

Review

Where there's a Will - An Exorcism of the Patriarchal Code

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Mahesh Dattani is the pioneering playwrights of Indian English Literature. He is born on August 7, 1958 in city of Bangalore. Dattani is internationally acclaimed as the most outstanding playwright of recent times. He is the first Indian dramatist to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to Indian English Literature. He is one of the few dramatists who write their plays originally in English. His plays are dramatic reflections on the concerns and constraints of the commoners. He writes about the society and surroundings in which he lives. In this way his dramatic art is the faithful and authentic expression of his first hand experience and knowledge of socio-cultural environment. Mahesh Dattani is considered as a 'change element' in the contemporary framework of Indian English theatre. So, it is improper to call him sequel to anybody or consider him component of a continuum- the ongoing journey of Indian theatre. Dattani dramatizes the social realism in a very comical and satirical way. It is replete with laughter and mirth. The tone of sarcasm and humour runs throughout his play. Dattani's creative genius handles sobriety and humour successfully side by side. The familial interaction is often comical and satirical. Dattani made this play both funny and philosophical. He mingles them in a very innovative and meaningful way.

Keywords: Patriarchal code, Philosophical reflections, Satire, Sarcasm, Social consciousness

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INTRODUCTION:

Mahesh Dattani's plays offer fine post colonial analysis. His plays represent the problems of those whose voices are silenced under the pressure of social conventions and prejudices as well as oppressed force of patriarchy. Dattani has been constantly attempting to present such issues under the hidden agenda of sensitizing the mass about the problems faced by the colonized class of Indian society. The playwright focuses on the tension and turbulence of the characters resulting from demolition of

human desires under the name of healthy socio-cultural practices. Where There's a Will, present the constant conflict between an individual self with the collective or social self. In other words, the individual self is trying to acquire as much freedom as possible from the grip of collective or social self. Where There's a Will does both delight and teach. The play was first performed by playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore, on 23rd September 1988, and a part of the Deccan Herald

Theatre Festival. The action of the play takes place in the lavish house of Hasmukh Mehta who is the doyen businessman and staunch follower of patriarchal system. Dattani has introduced a ghost of Hasmukh Mehta, who watches his own actions. Mehta exercises the patriarchal authority over all the members of his family and believes in absolute power.

The present paper focuses on emptiness and uselessness of strict adherence of patriarchal code. The father strictly believes that he has right notions regarding his son's life. When son rejects the idea of complete command over his life, father wants to give touch of modernity to his plan. Ajit needs five lakh rupees, but his father doesn't trust his son's ways of world and ability of dealing with business affairs. He thinks that Ajit is very novice and silly in the business world. He makes mockery of his son' and shows his displeasure towards his attitude.

As Ajit remarks: - And what becomes of me? The real me. I mean, if I am you then where am I? (CP: 461) Ajit asserts his individualistic identity. He protests against parental hegemony and challenges the dictatorship of his father.

Ajit: - Don't 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 is no need to do that, just polish my shoes every morning. I will be happy.

Ajit: - you will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune. And I will never do that. (CP: 458).

In the first half of 20th century Indian economy was predominantly agrarian which fostered the patriarchal code. The son tilled the field in the same way his father did. In social and family life, codes were fixed and each succeeding generation was taught to follow them in a rigorous manner. Business was carried forward as a family enterprise from one generation to another. So, whether in villages or in towns, life was organized around families, rather than individuals. The head of the family was supposed to be the custodian of the family, traditions and cumulatively of the community traditions. But, this agrarian setup begins to crumble in independent India by the spread of education, growth in employment, and opportunities in industry, commerce and service sectors. The spirit of individualism pervaded other walks of life. Even when a young man is working with his father or in family business, he has his views on different aspects of the work, he is involved in, and wants them to be heard and respected. All this affected the patriarchal code greatly. Dattani shows strong desires of old generation to preserve its authority over the young and the determined

bid of the young to break free of the patriarchal code. According to Mahesh Dattani the real danger of the patriarchal code lies in denying an individual, the opportunity for an independent growth. In the name of tradition, good manners and duty the son is expected to follow blindly, whatever he is asked to do. This will deprive a man of his drive and initiative. Mahesh Dattani calls the men who demand this kind of obedience as weak men with false strength and condemns those who submit this type of subjugation. Dattani's dramatic art has been appreciated for its fine fabric of philosophical undertone and social consciousness. *Where There's a Will* is a satire on the watertight patriarchal code; in fact no character is escaped from the stroke of Dattani's satire. Like Ben Johnson's *Every Man in His Humor*, Dattani's characters are delineated with more or less sarcasm. The dramatist intends to bring change in the human faults and follies.

Joy is the essence of life and I have always believed that theatre should exude delight, *Where There Is A Will* is such a play, it is not only thought provoking and introspective but also provides an evening of pure entertainment. (Raina Sita, 2000.P. 451)

Dattani's *Where There's A Will* is a comedy with slight farcical touches, which yet makes a point about the way patriarchal men invariably fail to exist as a true human being. Dattani possesses an exceptional sensibility for the suffering in society born out of gender dominance and power play. Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's A Will*, deals with the issue of patriarchy. There is a dominant patriarchal figure, Hasmukh Mehta (father). The family comprises of father, mother, son, daughter-in-law (Preeti) and Hasmukh Mehta's sister in law (Minal). Dattani's patriarchal figure Mehta dies in the very first scene of the play. Mehta had been ruling his house when alive and had a desire to do so after his death, and he does it through his will. Mehta wants his son to walk on his footsteps and made some conditions to run his company for his son, rather he needs an individual of his own making. But, his son (Ajit) has his own needs and desires. Ajit acts as an individual voice and freedom lover. This leads to the another entry in the family namely Kiran, the former mistress of Hasmukh, and she carries it to the family and introduces herself as trustee. Thus they were forced to live according to the will. The highly dissatisfied Hasmukh is decidedly unhappy with the manner his wife. He thinks that no one in the family is living up to his expectations, the way he had lived up to his father. He must therefore get back at his family and teach them a protracted lesson.

Invisible presence of Hasmukh especially after his appearance as ghost, his mate observations and the free display of the inner feelings of different characters

against the authority of Hasmukh, is a unique device for self assessment for the characters. (Beena Agrawal, 2008. P. 107)

The basic conflict between father and the son is that, father wants a typical submissive, hardworking and obedient son, not an imaginative, individualistic and independent one. But, Ajit is not ready to be merely a prototype of his father. He believes in living his own life and thinking his own thought. Ajit's plight can be seen in the following utterance;

why it is that everything I say or do has to be something or somebody had told me or taught me to do?(CP: 459)

In the patriarchal system, father acted more or less in a despotic manner, in his eyes the son never grew-up. Hasmukh holds the view that at the age of forty five, he is very rich successful industrialist and one of the richest men in the city, it is all because of the schooling that he had under his father. He is unhappy with his son, Ajit, because he would not follow the footsteps of his father. Hasmukh tells him that he needs reasoning to make him fit to run the company when his father would be no longer there. Ajit reacts to this by saying that he wants his son to be merely an extension to him. In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani makes a bold statement of individual's right to have his/her life according to his/her own light. One may fail to come to grief but at least one would dare to face life on one's own.

Where There's A Will has several interesting aspects; Mahesh described it as the exorcism of the patriarchal code. Women, be it daughter-in-law, wife, or mistress are dependent on men and this play shows what happens when they are pushed to the edge.(Raina Sita 2000.P. 45)

Mahesh Dattani shows us the most tangible and dynamic reality of middle class urban Indian society and has a sense chronicled the follies and prejudices, which he reflected within the microcosm of family unit. In this play Dattani depicts the picture of modern middle class urban Indian society with patriarchal dominance of a father and his colorless relation with his family members and also with his former mistress that comprises family, are developed in elaborate vignettes portraying two singularly unexciting generations of couples sexually insipid and loveless, who remain typically materialistic and money oriented. Mehta exercises hegemonic power over his family to perpetuate his conception of the 'Self' which he in turn got from his father. Mehta meets with resistance at all point from the other members of his family. As Ajit states "you still want to play Big Boss, and you can do it through me, In short you want me to be you." (CP: 460).

The action starts when Hasmukh Mehta returns home from office and heard his son and the Managing Director about the Mehta's refusal to invest in new business. Hasmukh classifies that he had thrown away his son's

project proposals unread. Mehta is a diabetic and cardiac patient, with high blood pressure and high cholesterol and an enlarged heart, with this the audience come to know that Mehta dies in the very first scene, and his dead body is seen by Sonal. This is not the beginning of a tragedy; however, Mehta's ghost lingers in the house, though unheard and invisible to his family. The terms and conditions of Mehta's 'will' which is carried out by Kiran states that his son Ajit can inherit his father's money and property until he is forty five. But he has to attend official tutelage of Mrs. KiranJhaveri. The will states that Kiran has to live in the family till the trust is dissolved after twenty two years. It all seems the patriarchal dominance of Hasmukh Mehta in the course of his life and even after his death.

What interested me particularly was its philosophical twist. To be the watcher of one's self is to make intelligent changes in his life. In *Where There's a Will*, Hasmukh has control over the 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.(Raina Sita 2000. P. 45)

Mahesh Dattani shows us how parental dominance makes the life of children pathetic, we see after death of Mehta Ajit confesses, "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!"(CP: 470).

Though, *Where There's a Will* is described as a drawing room comedy. It functions better than a tragedy in its effect and appeal on the minds and hearts of audience. The play has thematic richness, brilliant dialogue delivery, touch of humour, satire and suitable dramatic structure.

Satire, irony, gallows, humor and other mutations of comic spirit will be guiding forces of our theatre in the coming years and tragedy has little to offer to rebellious generation obsessed by the danger of mega deaths. (Ronald Hayman 1969: 95)

The play shows optimistically a way by which men and women can find happiness on their own terms. Ajit is projected through his father's unsympathetic eye, as a mother's darling and an ineffectual, but is shown to have resisted and even won, however, infinitesimal a way against his father in the battle of wills. Sonal, is a sufferer under Mehta and her sister Minal. Kiran tolerated her father, who everyday came with bottles of rum, and beating her mother and calling her names. Kiran finds

happiness eluded her in past existence as a business executive - cum mistress to a rich man and as daughter of a drunkard and wife of another. The liberation of these characters from the strange hold of their past is the defeat to Mehta. The domineering husband, heavy father and tyrannical boss is gradually dwarfed and diminished to the point of significance.

Dattani manipulates the incidents for self-enlightenment to expose the illusion of false authority. He promotes idea and the passion for power and domination, signifies the insecurity of an individual, one can nourish the dream of dominating others for a short time but each individual frames his own dreams of life and their essential spirit can never be checked. Mehta has control over his family through his money and forgoes the opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationship. He perceives that his desire to control led him to be the victim of his own machination. Dattani's plays have Gujrati family milieu as the setting or locate and shows that how patriarchal canons control not only the ways of women but also men of the family

Ajit survives as a subaltern who cannot speak about his rights to his father. Husmukh is a self made man and had a deprived childhood and manifests the horrors of patriarchy that aims to control freedom and selfhood of all those who come under its umbrella. Husmukh rebukes Ajit to talk with official and even with his friends. Ajit, in spite of being a simpleton is aware enough to ridicule the passion of his father and says:

I mean that you want to run the show play Big Boss as long as you can or as long as God permits. Husmukh calls Ajit zero. Nowhere that is just my point! If you are you then you are nowhere. You are nothing just a big zero. No matter what you do, you will remain a zero, zero, and zero. On their own, zeroes do not mean a thing. (CP: 480)

Where There's A Will is a play where traditional family values clash with un-expected twists in the tale that completely subverts stereotypes. The theatre attempts to articulate more and manners of the society intending to cheer people by lifting them from physical, social and mental problems and afflictions and also offer a piece of advice for leading life in the healthier and happier way.

Dattani's shows that social prejudice and conventions hinder the individual choices and deprive them from the path of possible growth and development. The colonial sensibility and social commitment does not give way to the self-desire and dreams. He explores the illusion of perfect and complete control over the family for a longer period. The play arise the questions that why a man aspires too much for authority and power. Does it signify any value of life? Apparently it does not attach any meaning to human existence. Nor does it helps in improving quality of human life. Dattani is conceived that it is an attempt to make oneself secure and survive. So, man's drive for the domination arises out of his own apprehension of insecurity.

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