

Relationships in Patriarchal Society in Mahesh Dattani's 'Where There is A Will...'

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani (1958 -) made his entry into Indian theatre with his first full length play "Where There Is a Will" in 1986, drawing attention on intricacies of relationships under patriarchal hegemony. Ever since he first penned "Where There Is a Will" in 1986, Dattani has treated each subject with a deep-seated identification rooted in everyday angst. Such charged emotions spare no one- neither players and the director, nor the audience.

A **patriarch** (Etymology, **Greek:** *patria* means father; *arché* means rule, beginning, origin) is a male head of an **extended family** exercising autocratic authority. Patriarchy is the 'rule of the father'. "Patriarchy is a social system in which the role of the male (father) as the chief figure of the power is central to family and where fathers hold authority over women, children and property." The play revolves around a 'self made' industrialist and technocrat, Hasmukh Mehta. He tries to dictate to his son, Ajit, because he would not toe his father's line. Though he makes Ajit the joint managing director of his firm, he does not allow him to regulate any company policy. However he fails to make Ajit do what he wants.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Gender, Hegemony, Predominant

This he succeeds in doing when through his will after his sudden death, he denies Ajit the ownership of his property till the latter becomes forty-five years old and in the intervening twenty one years continues to run the company in the way his father did. However as the play unfolds the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta, who is watching everything with triumph, realizes with dismay folly of his desire. It also depicts the traditional husband and wife relationship through two generations. Dattani also shows the dark humour and irony through the character of Hasmukh's will left in the care of his mistress. Dattani takes up the issues of the patriarchal code in his first play. Indian society has been a very traditional society with strong patriarchal rules. In Where There's a Will, Dattani exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal code, which cannot be followed in the post colonial (modern) times.

According to Allan G. Johnson patriarchal social structures are: 1) Male dominated- which doesn't mean that all men are powerful or all women are powerless- only that the most powerful roles in most sectors of society are held predominantly by men, and the least powerful roles are held predominantly by women.

2) Organized around an obsession with control, with men elevated in the social structure because of their presumed ability to exert control whether rationally or through violence or the threat of violence.

3) Male identified: aspects of society and personal attributes that are highly valued are associated with men, while devalued attributes and social activities are associated with women. There is a sense of threat to the social structure of patriarchies when these gendered associations are destabilized—and the response in patriarchy is to increase the level of control, often by exerting control over women.

4) Male centered: It is taken for granted that the centre of attention is the natural place for men and boys, and that women should occupy the margins. Public attention is focused on men.

1. Patriarchal subjugation

In *Where There's a Will* Dattani attempts the expulsion of the patriarchal code that subjugates women (WTW 451) Hasmukh establishes his patriarchy purely through his wealth sacrificing all familial relationships. His evil designs lead him to have ultimate destructive control over his kith and kin through Kiran, the executrix of his will after death.

Hasmukh Mehta is a self made industrialist who rules his household with an iron hand as an autocratic patriarch. His decision is final in everything and has no regard for his wife Sonal, son Ajit or daughter-in-law Preeti. He has no conjugal relationship with Sonal his wife. Ajit, his son is frustrated being and ignored by his father. Hasmukh's daughter-in-law Preeti is a scheming snaky character seeking only his money. They are a strange household. Ajit is considered a failure by his father. Hasmukh treats his wife like a servant to keep his house in order. He is suspicious of daughter-in-law Preeti's intelligence. She is the only one who can match his lack of concern for any one. Hasmukh heads such a family and keeps everyone under his patriarchal control.

As the play opens Ajit is on the phone talking to a friend about his frustration as his father does not give him Rs. 5 Lakhs to modernize the factory. Being the company's JMD, he has plans to diversify the business to manufacture electronic typewriters. As the telephonic conversation continues, his father Hasmukh keeps commenting on Ajit's irresponsible and crackpot schemes (455). He goes to the extent of cursing the day Ajit was born and wishes him dead.

Dattani focuses also on the female characters who are busy preparing for dinner. The quarrel and commotion send shock waves to Sonal as her blood pressure shoots up. Still she busies herself preparing dishes for her husband and son. She is like a machine churning out the same dishes as usual – salad which Hasmukh never eats. Still she refuses to stop making. Ironically she also makes orange flavoured halva for Ajit which irritates her husband who is a diabetic. Preeti is busy arranging the plates as Hasmukh keeps enquiring if dinner is ready. From the interaction of the characters it is evident that they have no deep familial relationship. The dinner time is only a daily ritual of bonding. Each one is suspicious of the other – the only unifying factor is the wealth of Hasmukh which they long to inherit after his death. The dinner table brings them all together and Hasmukh continues his tirade against Ajit and utters, "You should get a son like yourself. He will finish you off much faster than you've finished me" (463).

As Hasmukh retires to his room he regrets having had Ajit got married at a young age. He reminisces with complacency his patriarchal supremacy inherited from his father. "I am forty-five and look at what I have achieved. This is because I had the good sense to learn from my father" (463). Unlike his wayward brother who roamed about the streets singing

praises of Lord Krishna, Hasmukh was forced to work hard dreaming of becoming a millionaire. Tragedy struck with his early marriage to Sonal and the early birth of Ajit. Despite it all he was able to build a business empire, becoming one of the richest business tycoons. He regrets that his son Ajit on the contrary is on his road to failure at twenty-three. The bitter argument between Hasmukh and Ajit leads the latter to drive off to be with his friends.

Hasmukh continues to reveal his frustration after his son took over the business. He also makes detesting remarks on Sonal his wife with whom he never enjoyed marital bliss. "Twenty-five years of marriage and I don't think she has ever enjoyed sex.... And I haven't enjoyed sex with her" (473). Frustrated in his conjugal life he began his affair with Kiran Jhaveri, his typist and secretary, in whom he found brains that matched his. The scene comically shifts to Sonal conversing with Preeti as she clears the dinner table. Sonal ironically comments on the meaning of 'Hasmukh' which means 'a smiling face'. But her husband never smiled, blaming her and her son for all his problems. She reveals how Hasmukh had lost his mother when he was only four. He married only to fill the vacuum of a woman in his life.

In the second part of the play, the scene shifts to Hasmukh's death. He rises from his bed and observes his corpse. He moves behind the bed and speaks calmly of his death. Applying magic realism, Dattani has very deftly brought in the scene to establish the protagonist's patriarchal hegemony even after death. "I am dead. I can see my own body lying still on the bed. Looking peaceful, but dead" (476). The ghost of Hasmukh makes comments throughout the rest of the play adding much humor to the sequences.

Act I scene ii takes the story a week after his death. Lying on the sofa, Hasmukh makes a weekly roundup of events. He feels good to be dead since it has put an end to his health problems. "No more kidney problems, no backaches, no irregular heartbeats, no heartbeats" (479). But the family was bothered with too many condolence phone calls, rush of visitors and the paraphernalia of the funeral. The gathering was very impressive as family friends kept pouring into the bedroom to pay their last respects to the departed. His wife kept up her appearance of great loss crying at the appropriate moments under instructions from Minal. Hasmukh struck even headlines in the media. He felt good knowing how famous he was after death with obituary in the papers full of photographs inserted by his own different companies. The ironic way the dead man continues to wield his patriarchy is noteworthy. "Now it's all over. My life is over and I have no business hanging around here. I should be flying to heaven on a buffalo. But what about the mess that's down here? What about all my money?... I don't think they deserve all that money. None of them have worked for it, especially not my son... You see, I have made a special will! They are going to hate me for doing this to them!" (479).

In the sequence that follows, the family arrives home from the solicitor's office. They have been summoned by the solicitor as per Hasmukh's will and testament. They are all very upset after having learnt about the will by which he has ruined them all. They begin their bickering and quarrelling over the turn of events, accusing each other for Hasmukh making them suffer. Preeti accuses Ajit for bringing out the disaster on all of them by his not being nice to his father. The trio keep accusing each other for the ugly turn of events.

Preeti sums up the shame faced by the family: “The will has left us all naked. The whole world is saying, ‘Hasmukh Mehta didn’t have faith in his own family. He didn’t get along with his wife. His son is a spendthrift. His daughter-in-law is a scheming little witch. That’s why he left all his wealth in the hands of an outsider’ ” (WTW 493).

Kiran, however, side tracks their accusations of having influenced Has Mukh to become his mistress and clears their misunderstanding about her authority. “I am only the trustee of all his wealth. Not the owner...Everything rightfully belongs to the three of you. Provided you follow his instructions” (493). She asserts that Ajit will be briefed to attend daily to his duties and the two women will be given their regular maintenance allowance. The trust will be automatically dissolved when Ajit’s child would be twenty-one and Ajit would be made the heir to the property. Kiran’s duty is to train Ajit and eventually delegate the responsibilities to him. Meanwhile she would leave her husband and be in the Has Mukh household. When they protest at the deal, Kiran warns them of the consequences that “the holdings of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder” (494). Cursing Has Mukh’s evil machinations, the family relents to the proposal of Kiran.

Act II scene ii opens with a comical sequence where Has Mukh sits on the dining table cross-legged, commenting on the grim family situations. He talks to the audience about his perception of life after death and demonstrates how to lie upside down from a tamarind tree to observe his family:

Have you ever swung on a tamarind tree? Upside down?...You can see the world the way it really is...That’s the way I see my family now. Their lives have been turned upside down since Kiran entered this house...You may ask – what kind of a fool would ask his mistress to live with his family? A fool who knows his family very well. Kiran may have been my mistress, but she has far more brains than my wife! Transformed. From stupid incapable housewife to clever incapable housewife. Every day is a new lesson for her on husband-understanding. The more time she spends with Kiran, the more she learns about me. The more she learns about me, the more she’ll regret having been such a good-for-nothing wife. That will keep her from being a happy widow ever after..... I want Kiran here. To keep a check on my daughter-in-law (496).

His intentions are very clear – to prevent any happiness to any of his family members after death, thereby exercising perfect patriarchal hegemony. Things have turned out to be very difficult for Ajit who feels frustrated after the first day in office under the strict formalities executed by Kiran. Sympathizing with his sorry plight, the mother consoles him saying that he has to patiently endure the ordeal for twenty-one years. The ghost of Has Mukh blames his wife for bringing up Ajit like an irresponsible baby. Meanwhile the briefcase he carelessly keeps on the bed hurts Preeti who lands on it, hurting her tummy.

Has Mukh’s reaction is typical of establishing his patriarchal supremacy. He longs to have sway over everything in his household including his grandchild to be born. Preeti cannot bear any more the ordeal of being haunted by the will of Has Mukh being executed by his mistress. She longs to exorcise the ghost of Has Mukh, but utters her helplessness: “A picture of a perfect family. The widowed mother, the expectant mother, the son who has stepped into his late father’s shoes without a peep, and of course the mistress of the house. The only one left to complete the picture in your father” (500).

Ajit bitterly acknowledges that he was forced to step into his father's shoes, being shoved into it.

Kiran felt disgust for Hasmukh and hated him like her own father, brothers and husband. She felt pity for them as Hasmukh continued to rule over them even after death through his will. He did all that only to continue in his father's foot steps who ruled his family with an iron hand. She was glad that Ajit by revolting against his father, had escaped from the scars and ghosts of the past: "He may not be the greatest rebel on earth, but at least he is free of his father's beliefs. He resists... That is enough to prove that Ajit has won and Hasmukh has lost" (510).

Though Preeti is cornered there is no definite proof for the accusation levelled against her. Kiran can't go to the police either lacking clear evidence. Although Kiran has the power to disinherit Preeti, she didn't want to do it for the sake of Ajit and the child to be born. Instead, she plans of letting Ajit know facts, thus inciting in him hatred for his wife. Since Preeti pleads Kiran not to tell it all to Ajit, she desists and changes the topic of conversation to the surprise birthday party Preeti has planned for Ajit.

As the party progresses, they all decide to be good friends for the rest of the twenty-one years as per the clause in the will. Their hearty cheering drives Hasmukh's ghost out of the house. He runs to stay permanently on the tamarind tree outside, regretting for having made the will, which ultimately drove him out. The conversation shifts to Sonal, expressing the neighbours' concern about the tamarind tree, obstructing their electric wires. Ajit decides to cut it off as soon as his servant returned. Meanwhile Preeti experiences her baby move in her womb, as if suddenly sprung into life. The cutting of the tamarind tree will drive Hasmukh's ghost out of his shelter for ever, ending the patriarchal hegemony. Sonal also decides to break with her past from the shadows of her sister Minal by firmly responding to her over telephone, "...as far as I'm concerned you can jump into a bottomless pit!" (516).

By trying to establish supreme control over his family through his money and will, Hasmukh was only perpetrating the filthy tradition inherited from his father. Somewhere the hegemony had to stop. Ajit revolts against patriarchy and establishes his final victory. At the end, they all join hands being victims of the same male domination and ruthless patriarchy. Dattani has successfully explored like Ibsen some of the problems faced by patriarchal societies that need purging of the ghosts of the past.

3. Multiplicity of relationships

It is very strange that the familial relationships in Hasmukh household is basically one of non-love as patriarchy rules with an iron hand. Hasmukh treats his son as a zero indicative of psychological break-down in his own life having been a victim of patriarchy himself. Therefore he fights the ghosts of patriarchy by perpetrating the same evil, fulfilling the adage 'father like son.' Since Ajit has the guts to challenge his father, he is crushed economically, disregarding any feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness by Hasmukh.

Hasmukh's relationship with his wife is frigid empty love. There is no intimacy in relationship and he goes on with his extra-marital affair with Kiran. Sonal on her part merely fulfils the roles as wife mechanically all the time. She also allows herself to be under the perpetual shadow of her sister Minal.

Hasmuk's love for Kiran is only from infatuation as he needed a mother and mistress in her. On her part Kiran found Hasmukh a growing up child who needed psychological

mothering from her. She hated him finding in him a replica of her father, brothers and husband. But she used him to amass wealth for herself.

Relationship between Ajit and Preeti remains merely at the level of companionate love as she married him only for his money. On his part, Ajit needed a woman merely as a companion in his life-long fight against patriarchy.

As the play ends companionate love relationship is built between Kiran, Ajit, Sonal and Preeti to fight the ghost of Hasmukh.

4. Conclusion

“Where There’s a Will” while examining familial relationships, centres on exorcising patriarchy that continues to wreck bliss in family life. At the bottom of it all, it is psychological depravity that leads Hasmukh to exercise his supreme authority – belittling his son, wife and daughter-in-law. Finding no positive qualities in any of his relations, he searches for fulfilment and psychological bliss in extra-marital relationship. Finally he is crushed by his own machinations. Dattani’s ideas consolidate to expose social evils that continue to fester in our social net-working. Ajit finally has been able to expose his father’s follies by his timely revolt to escape from scars of the past.

Dattani has deftly drawn attention to issues seldom discussed, with humour and irony, calling for social introspection. Though written in the backdrop of a Gujarati family, “Where There’s a Will” is applicable to joint-family system prevalent in several parts of India. The patriarchal control is examined in two parts: in life and in death. In life Hasmukh haunted his family daily with his autocratic control. The bickering in the household escalates with the death of Hasmukh, when the ghost of the dead man, keeps his sway over with the execution of the will. In the final analysis, when all stand united, the sins of the forebears are rooted out when Hasmukh’s ghost is driven out with the cutting of the tamarind tree. Kiran’s assessment of extreme patriarchal control in Hasmukh as a substitute for his inadequacy as a man, finally resolves the conflict among the characters and brings them together to derive benefit from the Hasmukh will.

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