



Self-Awareness, Patriarchy and Psychological Transformation in Mahesh Dattani's Where There Is a Will

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's *Where There Is a Will* explores the complex dynamics of patriarchy, family relationships, authority and individual identity within the modern Indian middle-class household. While existing criticism has primarily examined the play from feminist, social and postcolonial perspectives, relatively little attention has been given to the role of self-awareness as a transformative force. This article argues that Dattani employs the dramatic device of Hasmukh Mehta's posthumous presence to create a psychological distance through which the protagonist recognises the limitations of patriarchal control and the emotional consequences of possessiveness. Drawing upon psychoanalytic criticism together with concepts of self-observation and consciousness, the study demonstrates how detachment from the ego enables the protagonist to perceive his relationships more objectively. The paper further analyses the symbolic function of the will, the representation of Kiran as an agent of transformation, and the gradual reconstruction of familial harmony after the collapse of authoritarian power. Through close textual analysis, the article contends that genuine interpersonal relationships emerge not through domination but through awareness, empathy and emotional freedom. Ultimately, Dattani presents self-awareness as an ethical and psychological process that dismantles patriarchal rigidity and opens possibilities for reconciliation, making *Where There Is a Will* a significant exploration of contemporary Indian family consciousness.

Keywords: Self-awareness, Patriarchy, Psychoanalytic criticism, Consciousness, Family relationships, Gender

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani is a champion in harmoniously blending feeling and form in spite of getting indulged in theory, universal in taste and flavour, appealing to all sections of society by portraying social maladies contaminating the healthy tissues of the society¹. According to Mahesh Dattani, 'theatre' is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre. In the words of Michael Walling,

*"Dattani fuses the physical and social awareness of the Indian theatre with the textual rigour of western models like Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. It is a potent combination, which shocks and disturbs through its accuracy and its ability to approach a subject from multiple perspectives: postcolonial Indian and multicultural Britain both have an urgent need for a cultural expression of the contemporary: they require public spaces in which the mingling of eastern and western influence can take place"*²

Where There is a Will, is the first play of Dattani dealing with the issue of exorcism of patriarchal code. Many number of writers have dealt this issue in different angles but the way Mahesh Dattani has handled with is the most inspiring and a different perspective.

Mahesh Dattani an exquisite chronicler of the contemporary society, has penetrated modern psyche to its last layer in this play. He is trying to evolve the ancient Indian technique of awareness to live a life of perfect harmony. Family, in modern times is a place with relationships in a forced harmony due to the split personalities and diabolic attitude of people. Dattani brings this split out to state that man is born natural, real and integrated but as soon as he becomes a part of the society, he begins to acquire the unnatural and unreal traits forgetting his natural urges. The natural traits in a family like love, trust and understanding are replaced by distrust, lifelessness and misunderstanding creating an emotional vacuum which is the very basis of a family togetherness. Where There is a Will is a play in which split family members live many lives to satisfy the prying eyes of the society. As Joy is the essence of life, Where There is a Will is a curtain raiser to happiness, because our happiness depends not on the developments, twists and surprises in life but on human motivation and will. Therefore, Dattani has employed the “Will Device” to state that our will is inevitable for the happiness and smooth inter personal relations. Our will is to serve, sacrifice, understand, love and so on. These are the primary requisite for relationships.

Dattani has taken the metaphor of family in this play to reflect the follies of the society and foibles of the individual self. All the characters of the play are one, two or even many. Almost all the characters suffer from disintegration at the level of thought and feeling. Their feelings and thoughts have become two different things. We all know that feeling is more real than thinking as we all come with a vibrating heart while thinking is cultivated, given and reared by the individual under many factors which include society as the most. This is justified by the various soliloquies of Hashmukh in the play revealing his thought process conditioned by his hereditary, parental, social and economic factors.

The play is divided into two sections i.e., in to two acts. The first act reveals the disintegration and the split between thought and feeling. Whereas the second Act offers a solution which lies in self-awareness by watching one's own self. Hashmukh Mehta, a successful entrepreneur is depicted with a seemingly happy family comprising of a wife, son and a daughter in law. He is a strict patriarch exercising complete control on the business and family. Money is a serious concern of this family as it is the source of dissension between the one who earns and the others who are the natural heir to it revealing the emotional bankruptcy of an economically rich family. The opening of the play is with the heated arguments of Ajith and Hashmukh.

“Ajit. (on the phone) Five lakhs. That's all. Give me five lakhs and I'll modernize the whole plant”.

The argument accelerates to the extent that Hashmukh finds the birth of his son Ajit a mistake on his part as he has become a vagabond and extra avenger,

“Hashmukh. That was 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 ahead. No, no. what a terrible thing to say about one's own son. I take it back

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 had been in my way". (p.455)

This represents the state of clash between two generations, two individuals and the most important is between father and a son. Hasmukh finds all his family after his hard earned money. Even his daughter in law Preeti is a 'scheming daughter in law', charming, graceful and 'sly as a snake' having an eye on his money. Sonal his wife is a spend thrift spending money lavishly for lunch and dinner.

"Hasmukh (to the audience). It's so easy for her to forget that we were a middle class family ones. She keeps cooking food like it's a new invention. Rich food, wasting so much ghee and oil". (p.456)

It is a family where the earning man has centralised all power and the marginalised one are struggling to acquire that position. But more than this it is a matter of mutual distrust. All the family members are living under one roof in spite of the fact that they do not wish to do so. They express an irresistible conflict between the feelings and thoughts. The study explains it to be a conflict related to finance or patriarchal struggling to express their identity specially Ajit. His personality is dwarfed in the presence of Hasmukh as Hasmukh has no concern for the imaginative, individualistic and independent traits of Ajit. "Ajit's position is like a subaltern who realises his position but has no power at all".

This disintegration between father and son represents the changed scenario of Indian family. We find that the older generation is trying hard to preserve his authority on the young while the younger generation is determined to create a new path. 'Ajit' as the name signifies, is one who cannot be wined but Hasmukh find him opposite of his name. For him Ajit is an unsuccessful man but Ajit is one who never submits or yields his will. He will protest and take the decisions of his life. In the play we find him always arguing with his father. During one such argumentative conversation he touches the crux of the problem.

"Ajit. Don't I have any rights at all?"

"Hasmukh. You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders". (p.458)

Ajit's attitude and protest reminds Hasmukh his past when he was a child working hard as per his father's wishes to raise the family business. He wants Ajit to follow the same tradition but Ajit will not follow him as he does not want to dilute his individualistic traits. But beyond this they are not associated at the level of feelings and so they are unable to understand each other. They think differently. Hasmukh thinks he is a self made man but Ajit thinks that his father is prejudiced and had a deprived childhood. Hasmukh thinks his son is useless but Ajit thinks that he can raise the business with his brain and young blood. Ajit knows that he cannot satisfy his father's will

"Ajit. You will be never happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune". (p.458)

The husband wife relationship is equally a waste. Sonal enjoys the status of being his wife but they are poles apart. She manages the kitchen and establishes her authority in the domestic activities but otherwise she is a passive docile and dependent woman whose inner experience is invisible. Hasmukh is constantly in argument with Sonal. The shallowness of their relationship is depicted in the soliloquies of Hasmukh. Sonal is presented as a woman with no

will of her own. She indulges to please her husband and the son but both are indifferent to her. The very foundation of a marital relation is at stake in their case.

"Hasmukh. I soon found that what a good for nothing she was. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life. Mud. Twenty-five years of marriage and I don't think she has ever enjoyed sex". (p.473)

Sonal, the name symbolises one who is gold like-pure and soulful, lustrous, always in demand but for Hasmukh she is like mud. A woman with mud consciousness can be 'utilised' only after the patting of a potter. Her nonutilitarian value is assigned by the male earning member of the family. Her mud like state is designated by Hasmukh as she could not satisfy his sexual urges being passive in her attitude. Her care for Hasmukh is a part of social taboo. He does not feel but think that she should take care of her husband's health.

"Sonal. If anything happens to you, they'll say I neglected my duty". (p.471)

This confirms that the very basic foundation of marriage is shaking. A social bond which binds a family with love, care and feeling is reduced to negligence, compulsions and obligations. Making him reflect upon marriage as a tragedy.

"Hasmukh. 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". (p.464)

It is not so that Hasmukh considers his marriage to be a tragedy. But even Sonal reciprocates in somewhat a similar manner.

"Sonal. Proud? He thinks he is the King of all he surveys. And we are his subjects? But you know the story about the crow painting himself white to become a swan? Well that's him. He can put all the airs he want to, but he doesn't fool me. I know who we are. We are just middle class people with a lots of money. That's all" (p.472)

All these instances reflect upon the unhealthy relationships glittering outwardly but dull and a disintegrated. The entire family pretends to be happy but they are frustrated individuals because they are unaware that happiness is a matter of feeling. This leads to extra marital relations. Hasmukh finds a mistress to satisfy his unsatisfied sexual urges. Kiran, us thus introduced to the readers as a shrewd, hard headed marketing executive. She is like a salt added to his saltless food. Hasmukh justifies her presence in his life:

"Hasmukh. All right, what's wrong with having a bit on the side? Especially since the main course is always without salt" (p.473)

A man marries to have a faithful companion in the form of woman and vice versa. But unfortunately marriage becomes the dominance of one on the other. Dattani tries to present the conflicts and frictions issuing from patriarchy, religious intolerance, gender and sexuality. He tries to convince his readers that we all want to be a part of the mainstream but by being true to ourselves we would not be placed in the centre. So there is a split and we come across a state of forced harmony. The necessity of having extramarital affair germinates from these sources. These factors form the basis of extramarital affair.

“Hasmukh. Why did I marry? To get Ajit. (An expression of distaste appears briefly on his face., then he coughs). Then I should be a very happy man. I’ve got a loving wife who has been faithful to me like any dog would be. She has given me a son, which is what I wanted from her in the first place. I should be happy, right? I’ve got what I want. Why do I have a mistress? Because I am unhappy?”(p.475)

This speech depicts the main conflict of Hasmukh who is trying to find answers to the questions related to happiness. Man may have a good family, social contacts, sound economic status but still may not be happy. Happiness is an inward state acquired by being a conscious observer of one’s own actions. It’s a way towards wilful harmony rather than forced harmony.

Hasmukh and his family are unhappy as they are involved too deeply in the thought process. They are not able to distance themselves. They identify themselves with the thought process while feeling should be given priority because all of us come with a vibrating heart while thought is reared and cultivated by the society. The second act of the play offers this solution to the readers. Death of Hasmukh offers him an opportunity to detach himself from the body and look at his own family from a distance. Death gives him a chance to understand the problems he faced during his lifetime. To understand a problem, we require a certain intelligence which cannot be derived or cultivated through specialization. It comes into being only when we are neutrally aware of the whole process of our conscious, without choosing what is right and what is wrong, which means there is no identification with the problem and therefore there is no judgment. Hence the problem begins to reveal its contents. This is rightly the case of Hasmukh, who is so identified with things, relations and people that he is incapable of remaining neutrally aware. He does not know to look at the problem dispassionately. He is unable to realize his follies and mistakes. But after death when he views his family as a neutrally aware human being he becomes wise. After death he objectively analyses his actions and there repercussions but after death this wisdom is of no use.

Hasmukh’s attachment with his money was the root cause of his problems. He could not bear the sight of lavish spending. This made him to decide a Will, prior to his death in which he mentions the terms and conditions for the regulation of his money. The Will stated that after his death, all his property, finances and shares will naturally go in favour of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust. His family members will get a fixed allowance from the trust, they can stay in the house but the monetary assets cannot be claimed until Ajit turns forty five. But before claiming he has to attend the office every day at nine a.m. till six p.m. No new business projects framed by Ajit could be sanctioned. If they do not go by these terms and conditions, the trust will donate its funds to various charities approved by Hasmukh Mehta.

Ironically, the trustee is kiran Jhaveri, Hasmukh’s mistress. Her identity is revealed earlier but she comes on the stage after the death of Hasmukh. She takes the charge of a family where all the members are frustrated by the verdict of the will. They wish to kick Kiran out of their world but fail to do so as she has been the Trusteeship of the Trust. Hasmukh liked Kiran for her enticing, commanding and head strong attitude. Her introduction in the plays is to dilute the existing order, be it patriarchy or marginalization. Dattani has skilfully depicted the irony that a person finds his own wife and daughter in law unworthy to handle his business empire as women but he finds the other woman

absolutely fit to handle the situation. Kiran thus becomes the image of a woman who can empower with her sharp intellect, balanced emotions and a certain degree of awareness that she possesses.

The three woman in the play represent the plight of women in the society but the collective force of Kiran, Sonal and Preeti is a declaration of the emancipation of women against man's 'will' born out of years of suffering, exploitation and an effort to abolish sexual urges.

They all show their strong reactions to prove that they are not as subjugated as they are conceived to be, and their antagonism against male autonomy is a monkey of patriarchal tradition.

A man who exercised full power and absolute control finds new revelations that he could not realize while he was alive. Sonal states about him as crude and loud like his father. The greatest shock comes to him when he finds Kiran also speaking against him. These adverse statements open his eyes and he becomes restless. He slaps his ears and shuts his eyes tighter and say: "I can still hear and see these women"! (p.10)

His first shock is when Kiran declares that she entered into an affair "mainly for money". (506) She says that Hasmukh was very insensitive to people especially Ajit. Sonal comments that Hasmukh was "like a village buffalo" (507) Kiran goes to the extent of comparing Hasmukh to her drunken father. All these statements provide lessons to Hasmukh. They show him the mirror to identify himself and his individuality. Hasmukh who was living his father's aspirations in his life realizes his follies:

"Hasmukh. Is ittrue? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? If that is true, then where was I? what become of me, the real me? (Realizing) Oh, my God." (p.511)

Kiran appreciates Ajit for his protest and Sonal appreciates Kiran for her attributes. All this is contrary to Hasmukh's expectation. Thus develops a true understanding and realization. The death of Hasmukh serves to project the hidden and suppressed desires of the family. This death device imparts vision to all the characters. The Will and the mistress were tools devised by Hasmukh to control his family even after death but they seem to shatter.

Kiran appears before us as a woman free from conventional, social and moral constrictions possessing a heightened individuality, understanding and awareness. She proves that education, enfranchisement and employment are not the prerogatives of the males. Woman is not just a housewife aspiring the well-being of her family and controlling domestic affairs. A woman can break the norms and taste the bitter fruit of human experience.

She is like a ray of hope to the family of Hasmukh becoming the iconic statement to power and shapes destiny. We see that the power given to a woman changes the entire fabric of the family. Her cool, balanced and far sighted behaviour changes the perplexed, complaining family members to cool and adjusting members. It is the requirement of money that brings Kiran close to Hasmukh and it is the money management that brings Kiran closer to his family. But in both the conditions she is aware of the difference between 'wants' and 'desire'.

"Preeti, I see nothing bad in desiring something that'll naturally be mine in course of time. Kiran . Yes. But to desire it with such passion? Don't you see anything wrong in that?"

Hasmukh's decision of giving Kiran the charge of his family alters everything. All the events happen contrary to his presumptions.'

"Hasmukh. That's the way I see my family now. Their lives have been turned upside down since Kiran entered this house. But you should see her now, my wife! Transformed. From stupid, incapable house wife to clever incapable house wife. Every day is a new lesson for her on husband understanding". (p.496)

He is surprised to find that even Preeti is taken into confidence by Kiran by keeping her secret of exchanging the blood pressure pills to vitamin pills. Kiran is thus a new modern woman who can manage her work, family and even an extra marital affair. She teaches the lesson of 'giving' to all of them.

"Kiran. My mother always used to say giving is more important than taking".

Sonal. I never get because I never gave" (p.507)

The three males in the life of Kiran – her father, husband and Hasmukh have paved way for her empowerment because she has learnt tough lessons from them. The defeat of Hasmukh is the victory of women. All the characters of the play try to shed off their imposed personality due to which they were in a state of forced harmony. This enhancement in the quality of interpersonal relationships is the ultimate motive of Kiran. The cohesiveness of these interpersonal relationships is too much to Hasmukh that he feels as a stranger in his own house.

"Hasmukh. No, I don't think to enter this house. It isn't mine....any more. I will rest permanently on the tamarind tree (Laughter on the table). They are not my family any more.... They look happy together..... Oh, I wish I had been more..... I wish I had lived. (Exits) (515)"

Hasmukh's wish to live again gives meaning to all relationships. The chopping off the tamarind tree and the note of new baby Kicking establishes the claims of identity and selfhood. Thus the play provides opportunity to see the process of women empowerment. But more than this it gives a solution to all of us to detach ourselves so as to create awareness which will keep an individual integrated, happy and satisfied. The play proceeded with a social argument and crept into the psychic recesses of human consciousness to explore universal significance out of individual experience. The play is an echo of our unknown selves in life than our known.

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