

Deprived relations under Patriarchal hegemony: A study on Dattani's

Where there's a will

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Abstract:

Dattani's *Where There is a will* is one of his best plays portraying typical family relations of contemporary society. He discusses various issues in his plays but the present play *Where There's a Will* deals with a serious issue of a wealthy family in a comical tone. Relations play a vital role to lead a happy and comfortable life but it is quite contrast for the people who cannot find happiness in their family. Dattani colours the same problem of an industrialist who fails to enjoy a happy family life in a wonderful manner. The play is weaved around 'a will' prepared by an old man to get a grip over his family, especially his son. Patriarchal domination of a father over all the other family members is the major subject of the play and how the same hegemony leads to his death is touching. The play throws a light on the traditional settings of the Indian family system along with the focus on materialistic thoughts of modernism.

Key words:

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| Contemporary society, patriarchal domination, traditional, materialistic thoughts, modernism. |
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The play *Where There's a Will* can be considered a different work of art among all the plays of Mahesh Dattani. Most of his plays deal with Gender discrimination, Gay culture and Post-partition conditions. But the present play is different in its subject as well in its narrative technique. The plot in this play is about the preparation of a will by the head of the family to teach a lesson to his family members for not obeying him and becomes a victim to the conspiracy woven by his own family member due to his rigid attitude. The play is about a man of forty five years old, Hasmukh Mehta, a wealthy person of his town. He is characterised as a dictator, allowing none of his family members to act according to their wish. His relation with any other family member is not cordial. He is the central character in the play. He is utterly disappointed old man due to his only son Ajit. Throughout the play he

feels sorry for having such son, fed up with his family and finally prepares a will with a cunning mind to have a grip over his family before his death. Hasmukh realises his mistakes after becoming a ghost. The problem in the play gets settled through 'the will' but by the humanistic lead taken by Kiran Jhaveri, a trustee appointed as per the will.

Dattani shows both the positive and negative sides of Hasmukh. He is the central figure, as well the villainous character in this play. He is shown as a responsible father but his interventions into every issue of his son Ajit, makes him a villain in his son's view. He regrets for having such an irresponsible son who wastes his money in new projects. The father restricts him from doing anything new without his consent. He does not allow him even to talk about business issues with his friends and tells him that, he is nothing to fit for. In his own words to his son:

HASMUKH. That was an even bigger mistake. What makes it worse is knowing that I actually prayed to get him. Oh God! I regret it all. Please let him just drop dead. No, no. What a terrible thing to say about one's own son. I take it back. Dear God, don't let him drop dead. Just turn him into a nice vegetable so he won't be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory, he has been in my way. (455)

The play reflects Traditional Indian culture and family life through its characters. Sonal, wife of Hasmukh Mehta stands as an icon for Indian house-wife. She loves her family and particular about each and every object in her house. She wants to feed her family with various delicious food items, which reflects Indian traditional way of consuming nutrients during meal time. Her love for Ajit, Mehta family's only son is showed through her preparation of Parathas and Halwa even after she falls sick. She is shown as a motherly icon throughout the play and showers endless love for her son. It is remarkable in her conversation while preparing food for the family:

SONAL. Rubbish, A meal isn't a meal without roti. You sit. I'll serve you all. Just because maharaj isn't here, it doesn't mean you have to go hungry.

HASMUKH. There's enough here to feed an elephant's family!

SONAL. It's all right for you to say that, you are on a diet. But what about our growing son. He needs proper nourishment.

HASMUKH. Growing son! I tell you we are all getting enough nourishment. There's no need to make parathas.

SONAL. Maybe you are getting enough. I'm making them for Aju.(468)

A true psychology of women is brought into light by Dattani in this play through the character of Sonal. She, as an Indian traditional wife respects her husband and takes more care about his health. She tells her husband repeatedly to not to smoke as per the advice given by the doctor even though he does not listen to her words. She is very patient throughout the play but shows her frustration when she comes to know about 'the will' prepared by her deceased Husband. Reality of every middle class family is shown through the circumstances of Mehta family after Hasmukh's death. Struggle of Ajit to earn money in the form of allowance, Clash conflicts between Sonal and Preeti provide wholistic picture of a family life in a humorous manner. Though the subject matter is very serious but Dattani presents it in a very humorous way through the technique of Black comedy. According to Sita Raina, "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." (449) (451)

All the family members are depicted as the victims of Patriarchal hegemony showed by Hasmukh Mehta as a family head. He feels that his son is almost spoilt and does not fit to run his well flourished business and thinks about himself how responsible he was when he was in his young age. He always expects Ajit also to be like him and this thought makes Ajit to rebel against his own father. The fight between father and son can be found in the following conversation:

AJIT. You will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune. And I will never do that.

HASMUKH. Don't be so stubborn!

Ajit. You are stubborn too!

HASMUKH. I'm stubborn because I know I'm right. You're stubborn because you are a nincompoop! (458)

Even though Hasmukh has a very responsible wife he does not enjoy a happy married life and finds happiness with other women. The story of *Where there's a Will* is full of serious issues resembling contemporary human lives and depriving human relations in greed for money and power which make everyone to have an introspection. Hasmukh's thoughts reveal his opinion on his family members, which is a very serious issue but the seriousness is veiled with comical conversations. It is remarkable in his soliloquy:

“..... Then when I was twenty-one, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married to my wife, Sonal. You will soon meet her. The following year Ajit was born. Tragedy after tragedy....” (464)

The play reflects damaging father and son's relation due to patriarchal hegemony. Dattani through this play tries to put forth many existing issues in a family system. He lays more stress on how old, rigid thoughts of a father clashes with the modern thoughts of a young son. Hasmukh's restrictions on Ajith and unnecessary interventions into his new project damage their relation and make Ajith to go against his father. Beena Agarwal opines that, “The over interference of Hasmukh in the life of Ajit manifests the horrors of patriarchy that aims to control freedom and selfhood of all those who comes under its umbrella” (108).

Sonal and Preeti are portrayed as two mute victims till the death of Hasmukh due to his patriarchal domination. He does not tolerate either his wife or his daughter-in-law and says Preeti is a very charming girl but a sly. He dislikes preeti's attitude and considers her as pretentious. He is the only person in the family who recognises Preeti's real nature but her reality is unveiled before the family only after his death. Her real nature is traced, only after they come back from Solicitor's office. She pretends as a responsible wife and daughter-in-law but her intentions are only to enjoy Hasmukh's property. She finds fault with Ajith and Sonal after knowing that they cannot enjoy his property till Ajith turns forty five years old. Her cunning nature can be traced in her following conversation:

PREETI. How could he do this to us?

AJIT. Well, he's done it.

PREETI. It's all your fault!

AJIT. My fault?

PREETI. Yes. If you had been nicer, all this wouldn't have happened.

HASMUKH. Clever girl.

AJIT. I wasn't nice to him because he wasn't nice to me.

PREETI. So what? He wasn't nice to me either. (481)

Hasmukh is very much aware that all his family members are very excited to enjoy his property, which he does not like. Frustrated by the family and having thought to teach a lesson to them he prepares a will before his death. He turns his property into a trust and appoints his mistress Kiran Jhaveri as the trustee. As per his 'property will' none of his family members can enjoy any of his properties including his house, till Ajith turns forty five years old and they are provided with minimum allowances in Kiran's presence. Kiran is sent to Mehta's house to look after the family's issues and guide Ajit in office works. She plays a key role in making Hasmukh's dreams to come true. Hasmukh always intends his son to be more disciplined and have concern for his father's hard work. He finally achieves it through a property will. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhary "The will, here, becomes the iconic instrument to power (through wealth), and shapes and reshapes the destiny of the family/familial relationship after his death." (83)

Mehta's family allows Kiran to stay in their house only with the fear of property will. It is informed to them that if they fail to fulfil any of the conditions of the will, entire property would be handed over to the trust. Sonal dislikes Kiran after knowing that Hasmukh never had a happy married life with her and she is her husband's mistress. But after listening to her real story she slowly develops her intimacy with her. Hasmukh Mehta's predictions about his daughter-in-law prove right when she shows her real nature before the family. She avoids taking care of her mother-in-law and insults her husband. Her real nature can be traced in her talk to Ajit:

AJIT. Look, it was a mistake.

PREETI. A mistake? You are a mistake! You are a big mistake in my life!

HASMUKH. Never a dull moment in this house.

AJIT. Calm down.

PREETI. Leave me alone!

AJIT. Don't get so tense. Tension will make things worse for you.

PREETI. I don't see how things can get worse! And if things don't get any better, I tell you I'll go crazy! (499)

The play reveals serious consequences of Patriarchal hegemony at its end, by using a minor plot. The fact behind the death of Hasmukh is found by Kiran Jhaveri. She detects that, Preeti has changed Hasmukh's high blood pressure controlling medicines with her vitamin tablets, which gradually takes his life without any one's notice. Preeti acts as very innocent before Kiran, but finally gets caught by her. She pleads her, not to disclose the secret before any other. Preeti's request is remarkable through the following conversation:

PREETI. Please! Don't tell him!

AJIT. Don't tell me what?

PREETI. I will do anything you say. I-I regret everything. Just don't tell him! (514)

Kiran handles many serious issues at Mehta's home including the fact of forty five years old Mehta's murder. Even though she is Hasmukh's mistress, understands Ajit's divergent views, Sonal's innocence and even forgives Preeti for the crime she commits. Considering Preeti's feeling of regret and her concern for Hasmukh, Kiran does not reveal the death mystery of Hasmukh Mehta to anyone. She tells Preeti, "As you say, I have no proof. I can't go to the police. I don't want to. For Hasmukh's sake. For his grandchild's sake. Your mother-in-law was right. I compared myself to you. We both desire money...." (513)

Hasmukh prepares the will with the intention to teach a lesson to the family and to strictly enforce his expectations on them at least after his death. It is Kiran Jhaveri, who understands his intentions and regulates Ajit and Preeti as a trustee of Mehta's property. Though she enters almost in the middle of the play, handles all the characters and sets the family unlike Hasmukh. Both Kiran and Hasmukh though implement their ideologies in the house but in two different manners. Thus one becomes victim for the enforcement and

another receives applause. According to Sita Raina's observations, "To be the watcher of one's self is to make intelligent changes in this life. In *Where there is a Will*, Hasmukh has control over his family through his money and forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationship. As do most of us. Consequently, when he became the watcher of his actions, he perceives that his desire for control has led him to be the victim of his own machinations unlike Kiran who uses power play to essentially improve her relationships." (451)

The play not only deals with patriarchal domination of a family head, over all the members of family, but also focuses on how relations become money oriented in contemporary society. The secret murder of Hasmukh by his own daughter-in-law evoke that extreme domination over others and more love for money can make humans to be more violent irrespective of human relations. It gives an eye opening message to the reader about the importance of family life with wife and children. Dattani, by employing his narrative technique of Black comedy suggests the public that money and power are not sufficient to lead a happy life but it is a happy family that makes one to have a peaceful life.

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