

Mahesh Dattani's *Where There Is A Will* as a Critique of Patriarchal System of Society

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Abstract

A patriarchal system of society is social structure in which men hold primary power and dominate in roles of political leaderships, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property. Male dominance, gender roles, inheritance and succession, social norms and expectations and control of women's bodies are some of the key features of a patriarchal system. Patriarchy can perpetuate inequality and limit the potential of individuals, particularly women and girls. It often leads to gender discrimination, violence against women, and the marginalization of those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. Mahesh Dattani's play *Where There Is A Will* is a sharp critique of the patriarchal system prevalent in Indian society. The play delves into the complexities of family dynamics, using the microcosm of this family to explore broader societal issues. Dattani's nuanced portrayal of characters and relationships reveals the destructive nature of patriarchal values and calls for a re-examination of the roles and expectations imposed on individuals within such a system.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Discrimination, Gender roles, Inheritance, Succession, Social norms.

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A patriarchal system is one where men hold the majority of power and influence, and societal norms and institutions are structured in ways that reinforce male dominance and female subordination. Men are viewed as the primary authority figures in both public and private spheres. They control most of the resources, decision-making, and societal roles, particularly in leadership and governance. Strict gender roles are imposed, where men are expected to be strong, assertive, and the primary breadwinners, while women are often relegated to domestic rule, such as homemakers and caregivers. Women's roles are seen as secondary or supportive to men. Property, titles, and family names are typically inherited through the male line. In many traditional patriarchal societies, daughters may receive little to no inheritance compared to sons. Patriarchal societies enforce norms that prioritize male perspectives and experiences. Women may face restrictions on their behavior, dress, mobility, and opportunities, reinforcing their

subordinate status. Patriarchal system often seeks to control women's sexuality and reproductive rights. Women may face societal pressure or legal constraints regarding their choices about marriage, childbirth, and sexual behavior. In Mahesh Dattani's play *Where There Is A Will*, the central character, Hasmukh Mehta, embodies the quintessential patriarch. He exercises control over his family even after his death through a will that dictates the future of his wife and children. Hasmukh's authoritarian nature symbolizes the deep-rooted patriarchal belief that men have the ultimate authority over the family and its resources.

Hasmukh is the character which contributes in a major way to the unfolding of Dattani's design. The play can, without much loss, be said to be about Hasmukh and his disillusion, albeit after his death. Right from the start, Hasmukh leaves no doubt in our minds about the fact that he as the head of the family is a veritable despot, not amenable to reason or emotion when they do not serve his own interest, which mostly consists in protecting his assets from the gaze of his so called relations – son, wife, daughter-in-law. In matters of wealth he is no respecter of relation or emotion. He just stops short of cursing his own son to death when his assets stand to real or imaginary risk:

"Oh God! I regret it all. Please let him just drop dead.

No, no. What a terrible thing to say about one's son"

There is the barest minimum family-bond among the members of the Mehta family and Hasmukh is the epitome of a man who is not ready to undergo any alliance that does not further his own interests. In Hasmukh's eyes the son is worthless; the daughter-in-law is a 'sly snake', wife – 'as good as mud'. All this is due to his overbearing nature and relentless pursuit for wealth or 'property'. Neither is he aware that he is led to thin blind pursuit of wealth at the expense of familial ties. Even the extra-mental tie is not what it looks. At the last analysis he was knowingly or unknowingly following the footsteps of his father and inherited contempt for the womankind in general unless it served his purpose as in the case of Kiran.

Apart from all other concerns in the play the dominant note is that of the patriarchal code so ingrained in Indian society finding expression in Hasmukh, who above all is a father who still holds the conventional role and status tradition has bestowed on him as father and head of the family. He cannot tolerate individual opinion or assertion be it in his son, wife or anyone else. In order to punish the rebellion note in his son's arguments and teach him and other family members a lesson, he makes a will that will force the members of his family to mould their life according to the terms and condition laid down by him. Until now, Hasmukh appears to be strong-willed character that perhaps deserves the abidance and approval of his plans by the beneficiaries of the will whether they like it or not. But as we see that the tables are turned, his

character is put under merciless scrutiny of his wife and mistress who think him a character to be pitied because all his life he lived under the shadow of his father with no original thinking and no independent personality to his credit. Kiran says to Sonal:

“Where were his own dreams? His own thoughts”,

And then again

“He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life. Like his father had. Hasmukh didn’t really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him”.

Not only this, the nasty trick played by the deceased in contriving a will that will always remain a heartburn for his family is ultimately ridiculed by Kiran:

“Even his attempts at ruling over you after his death, through his will are pathetic. The only reason he wanted to do that is because his father had ruled over his family. All his life he was merely being a good boy to his father.”

The bitter truth dawns upon him at last. With horror he notes:

“Is it.....true? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father’s aspirations for me? Have I been my father’s ghost? If that is true, then where was I? what became of me, the real me?”

The women in the play – Sonal and Preeti are portrayed as victims of this patriarchal control. Sonal though subservient, represents the traditional wife who has been conditioned to accept her husband’s dominance. Of all the characters, Sonal is the most pathetic. She is not only coerced into subjection by her husband but a sister in the garb of a good counselor thrusting her opinions on Sonal. So much so that she dictates when to cry at the funeral of Sonal’s husband:

“Even at my husband’s funeral, she sat beside me and told me when to cry”.

Preeti, on the other hand, is initially seen as a modern woman but eventually reveals her own manipulative tendencies, shaped by the patriarchal system she inhabits. Preeti before the change that comes on her because of Kiran is a self-centered woman trying to climb up the social ladder. She is described by Hasmukh as follows:

“Pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake”.

Again a little elaborately:

“But she is an intelligent girl, I can tell you. She has her life in my money” and “scheming daughter-in-law.”

Hasmukh’s assessment is more or less right. Preeti is a good strategist and makes well thought-out and planned moves but in the end she too has to face the self-revelation which all the characters undergo – Has Mukh after his death and all others after undergoing the ordeal of rather trying circumstances. When the truth about Has Mukh’s early death is discovered, Kiran sternly says:

“He was right – you are very clever. Of course you didn’t kill him. You just let nature do the work for you. Were you so impatient? Couldn’t you want a few more years? Oh I am glad he made this will. You don’t deserve any of his money.”

It is hoped that Preeti’s selfish and money-oriented nature will gradually subside through the good counsel of Kiran.

Despite the overwhelming control of the patriarch, Dattani introduces elements of resistance. Kiran, Has Mukh’s illegitimate daughter, serves as a counterpoint to the traditional women in the family. She challenges the norms and expectations imposed by Has Mukh, asserting her own identity and independence. Through Kiran, Dattani suggests that breaking free from patriarchal oppression is possible, but it requires courage and a willingness to confront the system. Apparently Kiran seems to be a confident executive who rose to her position by using her brain and looks. We can have the glimpse of the career girl of the twentieth century, who in the big bad world has to survive and fulfill her ambition. She has learned the hard way what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated world. She had her share of ignominy and mental agony by being born to a drunkard father perpetuating his legacy through the brothers equally cruel to their respective wives. It is the school that taught her the lesson, more important than knowing the intricacies of the business world. She recalls her past before Sonal in these worlds:

“I learnt my lessons from being so close to life. I learnt my lessons from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home every day with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers.”

Kiran seems to highlight the peculiar fate of the woman to get maltreated and yet pose a happy house-wife, as Kiran’s mother did. Kiran in spite of her education and forthright nature has to behave more or less like her mother:

“And I – I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing. And I too have learnt to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end.”

Dattani gives a social twist at this point when contrary to our expectation and of dead Hasmukh the two women who should be antagonistic to each other form an alliance as the members of the same sex undergoing the same kind of treatment at the hands of their male-folk. Sonal's appreciation and recognition of Kiran is contrary to Hasmukh's expectation. When Minal misbehaves with Kiran, Sonal takes Kiran's side. A permanent bond of understanding, recognition and mutual appreciation is established between Kiran and Sonal as will be evident from the following conversation:

"Sonal : You have make things clear to me. I am glad you are living with us. I hope you'll stay with us forever.

"Kiran : Thank you. You have made me happy."

Kiran is great at forming inter-personal relationship. As she wins over Sonal and Ajit, she wins the confidence of the hardest of all persons – Preeti. When we first hear about Kiran, we take her to be a careerist, a woman of easy virtue. Later, we come across her capacity to control tricky situations; we have the word from Hasmukh about his business acumen but the human side that bruised womanhood inside her is reserved for the concluding part of the play. In spite of her wrecked marriage she has always been striving to be a home-maker. She does not make public Preeti's exchange of bottles leading to an early death of Hasmukh lest it should break the hard-won harmony.

Finally, the play ends on an ironic note, with Hasmukh's will, intended to control his family, ultimately leading to the exposure of his own flaws and the unraveling of the very system he sought to perpetuate. This irony underscores the futility of patriarchal control and the inevitable decline of such a system when faced with the complexities of human relationships and individual desires.

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