

## **Mahesh Dattani's Preoccupation with Patriarchy and Gender in *Where There's a Will***

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### **Abstract:**

*Patriarchy and gender have been quite sensitive issues in almost all societies of the world with a certain exception. Patriarchy equips male with power infinite and brings with it certain mental changes which affect the opposite section socially as well as psychologically. The recurrent observant of this mentality creates big gap between the sexes and one is pushed to marginality in quest of centrality.*

*The paper aims to evaluate Dattani's preoccupation with patriarchy and gender under the analytical study of his very first play *Where There's a Will*. The paper explores how the play is embedded within the mechanics of the middle-class Gujarati family where Dattani refers to the subversion of patriarchy in the play as one of its major concerns. He interweaves his narrative around the scheming and plotting of the family members who apparently have been put in a fix by a dead man's will, and explores the dichotomy between the male/ female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man. However, it is equally interesting to find out what happens when a woman takes over. This leads to a marked identity crisis in women particularly, and in men consequently. It becomes a chain with which a female is fettered when the question of choice between male and female arises.*

**Key Words:** *Patriarchy, gender, oppression, injustice, male, female.*

## Mahesh Dattani's Preoccupation with Patriarchy and Gender in *Where There's a Will*

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Dattani's preoccupation with patriarchy and gender becomes apparent, from his very first play *Where There's a Will* (1988) which is embedded within the mechanics of the middle-class Gujarati family. Dattani often refers to the subversion of patriarchy in the play as one of its major concerns. He interweaves his narrative around the scheming and plotting of the family members who apparently have been put in a fix by a dead man's will, and explores the dichotomy between the male/ female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman takes over.

The play makes the point about the way patriarchal men invariably fail to exist as true human beings. The plot of the play revolves around the life (and more importantly, after life) of a man Hasmukh Mehta, a rich and successful businessman, and his family. The action begins with Hasmukh Mehta, who comes home from office and overhears his twenty-three-year-old son Ajit, who happens to be the Joint Managing Director of his firm, complaining about his father's refusal to invest in a new business venture proposed by him. He rejected Ajit's proposals because he (Ajit) is a 'nincompoop':

If I let him have his way, we would all be paupers. Twenty -three years old and he is on his way to bankruptcy. My bankruptcy. He was bankrupt up here (points to his head) the day he was born. God just forgot to open an account for him. (456)

Neither does Hasmukh have any love to spare for his wife Sonal or for his daughter-in-law Preeti about whom he talks in the following words:

That is my daughter-in-law, Preeti. Pretty, Charming, Graceful and Sly as a snake... But she is an intelligent girl, I can tell you. She has her eye on my money. Why else would she agree to marry a dead loss like my son?... Scheming daughter-in-law. (457)

Further, in course of the scene, we learn that Hasmukh is a diabetic and cardiac patient with a history of "high blood pressure, high cholesterol... (and) an enlarged heart." and all this leads to his death in the end of the first scene. Hasmukh dies but his ghost lingers on in the house,

wandering through its walls (and occasionally sitting, cross legged on the dining table), keeping on passing acerbic comments on the actions and attitudes of the other characters, though unheard by, invisible to them. Comically, even a member of the audience is not spared by the veiled criticism of Hasmukh's ghost, for at one point soon after he has passed away and assumed the role of a mock-chorus, his ghost sprawls on the dining table and dangles head and arms over its edge in imitation of swinging upside down from a tamarind tree, and points to a spectator in the auditorium and tells him sternly: "Your shoes need polishing!" (496)

The central issue of the play- its complication- however, comes up in the second scene when it is known that none of the family members has inherited his money, for what Hasmukh Mehta has done is to form a trust, which is to be administered over by his former mistress Kiran Jhaveri as the Trustee. In fact, according to the terms of Mehta's will, not only will Ajit not inherit his father's money and property until he is forty-five, but he will also have to compulsorily attend office every day from 9 to 6 and remain under the official tutelage of Mrs. Jhaveri, And finally, and most insulting to all the members of the family, Mehta's Will stipulates that his former mistress will move in and live in his family till the Trust be dissolved twenty-two years hence.

All these points to the thesis of the play, which is the patriarchal dominance of Hasmukh Mehta, both in the course of his life and after his death. Ajit confesses after his father's death, "Ever since I was a little boy, you have been running my life. Do this, do that or don't do that, do this. Was I scared of you!" (487)

Ajit's wife Preeti also comments on patriarchal dominance of Hasmukh and tells Ajit, "He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother." (501) Even Kiran Jhaveri, Hasmukh's mistress, confesses to Sonal, at a candid moment, "he was so insensitive to other people's needs ... (507) Yes, Mrs. Mehta, my father, your husband- they were weak man with false strength... Will the scars our parents lay on us remain Forever?" (508)

The truth that surfaces finally is that Hasmukh Mehta had hoped his son to live in his own image, just as he himself had lived his life, in thrall to his father's shadow. The following conversation between Kiran and Sonal, Hasmukh's wife brings this fact to light:

**Kiran:** I should have hated him. Like I should have hated my father, my brothers and my husband. But all I felt for him was pity.

**Hasmukh:**(as a ghost) I say, enough: I paid you to do my work. Not ridicule me.!

**Kiran:** Even his attempt at ruling over you after his death, through his will, are pathetic Ye. (Hasmukh sticks his fingers into his ears and shuts his eyes). The only reason he wanted to that is because his father had ruled over his family. All his life he was being a good boy to his father.

**Sonal:** How little I knew him. If I had understood him when he was alive, I would have died laughing. (510)

Sonal too admits to Kiran that she herself had lived her life under the total dominance of her sister, Minal, who becomes a substitute of patriarch to her:

Yes, it is true of me too. I have always lived in my sister's shadow. It was always Minal who decided what we should wear, what games we should play. She even decides which Maharaj is suitable for our family. Even at my husband's funeral, she sat beside me and told me when to cry. (511)

These are the confidences that Sonal and Kiran exchange, much to the dead man's horror. All the characters are liberated from the stronghold of the patriarch and Hasmukh Mehta is defeated. This domineering husband, heavy father and Tyrannical boss is gradually dwarfed and diminished to the point of insignificance by the gendered strength of Kiran Jhaveri, who stood on the margins as Hasmukh's mistress. Asha Kuthari Chaudhury comments:

Dattani's perception of gendered strength is invariably that of a woman like Kiran Jhaveri, marginalized, almost invisible, suddenly thrust into the action and pluckily accepting the challenge for what it is worth. She is nobody's fool and wields authority with the sensitivity that is perhaps peculiar to women. (Chaudhury, 59)

The bonding of the wife and Kiran, the mistress tears the ambitions of a patriarch and undermines his malicious power. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhury:

The power centres or turned on their heads, with a female ably assuming authority and smoothening out the previously dysfunctional family. Hasmukh is more successful with his devious will than he had imagined...-only, even his own presence is exorcised by the new order, and his Machiavellian intentions are laid to rest as the ghost hastily beats a retreat. (Chaudhury, 60)

Dattani's message in the play age to suggest that the patriarch who would rule over his family even after his death is exposed at the end to be what he really was- a comic tragic weakling who had constantly desired for a father substitute; a man who was rude to the members of his family

because he felt himself insecure; an unfaithful husband who didn't really want a mistress but "a woman who would father him". (510).

Thus, we see that the evils of patriarchy take a central stage in this play. Sangeeta Das comments:

*Where There's a Will* is another play in which Mahesh Dattani has depicted another aspect of patriarchal dominance. Let it be daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, or mistress, all or dependent on man for financial and physical security. Man has always taken up women as a liability and a source of requirement. Women have been looked down upon by men as an object to meet their needs. They should be there to cook their food, smile cordially at his friends, run around attending to their needs and sexually satisfy them whenever they have the urge. If the wife is unable to satisfy the husband, then there is always a mistress to do that. That mistress also is subject to compulsion to kowtow before him for he may be having reins to her weaknesses. Everything finally boils down to one conclusion, which the autocratic nature of man discreetly dealt with by Dattani and this play. (Das 117)

Mahesh Dattani, vehemently remarks that his play is:

... about this patriarch who controls his family- his wife, son and daughter-in-law. He dies at the end of the first scene, and his ghost becomes the narrator. What he has done is that he has left a very convoluted Will and his family had to act according to his wishes to inherit. The ghost is later exorcised by the women. (171)

Thus, the theme of patriarchy and gender dominate in the play where the playwright very deftly deals with their complex web, which leads to identity crisis in women particularly, and in men consequently. It becomes a chain with which a female is fettered when the question of choice between male and female arises.

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