

Depiction of Family Disintegration in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

Mrs. Purnima Gupta

Assistant Professor in English
Govt. Degree College
Samthar, Jhansi (U.P.)

Abstract

Where There's a Will is one of the thought provoking and introspective plays of Mahesh Dattani where the playwright has not only pointed to the serious and posing issues of family disintegration, generation gap and loosening bonds of love, faith and understanding among family members, but also has entertained us through the comic dialogues of Hasmukh and his will. The drama is an attack upon the patriarchal system and authoritative attitude which cause suffering of the family members especially the women who are the most pitiable victims. The play deals with the life of a successful man of forty five Mr Hasmukh Mehta and his dominance over family members like wife Sonal, son Ajit and daughter-in-law Preeti who are fed up with his bossy nature and its effect upon their relationships.

Key Terms: disintegration, generation gap, patriarchal system

The post- independence period of Indian English drama is concerned with the changing facets of Indian social panorama. The dramatists have strived to convey meaning beyond the verbal connotations to reflect upon the emerging complexities of Indian life, society, its problems and breaking of relationships. Most of the dramas are confronted with the challenges of new situations posed by the conflict between the tradition and modernity. The Indian English drama is striking its roots deeply into the soil of India and delineating its inextricable theme of socio political milieu. The dramatists have created a socially purposeful literature which is remarkable for its intellectual maturity, technical innovations and wider artistic and thematic concerns.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the most daring, innovative and significant dramatists of contemporary Indian stage. He creates magical effects by his art of presentation of trivial and serious themes in a very

entertaining manner. Basically, he is the supporter of every marginal of the cause of either a eunuch or women or dalits or gays. He portrays the society as it is and analyses the holes and problems in it. Daxa Thakor writes about Dattani, “He blends conventional themes with some modern approach in his works. His plays are total of social, personal and the rustic, often exploring the boundaries between those realities.”¹

Where There's a Will is a drama about the decaying system of joint Indian family and relationships among the family members. It is about the breakdown of the family affection, co-operation, and bondage of love, closeness, integrity and natural understanding. It is mouth piece of shattering Indian patriarchal authority in the changing scenario of contemporary India. In his first play *Where There's a Will* (1988) Dattani has chronicled the follies and prejudices of the Indian society as reflected within the microcosm of the family unit. In this play, the intricate relationship of father and son, mothers and children, and husband and wife, is shown in a comic mode in the family of Hasmukh. Through the story of Hasmukh Mehta, Dattani has targeted the loosening hold of patriarchal code of conduct, issues of generation gap, gender subordination and disintegration of Indian family. Dattani has raised these issues in an entertaining subject matter and subtly pointed to the ironical condition of modern patriarchs. Om Nath Trivedi writes, “Dattani examines the relationship among the members of the family with accuracy and authenticity. Marriage and the breaking of marriage, parent child relationship, extra-marital relationship, difference in outlook among family members on various issues –all these attract Dattani's attention and shape his attitude to family life.”²

In India, family is considered to be the pivot of the whole society. It is a society in miniature. It mirrors the whole society, its conventions and practices. The changes in modern outlook, the pursuit of materialism and ambitious fights for upliftment have made modern man mechanical, insensitive, lacking in emotions, feelings, love and faith. The heart of modern man is dominated by head. The sensibility has been replaced by sense. This state of human behaviour is posing threat to the existence of family and family relationships which is fed only on food of feelings and emotions. *Where There's a Will* depicts family

disintegration due to the patriarchal pressure, loss of values and corrupting power of money.

The life story of Hasmukh Mehta, a dominating figure and head of the Mehta family, is a symbol of patriarchy. He is embodiment of power, authority and sense. He has inherited his sense of superiority from the so called patriarchal system of Indian society. He has no affection either for his wife Sonal or Son Ajit or daughter-in-law Preeti. The most ironical thing is that a family consisting of only four members is not able to stand and survive just because of their outlook and ambitious plans. If we analyse their relationships, we find that there is nothing which can bind them together. Dr Alka Jain writes, "Dattani shows us the hollowness of middle-class lives. He reveals the loneliness of the people behind their mask of normalcy. His characters are vulnerable and disenchanted, wanting in happiness and fulfillment. They seem absolutely normal but live with terrible pain inside."³

The husband – wife relationship between Hasmukh and Sonal is governed by the patriarchal outlook of Hasmukh. Being a successful man, Hasmukh has over confidence over his success. He considers himself as a ruling monarch. His dominating spirit does not let him accept his wife as his counterpart. Sonal is suppressed under his overruling spirit. Sonal is considered only as a part of life. She is not accepted as a mate of Hasmukh. Hasmukh is always critical of her, her views, her way of bringing up Ajit. Marriage with Sonal was not a pleasant event of Hasmukh's life. It was the most tragic part of his life as he considered. He says, "Then when I was twenty one, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married to my wife Sonal." (W.Th.W.p. 464). An Act I, Scene(i) Hasmukh reiterates, "Do you know what Sonal means? No? 'Gold'. When we were newly married, I used to joke with her and say she was as good as gold. But that was when we were newly married. I soon found out what a good for; nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud. Twenty five years of marriage and I don't think she has ever enjoyed sex. Twenty five years of marriage and I haven't enjoyed sex with her." (W.Th.W.p.472). Marriage was only a means of satisfying his lust. It was not a union of two souls and two life styles. Hasmukh started cheating his wife and began to satisfy himself outside because he considered himself powerful to do anything he liked. He confesses before his

readers. "I started eating out." (W.Th.W.p. 473). He broke the faith which is the backbone of married life. The institution of marriage is threatened by the growing lust of man.

Another factor which mars the bliss of married life of Hasmukh and Sonal is money. Money power has made Hasmukh capable of getting everything he wanted even sex. The economical freedom and independence of man can lead to such breakage of family. We can see it in this play. Sonal can not do that because she is a woman and not desired to degrade herself. Moreover, she has not financial freedom and independence. Preeti and Sonal discuss this bitter reality of their lives. Sonal remarks about her husband." Money has made him stubborn." (W.Th.W. p.472). Preeti Says, "I suppose he is proud of his achievements." (W.Th.W. p.472).

Hasmukh develops extra -marital relationship with Kiran Javeri just because of his male ego and money power. He says, "I started eating out. Well, I had the money. I could afford to eat in fancy places. And what about my sex life? Well, I could afford that too. Those expensive ladies of the night in five star hotels! (Smiles at some pleasant memories) some of them were really....! But that didn't go for long. I mean, a man in my position has to be careful. I needed a safer relationship. Something between a wife and a pick up Yes, A mistress! I didn't take me very long to find her. She was right there in my office. An unmarried lady." (W.Th.W. p.473).

Hasmukh's commitment of his past deeds shows that he was becoming corrupt, faithless and immoral towards his wife Sonal and the most surprising thing is that he was not repentant for his evil deeds at all. Rather, he says,"All right, what's wrong with having a bit on the side?" (W.Th.W. p.473). It means that he is totally a shameless person, who has no moral sense and reverence to his relationships with his wife. He breaks the trust, so he does not deserve our sympathy. The loss of faith in married life makes marriage unbearable and burdensome. Both husband and wife accuse and suspect each other and life just becomes a bundle of disputes and quarrels. All harmony and love are lost in the lives of Hasmukh and Sonal. Hasmukh says, "How

can I eat halwa when I have sugar in my urine? She knows that! One day she's going to kill me with her halwa." (W.Th.W. p. 462).

Hasmukh Mehta questions the importance of the institution of marriage. In Act I, Scene (i) he says, "Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? No. There's more to it than that. What? May be he needs a faithful companion? No. If that was it, all man would keep dogs No. No I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son Why did I marry? Yes, to get a son. So that when I grow old, I can live life again through my son." (W.Th.W, p.474-475). Hasmukh has got a faithful wife and son, yet he is unhappy. He detests his son Ajit because he is not like him. Ajit is not upto his wishes.

The most ironical thing is Hasmukh's will which exposes his mentality about his family members. He did not do justice to his wife and son even after his death. He handed over the authority to manage his property and business to his mistress Kiran Javeri instead of his wife Sonal. He made Kiran trustee of all his wealth. He always found fault with Sonal. Instead of compromising with her, he always compared Sonal with Kiran. In Act II Scene(ii) he says, "Kiran may have been my mistress' but she has far more brains than my wife ever had." (W.Th.W.p. 496). He calls Sonal "Stupid in capable housewife." (W.Th.W.P-496) He thinks that his wife did not know as much about him as Kiran. He thinks that after his death, his wife will repent for being a worthless wife for her husband. Hasmukh reposed his faith in Kiran. So he gave her money. Both Hasmukh and Kiran were fulfilling each other's needs. Hasmukh was searching an ideal woman in Kiran impressed by her intelligence and judgement.

The role of wife in saving the family life or married life is very crucial. A woman has to hold the attention of her husband and try to satisfy him at any cost. She has to treat him like a child and be ready to offer any support to him. Sonal failed in extending psychological and moral support to her husband, so she lost everything. Dattani has pointed out this truth indirectly. At last, Sonal accepts, "And I never got because I never gave." (W.Th.W.p.507).

Besides dealing with the relationship of husband and wife, Dattani has presented the relationship of father and son which is dominated by the forces of generation gap. Generation gap is a forceful factor in modern scenario which affects the relationships. It creates lack of communication, understanding and mutual love. The older generation always justifies its way of life, beliefs, assumptions and principles while the younger generation tries to break the set values and old beliefs. The new generation wants to take its own initiatives in any work, wants to execute its own perspectives in life; it is adventurous and aggressive. Hasmukh wants to see his image in his son Ajit, but he finds his son unworthy of any achievements. He visualizes himself as an ideal son who made his father happy and proud. He was a successful man because he had a sense to learn from his father, his hard work and his devotion and his sense of responsibility. At the age of forty five years, he was a successful man and one of the richest men in the city just because of his efforts, hard labour and talents. When he compares Ajit to himself, he finds Ajit a total fiasco. He gets depressed on comparison. He has great expectations from his son and being unable to find his complete reflection in his son, He gets irritated. He has no confidence in Ajit's talents. He regrets to have prayed for a son like him. Everyone of the family is tired of the bossy nature of him. Ajit says to Hasmukh "You will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune. And I will never do that." (W.Th.W.P-458) He says, "Anything I do is wrong for you! Just because you are self made man and had a deprived childhood, you feel that I am having it too easy nothing I do will ever seem intelligent to you, you are prejudiced." (W.Th.W.p.459 .

The old generation wants to make young generation tough and sensible but the young generation takes it otherwise. The old generation demands respect from youngsters while the other is more ambitious and sees shortcut to success. Hasmukh says to Ajit, "You are raw! Under all that pressure in the office, you will bend you will break. That's why I'm toughening your up." (W.Th.W.p.460)

Mahesh Dattani wants to point out that finding fault with others is not the right way to reconcile the two generations living in one family. It will be better to loosen the bond of domination and authority and let the youngsters seek their own goals and paths to realize their own goals. Hasmukh is usually dominating. He is possessive about everyone and

everything. He does not provide freedom to his son to choose his own way to run the office. He fears lest he and his family should become paupers due to wrong decision of his son Ajit. Ajit wants to make his own identity instead of being a photocopy of his father. He says to his father “And what becomes of me? The real me: I mean if I am you, then where am I?” Hasmukh – “Nowhere! That’s just my point! If you are you, then you are nowhere. You are nothing just a big zero. No matter what you do, you’ll remain a zero. Over the years, you’ll just keep adding zeroes to your zero.” (W.Th.W.p.461).

Through Kiran Javeri’s disclosure about Hasmukh’s personality, we come to know that Hasmukh was living his father’s life. He was not real he. He was a weak man who needed support of a strong person whom he saw in Kiran. Hasmukh showed his false strength to his family members. He did not want his son to inherit his property easily, so after his death, he used his special will to make Ajit a disciplined and hard working businessman. The intention behind such will was to rule over his family even after his death.

In this sense, Ajit is indeed a freeman; a person with self identity who wants to promote company with his young blood and talents. Ajit learnt to resist and this was his first step towards success. The dominating spirit of father and adventurous spirit of son often clash and create disturbance in the family. This sort of clash can be resolved through adaptation and natural understanding. The authoritative and ruling attitude is destructive for family relations.

In the course of the drama, the dramatist has also ironically and humorously depicted the relationship between father in law and daughter-in-law. Hasmukh is suspicious of his daughter in-law Preeti’s intentions. He thinks that Preeti married Ajit for his property and this doubt comes true when Kiran reveals the truth how Preeti expediated the death of Hasmukh by changing his medicines with the multi-vitamins. The urge for money and property has made everyone insensitive. The thirst for money can lead a person to commit crimes like murder. Kiran’s revelation about Hasmukh’s death makes us surprised as to how Preeti could do that. Preeti married Ajit for the sake of his money and not for love. The institution of marriage is loosening its basic and fundamental values like love, faith and co-operation. Preeti often quarrels with Ajit over the issue of property.

Sonal says about Preeti, “She was nice and caring when he was alive. Now, after the will, she has become unbearable. She frightens me. Sometimes, I think she is capable of doing anything for money”. (W.Th.W.P-506).

If we throw light on the character of Hasmukh we again find the factor and role of money in destroying the peace of mind and life of Hasmukh. Money mindedness was so powerful and dominant in him that he always suspected his wife, his son and daughter-in-law. He had become mechanical and thought only in terms of profit and loss. The power of money had made him mad and over dominating. He feared to hand over the charge of company to his son because he was afraid of being a pauper. He had disbelief in his son’s abilities. He ruled over his family members like a boss. Kiran says, “He was so insensitive to other people’s needs.” (W.Th.W.P-507). Through the protagonist Hasmukh, Mahesh Dattani discloses that besides the intoxicating and corrupting power of money, the institution of marriage and family are threatened by the instinct for domination. The family members require healthy atmosphere to grow and develop. The relationship needs to be nourished by love and care and not power. The cause of disasters in Hasmukh’s life and family is his over dominating and suppressive instinct. So Dattani indirectly hints at the secret of happy family life. He also attacks upon the powerful patriarchal system under whose weight the women suffer. The female members become victims of male chauvinism due to over ruling nature of men. Such as we find in case of Sonal and Kiran. Both female characters suffer due to patriarchy. In this way, the drama is a mouthpiece of Dattani against the evils of patriarchy and corrupting power of money which can lead to disintegration of the family and relationships.

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