis (flashforwards) and instead engage with the specialized vocabulary of psychological trauma theory. In her seminal text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth redefines trauma not as a simple physical or emotional reaction to a catastrophic event, but as an epistemological crisis of memory. Caruth posits that trauma occurs when an event is experienced with such suddenness and catastrophic intensity that it defies immediate comprehension:



The breach in the mind's experience of time... lies in the fact that the event is not fully assimilated as it occurs, but is experienced instead in the strange phenomenon of its repeated intrusion and insistent return. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4)

Crucial to Caruth's formulation is the concept of *latency*. The traumatic event is not integrated into the victim's normal, sequential memory system; instead, it is stored in the psyche as a raw, unmediated, and unassimilated sensory imprint. Because it was never truly "lived" or understood at the moment of its occurrence, it remains latent, waiting for a subsequent real-world trigger to awaken it. When triggered, the memory does not return as a recollected thought from the past; it returns as a literal, terrifying re-enactment of the event in the present. The traumatized individual is caught in a temporal loop where the past continuously overwrites the present, destroying the mind's ability to maintain a distinction between what has been and what currently is.

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth further notes that this "insistent repetition" is characterized by its unbidden, non-linear quality (5). The victim has no conscious control over when or how the memory manifests. It bypasses the intellect and addresses itself directly to the nervous system. When applied to Dattani's radio play, this theoretical model illuminates why the narrative structure is so aggressively disjointed. The shifts between 2006 and 2025 are not orderly transitions managed by an omniscient narrator; they are violent, involuntary cognitive disruptions occurring within Bhavna's mind.

Furthermore, the choice of radio as the creative medium perfectly externalizes this Caruthian framework. In his work on acoustic media, French theorist Michel Chion's description of the *acousmêtre* defines a voice whose source is unseen, a disembodied sound that hovers over the image, possessing an eerie, omnipresent, and often terrifying power (21). Radio is, by definition, a purely acousmatic medium. By stripping away the visual body, Dattani ensures that every voice whether it belongs to a mission control specialist in 2025 or a tyrannical father from 2006 exists on the exact same acoustic plane.

The human mind naturally uses vision to categorize and separate objects in space and time; we see a character grow old, or we see a change in scenery, and we understand that time has passed. Deprived of sight, the auditor's brain must rely entirely on sound cues. When Dattani mixes the digital, high-frequency alarms of a spaceship with the low-tech, analog soundscape of a rural Indian household, the two distinct historical eras collapse into a single, overwhelming acoustic interiority. The radiophonic medium becomes the literal, formal double of the traumatized brain: a space where all memories, past and present, are forced to live simultaneously, competing for cognitive dominance.

3. The Latent Origin: Domestic Carcerality and Paternal Acousmatics in Bhuj (2006)

The chronological and psychological anchor of Bhavna's trauma is firmly rooted in her childhood in Bhuj, a region marked historically and socially by rigid traditionalism and, in the



context of the early 2000s, the lingering collective anxieties of geopolitical and seismic instability. In these analeptic sequences, Dattani presents the domestic home not as a sanctuary of nurturing development, but as the primary site of systemic psychological injury and carceral containment. The trauma depicted here is unique; it is not born of a singular, spectacular physical catastrophe like a wartime explosion or a natural disaster, but is instead generated by an insidious, daily erosion of female individual agency under the weight of an omnipotent patriarchal authority.

3.1. The Material Manifestation of Intellectual Erasure

The primary auditory signifier of Bhavna's childhood is the furtive, anxious rustling of paper as she hides her mathematics textbooks beneath her pillow. In this household, the pursuit of scientific knowledge and intellectual self-actualization by a young girl is treated not as a virtue, but as a dangerous, highly transgressive act against patriarchal expectations. Her father's booming voice establishes the absolute boundaries of her physical and intellectual containment, a dictate that she recalls with painful clarity decades later: "Father never wanted me to study further... marry his best friend's son and live in Bhuj" (Dattani, "The Girl" 58).

This specific quote serves as the definitive blueprint for Bhavna's psychological containment. The trauma is rooted in the forced compliance to a life path that requires the total erasure of her authentic self.

When examined through Cathy Caruth's lens, this initial period of domestic oppression possesses a profound quality of latency. While the young Bhavna is living through this daily containment, she does not possess the psychological vocabulary or the social autonomy to fully process the horror of her erasure; she simply survives it through quiet, hidden acts of resistance, such as studying by flashlight (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 7). She does not openly rebel or confront her father; instead, her trauma is internalized as a deep, silent suffering.

The act of hiding the mathematics books represents the literal material site of the unassimilated event. Because her intellectual desire cannot exist openly within the traditional patriarchal grid, she is forced to partition her psyche into two distinct halves: a visible, submissive exterior that conforms to her father's wishes, and a hidden, rebellious interior that dreams of the stars. This structural division of the self is the foundational fracture that will eventually split her consciousness apart in her adult life.

3.2. Pramod K. Nayar and the Carceral Domestic Sphere

To understand the political implications of this domestic containment, it is highly useful to ground Dattani's depiction in postcolonial spatial theory. In his extensive work on the literature of marginalized subjectivities, Pramod K. Nayar in many of his works on post-colonial studies identifies the concept of the domestic sphere in postcolonial societies which is systematically weaponized by patriarchal authorities to restrict the physical, social, and intellectual mobility of the subaltern female body, that for many women within traditional frameworks, the home



functions essentially as a private prison cell where surveillance is absolute and escape is deemed an act of social criminality.

In *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*, Dattani makes this carceral reality audible. The domestic soundscape of the 2006 sequences is intentionally restricted, heavy, and claustrophobic. The background sounds are small, repetitive, and terrestrial: the clinking of domestic utensils, the sweeping of floors, and the heavy, structural creaking of old doors. These everyday analogue sounds are loaded with a sense of inescapable weight. They contrast sharply with the expansive, infinite silence of outer space that Bhavna desires, serving as constant acoustic reminders of the traditional domestic duties that she is expected to perform. Her intellect is locked inside this room, and any attempt to think beyond the borders of Bhuj is treated as a systemic violation that must be met with paternal discipline.

3.3. The Paternal Acousmètre as an Auditory Dictatorship

Dattani capitalizes brilliantly on the specific, disembodied properties of the radio medium to emphasize the terrifying psychological weight of the father figure. In the play, the father's voice is entirely empty of physical form; he is never granted a visible body, meaning his words ring directly inside the auditor's headphones or speakers without the balancing, softening context of a physical human presence. He operates as a pure, terrifying paternal *acousmètre* (Chion 21).

On a standard stage, an actor playing the father would have physical limits he could only occupy one corner of the stage, and his voice would naturally fade if he turned away. On the radio, however, the father's voice is mixed with a harsh, unmediated intimacy that places him directly inside the protagonist's and the listener's ear canal. He represents an omnipresent, auditory dictatorship that cannot be escaped by simply looking away.

This acoustic dominance explains why the experience remains entirely unassimilated within Bhavna's memory. The trauma is rooted in the crushing, invisible weight of this paternal voice, which acts like an inescapable emotional gravity, continuously pulling the young girl down, away from her self-actualization and back into the dirt of Bhuj. This terrestrial past establishes the traumatic baseline of the entire play. It ensures that her subsequent, historic flight to the stars in 2025 is understood by the audience not as a standard act of scientific adventure or nationalistic pride, but as a desperate, survival-driven escape velocity designed to outrun a psychological obliteration that began in her childhood bedroom.

4. The Cosmic Mirage: Technological Acceleration, Flashforwards, and the Failure of Escape (2025)

If the 2006 flashbacks establish the latent, domestic origin of Bhavna's psychological injury, the flashforwards to the year 2025 expose the absolute failure of geographical distance and technological acceleration to heal or historicize that trauma. By constantly juxtaposing Bhavna's highest, most spectacular professional achievement with her deepest, most intimate



childhood wounds, Dattani demonstrates that the unassimilated traumatic memory completely refuses to obey the linear progress of calendar time or the triumphant narratives of modern science.

4.1. The Disruption of the Techno-Utopian Present

In the 2025 timeline, Bhavna Patel is presented to the global public as a highly accomplished, celebrated astronaut the literal face of a historic, state-sponsored mission to Mars. This futuristic timeline is initially characterized by a sterile, hyper-linear, and intensely disciplined soundscape of scientific progress. The ears of the audience are filled with the reassuring sounds of high-tech competence: rhythmic countdown sequences, the steady hum of life-support machinery, the clicking of computer keyboards, and the crisp, professional exchange of technical data between the spacecraft and Mission Control on Earth. This is the ultimate techno-utopian space a world where human intellect has seemingly conquered the physical limitations of the earth and broken free into the ultimate frontier of the cosmos.

However, Dattani systematically shatters this clean, linear trajectory through a series of violent, unbidden traumatic intrusions. The catalyst for this psychological collapse occurs when the spacecraft begins to experience severe mechanical complications, a crisis that threatens the structural integrity of the ship and the lives of the crew. As the technical systems begin to fail, the adult Bhavna's carefully constructed psychological defences fracture instantly.

The rhythmic, high-frequency blinking of the cockpit's warning lights and the piercing beep of the computer alarms do not trigger a standard operational response from her; instead, they act as an unmediated sensory bridge that triggers a sudden, involuntary return to the schoolyard mango tree of her youth in Bhuj, where she recalls, "I became a woman, standing on the highest branch... Looking down at the world" (Dattani, "The Girl" 65).

This structural intersection illustrates with textbook precision what Cathy Caruth describes as the "insistent repetition" and absolute literalness of traumatic memory (Caruth, *Trauma* 5). Bhavna has physically travelled millions of miles away from India, escaping into the literal weightlessness of outer space where the gravity of Earth can no longer touch her physical form. Yet, despite this astronomical distance, her mind remains entirely tethered to and trapped within the site of her original domestic wounding.

The hyper-advanced technology of the spacecraft cannot insulate her from the past; rather, the extreme stress of the current mechanical failure strips away her intellectual armor, allowing the unassimilated, frozen memories of her childhood to flood the present moment. The cockpit of the spaceship and the branches of the mango tree become the exact same space in her mind. She is physically weightless in the cosmic future, but she remains psychologically anchored to the oppressive earth of her past.

4.2. The Cognitive Disorientation of the Audience as a Political Tool



By structuring the narrative so that these two disparate timelines collapse into one another without any formal warning, Dattani forces the reader and listener to experience Bhavna's cognitive disorientation firsthand. In a traditional historical drama, an author might use a clear narrative transition such as a character stating, "I remember when I was young," followed by a soft musical bridge to signal a shift to the past. This conventional method allows the audience to remain in a position of intellectual security; they can observe the character's past from a safe, chronological distance, knowing exactly where the past ends and where the present begins.

Dattani completely rejects this comforting distance. Because the audio cues layer over each other simultaneously, the audience is caught in the exact same temporal trap as the protagonist. We are forced to constantly question the stability and reality of the present moment.

When a voice shouts out a technical order, the listener cannot immediately tell if it is a flight director from Mission Control in 2025 trying to save the spacecraft, or if it is the echo of her father from 2006 commanding her to get down from the tree and return to her domestic chores. This pervasive confusion serves as a vital political aesthetic tool. It proves that for a deeply traumatized individual, the linear progression of history is nothing more than an artificial construct.

Dattani uses this temporal confusion to critique the grand, nationalistic narratives of postcolonial progress. The play suggests that a society cannot simply leap into a glorious digital future of space travel and global economic power while ignoring the unresolved, localized structures of domestic violence and patriarchal tyranny that continue to crush its citizens internally. The outer space mission is revealed to be a cosmic mirage; no matter how fast or how far a nation accelerates its technology, the unassimilated ghosts of its past domestic erasures will always catch up, invading the cockpit and unmooring the present.

5. The Acoustic Vortex: Sensory Overload and the Fragmentation of Consciousness

The psychological and formal climax of *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* occurs in its middle sections, where all semblance of conventional narrative progression completely gives way to a chaotic, undifferentiated acoustic vortex. In this section of the text, Dattani pushes the auditory limitations of the radio medium to their absolute brink, utilizing pure sound design to externalize the internal, hidden architecture of a complete psychological breakdown.

5.1. The Layered Soundscape of Hyperarousal

As the internal conditions of the Mars shuttle deteriorate, the text abandons all pre-tense of chronological order or single-character dialogue. The soundscape becomes an overlapping, terrifying tapestry of competing audio signals that play simultaneously across the stereo field:

- The cold, rhythmic, synthesized warnings of the spacecraft's onboard digital computer, continuously announcing the loss of oxygen pressure.



- The frantic, rapid, and desperate physical breathing of the adult Bhavna inside her spacesuit helmet.
- The angry, booming, disciplinary shouts of the father from the year 2006, demanding obedience and denouncing her intellectual ambitions.
- The soft, distant, and deeply haunting melody of a traditional Hindi lullaby, gently hummed by her mother in the background of the Bhuj household.

This dense accumulation of conflicting audio signals serves as a formal manifestation of what trauma psychology identifies as *hyperarousal* a state of chronic, physiological overload where the brain's filtering mechanisms completely break down, leaving the individual unable to categorize, separate, or prioritize incoming sensory data.

In this acoustic vortex, the past and the present are no longer separate chapters in a neatly organized life history; they exist simultaneously within the exact same acoustic frame. The father's voice from nineteen years ago is no longer processed by Bhavna as a distant, historical memory that can be easily dismissed; it functions as an active, current, and lethal threat that competes directly with the mechanical life-support alarms for her immediate attention.

The audience is left entirely disoriented, stripped of any objective footing. We are forced to realize that within the context of severe trauma, the boundary between objective exterior reality (outer space) and subjective interior reality (the fractured mind) has been completely liquidated. The play is no longer taking place in the physical reality of outer space, nor is it taking place simply in the past; it is occurring entirely within the shattered, haunted theater of a dying woman's consciousness.

5.2. Trauma as the Destruction of Sequential Memory

This structural confusion serves as a brilliant formal translation of Cathy Caruth's insights into the nature of traumatic recall. Caruth continually emphasizes that trauma is fundamentally characterized by its *belatedness* (*nachträglichkeit*); it is an experience that is lived through the raw body and the unmediated senses rather than being neatly organized into an intellectual narrative sequence. As Caruth notes:

Trauma is not a locatable action or a single event... it is an ongoing narrative gap, a historical experience that is lived precisely through its own inability to be fully understood. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11)

By packing these conflicting voices, eras, and sounds into a single, chaotic scene, Dattani provides a formal demonstration of this narrative gap. Bhavna's mind has lost the executive capacity to maintain a linear sequence. She cannot say "then I was a child, and now I am an astronaut." Instead, the trauma forces her to live both realities at once, tearing her identity apart.

This formal strategy aligns perfectly with Dattani's own stated dramatic philosophy. In his introduction to his collected works, Dattani remarks that serious theater must reject the



"comforting lies of structured memory" and instead embrace a fragmented aesthetic to uncover the uncomfortable, hidden truths of human suffering (*Me and My Plays* 22). The cockpit of the Mars mission is quite literally haunted by the unassimilated ghosts of her past. The adult astronaut is forced to fight a tragic, dual battle: she must attempt to navigate a catastrophic mechanical failure in the scientific present, while simultaneously fighting the internalized patriarchal voices of her childhood that continue to scream into her ears, telling her that she is nothing more than a girl from Bhuj who has no right to occupy this elevated, cosmic space.

6. Radical Decoupling: The Sovereign Space of Final Silence

The final dramatic movement of *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* the ultimate destruction of the Mars shuttle brings about the complete collapse of both the technological, digital present of 2025 and the repeating, analogue loop of historical trauma from 2006. The precise manner in which Dattani structures this ending offers a deeply compelling, subversive insight into how a traumatized consciousness can finally break free from its cycles of involuntary repetition, pointing toward a form of resolution that completely rejects conventional Western narrative expectations.

6.1. The Rejection of the Spectacle of Trauma

In a conventional linear narrative especially one centred around an international space mission the explosion of a spacecraft is typically treated as a highly dramatic, visual, and tragic spectacle. It is scored with bombastic music, panicked shouting, and a definitive, chronological end point that seals the narrative with a sense of catastrophic finality. Dattani, however, completely upends this expectation by capitalizing on the specific limitations and advantages of the pure radio medium. The play does not end with a dramatic auditory explosion, a tearing of metal, or a final, panicked message transmitted back to ground control. Instead, the chaotic acoustic vortex of alarms, computer voices, and shouting paternal dictates simply drops away into a sudden, absolute void: "A deathly silence. Followed by the soft humming of the lullaby" (Dattani, "The Girl" 77).

This sudden transition from extreme acoustic overload to absolute silence represents what contemporary trauma theory views as the radical decoupling of the self from the repeating loop of historical injury. Throughout the entirety of the play, language and sound have been weaponized against Bhavna Patel. Sound has been the medium of her entrapment whether through her father's loud commands restricting her mobility, or the cold digital computer's announcements of her impending death, or the global media's demands for her to perform the role of the successful modern astronaut. Language has functioned as a patriarchal tool designed to define, categorize, and control her existence. Her sudden slip into absolute silence indicates a total, intentional withdrawal from the symbolic order and the linguistic structures that caused her suffering.

6.2. The Lullaby as an Agent of Peace and Self-Reconciliation



The return of the mother's traditional Hindi lullaby in the final seconds of the play provides the ultimate structural resolution to the text's non-linear design. In the early flashbacks to 2006, the lullaby was an audio cue associated with domestic entrapment, maternal sorrow, and the passive acceptance of suffering; it was the song sung to comfort a girl who was being erased. However, when the adult Bhavna sings this melody to her childhood self in the silent, vacuum-sealed cockpit of the dying spacecraft, she radically transforms its psychological meaning.

The song is no longer a marker of localized grief; it becomes a powerful, self-soothing mechanism that allows her to finally reconcile her fragmented identities. The child of 2006 who was trapped in Bhuj and the adult astronaut of 2025 who is dying in space are finally united, not through a long process of linear growth or social progress, but through an immediate, compassionate embrace in the dark interior of her own mind.

The absolute silence that follows this final melody is not a passive failure of radiophonic transmission; it is an active, sovereign silence. It represents the precise point where the traumatized subaltern subject completely exits the chronological, political, and linguistic parameters of her oppressive environment. By dying in the cosmic void, far beyond the reach of Earth, Bhavna ensures that her personal story can never be neatly categorized, resolved, or co-opted by the nationalistic, techno-utopian narratives of the state. Her absolute disappearance from the historical timeline is her final, successful assertion of psychological independence. She reclaims her mind by removing it entirely from the world of sound.

7. Conclusion: Retuning Postcolonial Progress

Mahesh Dattani's *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* demonstrates with profound clarity that formal narrative experimentation can serve as a powerful vehicle for psychological and political critique. By transferring his dramatic canvas from the physical restrictions of the proscenium stage to the fluid, auditory landscape of the radio play, Dattani exploits the medium's capacity for absolute temporal freedom, constructing a complex architecture of flashbacks and flashforwards that systematically maps the interior of a traumatized mind.

This paper has illustrated that the temporal confusion structuring the text is not an accidental formal flaw, but a highly functional aesthetic translation of Cathy Caruth's theoretical framework of unassimilated trauma and latency. By forcing the terrestrial entrapment of Bhuj (2006) and the cosmic expansion of the Mars mission (2025) to exist simultaneously within a singular, overlapping acoustic frame, Dattani highlights the persistent, invisible psychological scars that modern, linear narratives of professional success and national mobility frequently conceal. The play reveals that for the marginalized female subject within the postcolonial context, survival and liberation are not achieved through a clean, triumphant march forward into technological acceleration. Instead, existence is a continuous, non-linear struggle against an internalized past that refuses to be historicized.



Ultimately, *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* offers an uncompromising, deeply nuanced look at the reality of psychological fragmentation. True sovereignty for the traumatized subaltern subject is not achieved by simply outrunning the past through technological or geographical acceleration. Instead, genuine peace is found only when the subject shatters the linear timeline of her environment entirely, carving out a sovereign void within the quiet intervals of the narrative an absolute silence where she reclaims the permanent, unmediated right to her own memory, her own identity, and her own stars.

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