



Patriarchal Problem and Gender Issue in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one of the pioneering modern playwrights. The contemporary issues developed in his plays are said to be both from his own life and his imagination, and what he calls a marriage of both, but his confidence lies in reality itself as a resource. Dattani in the process of engineering the current of Indian drama has brought it closer to voice of the oppressed sections of the society whose identity is shrouded in the cover of myths and social prejudices. In most of his plays, he tries to investigate the identities of those who occupy no space in social order.

Key words: patriarchy, prejudices, exorcism, discrimination, follies

Mahesh Dattani is one of the popular Indian English dramatists. In most of his plays, he handles various subjects and issues like gender discriminations, homosexuality, communalism and child sexual abuse. His most distinguishing quality is that he deals varied range of theme within his writing. He analyses the follies and prejudices of Indian society and he has chronicled sections of the Indian society who have been victims of social apathy and humiliation. All of his plays have great contemporary value. It is because of these themes that Dattani's plays have been hailed as *fresh arrivals* by the people at large. Though his plays deal with the ills in the Indian society, they have universal appeal. They draw full attention of the audience in every corner of the world. Moreover, his plays could be staged anywhere on this earth because of their themes. Dattani moulds his subject in such a way that it is both topical as well as appealing. Thus, his plays have a great contemporary value.

Dattani tackles issues that affect societies the world over. Dattani deals with contemporary issues like male - female divide, the patriarchal tradition, commercialism, communalism and consumerism. Dattani holds back nothing. Dattani handles every problem from gender issues to sexuality very carefully and successfully. His achievement as a playwright depends on the fact that his plays are a slice of life. He writes and creates a character as he lives. His characters are the persons in real life whom he has met somewhere or other. They are real lively characters brought on to the stage to make the society realize the conflict and dirt of the original world without any hidings.

Gender discrimination exists in almost everywhere in the world. Discrimination in the developing world is a bitter reality. It affects human relationship and results in millions of individual tragedies. In India, as in many parts of the world, women are discriminated on the basis of gender.

The male dominated society has defined her role, and confined her to the four walls of her home. Despite women's empowerment movement, discrimination remains deep rooted in the Indian society.

Where There's a Will is also based on Dattani's motive of patriarchal dominance. He describes the patriarchal problem and also gender issue in the play. In this play, Dattani deals with the ways or societal constructions by which men try to subjugate women. A woman is generally looked as a commodity or symbol of sex. Her only function is to attend the wishes of her husband and other family members without complaining, as she is dependent on him for financial and physical security. Man has always taken up women as a liability and as a source of requirement. They should be there to put their food, smile cordially at his friends, run around attending to their needs and sexually satisfy them whenever they have the urge. These undemocratic nature repulses a woman be it daughter, wife, daughter in law or mistress.

Dattani's *Where There's a Will* is a comedy with farcical touches. It is deeply rooted in the Gujarati familial background. In it Dattani has focused the follies and prejudices of Indian society. The patriarchal men often behave egoistically, as it is the bitterest reality in middle class Indian family.

Gender discrimination and patriarchy become apparent from this play. It is found within the activities of middle class Gujarati as well as any Indian family. Dattani has repeatedly referred patriarchy in the play as one of the central issue. Dattani explores the discrimination between the male-female roles within the traditional family headed by a man and what happens when woman takes over her position. Through the pre-planned mechanism of the will, the patriarch thinks that he has won the battle. Dr. Sunanda Shelake rightly says:

Where There's a Will has been read and criticized on a different level. As Sita Raina observes that the play has several interesting aspects. Dattani, the playwright described it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. Woman-be it daughter-in-law, wife or mistress - are dependent on men and

this play shows that what happens when they are pushed to the edge. (116)

Here, Dattani presents the conventional picture of a boss like father and domineering husband. Hasmukh is always unhappy and dissatisfied with every family member. They are not living up to his expectations as he had lived and fulfilled the desire of his father:

HASMUKH: Why does a man marry? . . . Why did I marry? Yes, to get son. So that when I grow old, I can live like again through my son. – Why do I have a mistress? Because I am unhappy. (pause) Why I am unhappy? Because I don't have a son. Who is Ajit? Isn't he my son? No. he's just a boy who spends my money and lives in my house. He doesn't behave like my son. A son should make me happy. Like I made my father. . . happy. I listened to him. I did what he told me to do. – I worked hard for him. I made him. . . happy. That is what I wanted my son to make me. (Collected Plays 474-75).

Hence, Dattani's recurrent theme of gender discrimination and the patriarchal paramount appear in this play. All the female members, whether a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mistress, are depend on man for social, economical and physical security. Women have been looked as secondary by men as an object to meet their needs, as a liability and a source of enjoyment. Their main and only jobs are to dance attendance upon their husband and to be an honest partner in bed for sexual satisfaction. The lovers and colourless relationship between the two couples, Hasmukh and Sonal, Preeti and Ajit are examples of a money-minded upper middle class family as well as physical and materialistic world. Hasmukh thinks that his life is a complete waste due to inability of his wife to satisfy his urges. He says:

I soon found out what a good-for-nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud... (Collected Plays 473)

Sonal is afraid of her husband's behaviour. She has no voice of protest in front of her husband, yet she says to Preeti, her daughter-in-law:

Proud? He thinks he is a king of all he surveys! And we are his subjects... he can put on all the airs he wants to, but he doesn't fool me. I know who we are. We are just middle class people with a lot of money. That's all (Collected Plays 472).

Hasmukh Mehta is an autocrat and cynical man. He is a terror for all his family members when alive as well as dead. His wife Sonal is typical middle class woman. She is lovable and caring. She takes care of him, his house, cook their food. Even though Hasmukh always criticizes his wife, he has kept a mistress for his satisfaction.

Due to such tyrannical behaviour, many women can find no solution to their struggle. They are not able to lead a normal life. They are disappointed and frustrated. The 'sick headaches' or hyper-tension, - all arises from an inability to take proper and correct decision due to disappointment and frustration. The same thing happens to Sonal. Even after the death of her husband, she is not able to live a normal life. Kate Millate observes:

If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principle of patriarchy appear to be twofold: Male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger. (Agrawal 132)

Hasmukh Mehta thinks Ajit as an irresponsible idiot of thirty-three. On another side, Ajit considers his father to be a head-strong person who possesses a bossy attitude. The dramatist exposes the attitude of both through this conversion:

AJIT: Don't I have any right at all?

HASMUKH: You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.

AJIT: Thank you. You are so generous I could kiss your feet.

HASMUKH: There's no need to do that. Just polish my shoes every morning and I will be happy.

AJIT: You will never be happy. Not until all of us danceto your tune. And I will never do that. (Collected Plays 458)

Here, Dattani focuses on the point that the real problem of the patriarchy lies in rejecting the opportunity to individual for an independent progress. The son has to follow the orders blindly. Dattani calls the men who expect this kind of audience as 'weak men with false strength'. Kiran remembers her own drunkard father who abused her mother and beat her. She also remarks that her brothers have turned out like their father. At last, pathetically Kiran raises question:

Isn't it strange how repetitive life is? My Brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottle of rum wrapped up in newspapers. Beating up their wives 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? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever? (Collected Plays 508)

To conclude, through *Where There's a Will*, Dattani raises certain important questions regarding gender-discrimination, patriarchy and prejudices of Indian society. Dattani tries to focus his views on the gender-discrimination which is prevalent in middle as well as educated urban class of Indian society. Dattani expresses that women should be given equal opportunities to develop their potential and inner talent. At the same time, he also makes it clear how women are responsible for the degradation of other women. A complete life is impossible without unification of male and female. We find in Guru Granth Sahib (75): In a woman man is conceived,

From a woman man is born,

With a woman he is betrothed and married,

With a woman he contracts friendship.

Why denounce her, the one from whom even kings are born?

From a woman a woman is born.

None may exist without a woman (Rajan, 71)

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