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A Critical Evaluation of the Politics of Patriarchy and Gender Role in Mahesh Dattani's Play, *Where There's a Will*

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Abstract

The present paper is an exhaustive study of the treatment of patriarchy and gender issues in Mahesh Dattani's debut play *Where There's a Will*. Patriarchy and gender are the major themes in the plays of Mahesh Dattani, which he has used as a significant tool to give a new face to Indian English drama. Dattani has picked up the highly practical issues of Indian society which has been faced by majority of people. Almost all issues taken up by Dattani in his plays are radical, unconventional and contemporary. He has prepared the stage for the treatment of realism.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender identity, Theme, Realism, Gender role.

Mahesh Dattani, the Sahitya Academi Award winner playwright, is known to all not only for his modern dramatic style but also for his thought provoking dramatization of social consciousness. There are various reasons which set him different from other contemporary Indian playwrights in English. It is because he deals with burning social issues about gender identity, sexual identity including the *hizra* community and child sexual abuse, patriarchy, hypocrisy HIV- positive people, religious intolerance, and universal themes of contemporary Indian family.

Patriarchy is a major pre-occupation of Mahesh Dattani which automatically leads to another of his concern, gender. He has used the theme of patriarchy and gender in a number of his plays. Dattani's debut play *Where There's a Will* written in 1986 was first performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on September 23, 1988, as a part of the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. It is a fine entertaining comedy

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exposing the follies and prejudices of the middle-class Indian society – a topic repeatedly dealt with in his works. Commenting upon the quality of the play, Sita Raina says:

> Joy is the essence of life and I have always believed that theatre should exude delight. *Where There's a Will* is such a play. It is not only thought-provoking and introspective but also provides an evening of pure entertainment (Dattani 451).

Though the play is cast in comic muse, it is not devoid of seriousness. It is amusing as well as thought-provoking, entertaining as well as introspective. This is what makes Dattani a successful playwright.

Dattani has quite deftly handled the theme of patriarchal dominance in this play. The plot revolves around the life of a rich businessman, Hasmukh Mehta and his family. Hasmukh Mehta dies in the first scene itself and then stays on the stage as a ghost. He ruled his household when alive, and has attempted to do so after his death. This he does through the device of his will. The patriarch is disliked by his wife, daughter-in-law and his son. It is to be noted here that the victim of patriarchy is not only woman, but also man. Dattani raises a few questions about the traditional ways of defining ourselves. "One is not born a woman; one becomes one", (Hall 98) says Beauvoir. In the light of this, the sexual construct of Ajit is in question. He is not considered manly enough in the play. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri says,

> Dattani raises a few unlikely questions about the sexual construct that a man is. The stereotypes of gender roles are pitted against the idea of the artist in search of creativity…. (Chaudhuri 67)

Owing to his patriarchal attitude, Hasmukh "forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationships" (Chaudhuri 67)**.** This is the worst outcome of patriarchy. Our society is a witness to it.

By handing over the control of the family to Kiran Jhaveri, a mistress of Hasmukh till the son, Ajit is forty-five as per the words of the will, does Dattani mean something? Probably yes. He gives a hint to the end of patriarchy and the beginning of a new era in which there will be no patriarchal dominance and which will lead ultimately to the improvement of interpersonal relationships. Kiran Jhaveri, though unwanted and hated in the family of Hasmukh owing to her illicit relationship with Hasmukh, the head of the family and she, being nominated as the Trustee of Hasmukh's property after his death forges an opportunity to improve her interpersonal relationships with Hasmukh's wife, son and daughter-in-law whereas Hasmukh forgoes. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri rightly calls her "the epitome of Dattani woman" (Chaudhuri 30). The patriarch is gradually dwarfed and diminished to the point of insignificance.

When the play begins, Ajit, the son of Hasmukh is found talking to his friend on the phone about his plan to invest in new business ventures, but it is rejected by his father calling him "bankrupt up here (points to his head) the day he was born. God just forgot to open an account for him." (Dattani 456) Ajit feels the pinch of patriarchal dominance and cries:

> I mean that you want to run the show, play Big Boss as long as you can. Or as long as God permits. And when all of a sudden, you are 'called to a better world', you will still want to play Big Boss ….(Dattani 460)

It is interesting to note that Hasmukh plays 'Big Boss' even after his death through Kiran Jhaveri. Ajit wants his own identity, but his father is sure that he would not be able to make spaces for himself without his protection and supervision. He calls Ajit a 'big zero'.

> 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. Zero, zero, zero. On their own, the zeroes don't mean a thing. But if there's a number one standing before all those zeroes, then they really add up to a lot (Dattani 461).

Neither does Hasmukh have any love to spare for his wife, Sonal nor for his daughter-in-law, Preeti. He condemns his wife for her inability to provide him a good and healthy married life. His accusation is "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" (473). Hasmukh takes it as his right to display his dreams in which there is no space for the desires of others. Hasmukh's statement about his wife strikes a tone of sarcasm and sexual colonialism. For him a faithful wife is as good as a faithful dog: "Then I should be a happy man. I've got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be" (Dattani 475).

Hasmukh describes his daughter-in-law, Preeti as "pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake" and sums up as a girl who "has an eye on my money" (Dattani 456).

Beena Agrawal rightly says, "Hasmukh's consciousness of his authority, his contempt for the simplicity of his son, his mockery of the submissiveness of his wife prepares a very ridiculous image of patriarchal authority" (Agrawal 109).

The relationship between Hasmukh and the members of his family is the relationship between 'the ruler' and 'the ruled' and thus focusses on the matrix of colonisation.

Towards the end of the first scene, Hasmukh dies in bed where his wife discovers his dead body a few minutes later. Death finds its meaning when tears are truly shed, at least one true drop of tear. But nobody really grieves over the death of Hasmukh owing to his domineering attitude.

In the second part of Act I, the ghost of Hasmukh appears on the stage to make an assessment of his doings. He lingers on in the house wandering through its walls, occasionally sitting cross-legged on the dining table and keeping on passing acerbic comments on the actions and the attitudes of the other living characters, though unheard by and invisible to them. Comically, even a member of the audience is not spared Hasmukh's ghost's not-so-veiled criticism: "Your shoes need polishing" (Dattani 496). As is evident here, the audience becomes an essential part of Dattani's dramatic scheme and gives his plays a realistic touch.

Hasmukh intends to govern the fate of his family members even after his death through his will. According to the will, after the death of Hasmukh, a Trust is to be formed and administered over by his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri as the Trustee; his son will not inherit his father's money and property until he is forty-five and he will have to compulsorily attend office everyday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. under the official tutelage of Mrs. Jhaveri. And finally and most insulting to all the members of the family, the will stipulates that his mistress will move in and live in his family till the Trust be dissolved twenty-two years hence.

The appearance of the ghost of Hasmukh is to see how the will works as a tool for patriarchal dominance even after his death, but ironically it works as an eye-opener to him. He encounters the inner conscience of all those characters whom he dominates in his life time. The idea of Hasmukh's invisible presence is an excellent device of introspection as Sita Raina says: "To be the watcher of one's self is to make intelligent changes in this life" (Dattani 451).

The ghost of Hasmukh comes to know about the mind of his family members and also of Kiran Jhaveri, his mistress. They speak ill of him and thus their true colours are brought to his notice. Ajit groans, "He has ruined us! The old man has taken us for a nice ride" (480). Preeti, an obedient daughter-in-law emerges as a cunning and calculative woman. She says to Ajit:

> He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother. But I didn't let him do that to me. How did I manage? Simple, I gave in, I simply listened to him and didn't 'protest' like you! I knew he didn't have long to live. I thought; why not humour him for a few days? After he's gone, we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money. I almost succeeded. He would have left everything to us if you hadn't 'protested'. That was your mistake! (501-502)

Sonal, Hasmukh's wife calls him 'a village buffalo' who did not "understand about other people's feelings" (507). Even Kiran the man's mistress confesses to his wife at a candid moment: "He was so insensitive to other people's need" (507), "Yes, Mrs. Mehta. My father, your husband – they were weak men with false strength" (508) Kiran's worst reaction against Hasmukh and patriarchy is yet to come: "Hasmukh didn't want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him. . . Men never really grow up!" (510)

Kiran establishes a good understanding with the family members of Hasmukh. All the characters are liberated from the stranglehold of their past. The patriarch sees the palace of patriarchy demolished. It is followed by his self-realization:

> No. I don't think I can enter this house. It isn't mine … any more. I will rest permanently on the tamarind tree. They are not my family any more. I wish I had never interfered with their lives. They look quite happy together. With Kiran sitting in my place. Oh, I wish I had been more … I wish I had lived (515).

This critical study thus places Mahesh Dattani as a well-recognized post-colonial Indian English dramatist. He has dealt with a very serious theme of dominance of patriarchal system in an entertaining way. It cannot be denied thus that Dattani has applied a new thought in the realm of traditional thinking.

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