



Patriarchy and Gendered Subalternity in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

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Abstract— This paper explores the representation of patriarchy and gender in *Where There's a Will*, analyzing how Dattani uses character dynamics, narrative structure, and dialogue to criticize traditional gender roles and inheritance practices. It also considers the broader socio-cultural implications of the play, situating it within the context of feminist and postcolonial discourses in Indian English literature. It is a poignant dramatization of patriarchy and gender in an Indian family setting. Through its dark humour and restrained dialogue, the play vividly portrays how patriarchal structures suppress women's voices and autonomy even after death. Hasmukh Mehta, the patriarch, whose power controls every member of his family because of his will, is at the heart of the play. Using the narrative technique, Dattani demonstrates how patriarchy transcends physical presence.



Keywords— Patriarchy, subaltern, feminism, gendered.

One of India's most well-known English-language playwrights, Mahesh Dattani, is renowned for his sharp criticism of cultural customs and social conventions. His dramas are promiscuous due to their concern for the marginalized sections of the society. He is an upholder of the subalterns, especially the gendered subalterns. Anita Myles writes, "All the plays of Mahesh Dattani are rooted in realism focusing attention on subalterns, which are the neglected groups of society who are ostracized, exploited and suppressed."¹ The play *Where There's a Will* (2003) is a powerful critique of the patriarchal structures that still rule Indian homes, particularly when it comes to inheritance and property. The play focuses on the fallout from the death of a family patriarch, whose will serves as the impetus for the disclosure of long-standing conflicts, secrets, and family hierarchies. Dattani challenges the ways in which patriarchal ideologies are upheld through the generations, frequently at the price of women's independence and self-respect in this story.

During the post-colonial times, the subaltern studies group have come up with the interdisciplinary methods to investigate and analyze the consciousness and voice of subaltern social categories such as dalits, religious

minorities, farmers, tribals and women. This group has tried to focus on the isolated study of subaltern people and their structural exploitation. In the book *In Other Worlds* (1987), Gayatri Spivak has explored the gendered subaltern as the subject for history and literature. She tried to liberate the subject of subalternity from the restricted domains of history to include alternative narratives and subalternity of Third World women. Translating the two short stories of Mahasweta Devi -*Draupadi* and *Breast-Giver*, she tried to trace the lives of subaltern women who are marginalized and oppressed by several power hierarchies simultaneously. She pointed out that the condition of women is more miserable as a subaltern because they are governed by multiple factors such as race, class and caste. Women are doubly marginalized and so it is important to locate women as subaltern in the context of subaltern studies. Feminism serves as another possible criterion for locating the subaltern. The woman from this perspective emerges as the gendered subaltern who is subjected to different levels of oppression based on her gender as well as her class and caste. In this way, woman is a gendered subaltern who is doubly marginalized. Mahesh Dattani has tried to find out

the subaltern based on gender in her different plays. Gargi Talapatra writes,

“In the context of Subaltern Studies, feminism serves as another possible criterion of locating the subaltern. The woman, from this perspective, emerges as the ‘gendered subaltern’ who is subjected to different levels of oppression based on her gender as well as her class and caste. Within the larger matrix of her existence, she is constructed as an individual belonging to the ‘Second Sex’, and hence is dominated by patriarchal norms. However, simultaneously, she is also the recipient of oppression based on her caste, class, race and such multiple layers of hierarchies. Moreover, within her own community or class, she is further dominated by the patriarchal order of her immediate society. Therefore, the woman, as the gendered subaltern, is doubly marginalized. She is rendered voiceless by such diverse parameters of subjugation.”²

The phrase "gendered subaltern" describes people, mostly women, who are silenced and socially, politically, and economically marginalized not only because of their gender but also because of their subordinate status in a colonial or postcolonial setting. This idea, which is essential to feminist and post-colonial studies, emphasizes how women experience even more oppression within already disadvantaged groups, making them the most marginalized and silent members of society. The postcolonial writer Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was a significant theorist of the concept, questioning their capacity to be heard in her landmark article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Where There's a Will highlights the systemic injustices that still keep women at the margins by depicting gender roles, property rights, and family dynamics in a nuanced manner. It also presents a vision of resistance and change, implying that it is both necessary and feasible to overthrow patriarchal system. It is a biting satire that dissects the insidious role of patriarchy, revealing its pervasive influence on individual lives, family dynamics, and the very concept of identity. A compelling examination of gender and patriarchy in modern Indian society can be found in this play. Mukesh Ranjan Verma writes, “In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal code. The play presents the story of a successful industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta, who tries to dictate his son's life through his will after his death.”³

The struggle over inheritance and property, which is central to *Where There's a Will*, is a metaphor for the larger patriarchal control over women's lives. The patriarch Hasmukh Mehta's passing away starts a series of events that reveal the brittleness of family ties and the pervasive gender inequality in the family unit. Hasmukh Mehta is the head of his family. He controls his family as long as he lives. Even

after his death, he continues his authority in the form of his will. His will, a meticulously crafted document designed to control his wife, Sonal, and son, Ajit, is the ultimate manifestation of his desire for absolute control. Hasmukh embodies the traditional Indian patriarch: domineering, financially controlling, emotionally distant, and deeply invested in maintaining his legacy and lineage through his male heir. Every family member is irritated by his ‘bossy nature’.(Dattani, 509)His constant surveillance and commentary, audible only to the audience, highlight the internalized nature of patriarchal oppression, where the deceased patriarch's voice continues to dictate the living's choices. Through the spectral presence of Hasmukh Mehta and the evolving dynamics of his family, Dattani exposes how patriarchal norms dictate inheritance, control female agency, and stifle individual freedom. Kiran asserts that Hasmukh was “intoxicated with his power” and “thought he was invincible. That he could rule from his grave by making this will.” (Dattani, 508)

Hasmukh cannot accept his wife as his equal because of his domineering nature. His overruling spirit suppresses Sonal. Sonal is only regarded as a natural aspect of existence. She is not recognized as Hasmukh's mate. Hasmukh constantly criticizes her, her opinions, and the manner she raised Ajit. Hasmukh's marriage to Sonal was not a happy occasion in his life. He thought of it as the most sad period of his life. His marriage served simply to satisfy his lust. Two souls and two lifestyles were not united because he believed he was powerful enough to do anything he wanted. Hasmukh began cheating his wife and gratifying himself outside the house. Only Hasmukh's masculine ego and financial dominance lead him to form an extramarital affair with Kiran Jhaveri. It indicates that he is a completely shameless individual who lacks morality and respect for his marriage to. He is not deserving of our pity because he betrays the trust. Marriage becomes intolerable and difficult when one loses trust in married life. Life simply turns into a series of arguments and fights as the husband and wife accuse and suspect each other. Hasmukh and Sonal's lives are devoid of all harmony and love.

Man's economic independence and freedom can lead to such family dissolution is evident in this drama. Sonal Mehta is portrayed as a traditional, submissive Indian wife who has assimilated patriarchal norms. She is unable to do anything since she is a woman and does not wish to diminish herself. She also lacks independence and financial freedom. Her passivity is a direct result of a long, loveless, and unfulfilling marriage. She is often ignored and belittled by her husband, who complains about her lack of passion and finds her "good for nothing". She is a docile, subservient woman whose place in the household is limited to the kitchen. Sonal's "hearth" is her kitchen, where she

spends the most of her time preparing "parathas" or "halwa with an orange flavour." Since she has nowhere else to express her annoyance and irritation, the kitchen becomes her haven. It is therefore not at all strange that she overindulges in the kitchen when she maintains that a proper meal requires more than just navrathan pulao, malai kofta, baingan barta, patties, and not to mention halwa and salad.

Sonal Mehta was governed not only by her husband, Hasmukh, but also by her sister, Minal who always decided what she should wear and what game she should play. She is devoid of taking decisions of her life. It is most ironical that a woman is governing another woman's life. Mahesh Dattani's portrayal of the tradition-bound woman is unique in that she is simply a passive figure bound by custom. Sonal's metamorphosis stems from Hasmukh's death and the aftermath, which highlights her childhood passivity. Sonal realizes she has been oppressed and dominated not only by her husband, but also by her sister, Minal. Her sister continues to limit her life and she lacks the strength to break away. Sonal has always blindly followed Minal's decisions.

Preeti, the daughter-in-law of Hasmukh, was also oppressed under the dominant control of her father-in-law. She expresses her anger only after the death of Hasmukh, "What did he do? He! He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother. But I didn't let him do that to me. How did I manage? Simple. I gave in, I simply listened to him and did not 'protest' like you!" (Dattani, 501) Preeti adopted another form of protest that was silent and murderous. She planned to change his pills to kill her father-in-law. She had no voice. She did not resist. She became fatal and criminal to get relief.

Very much like the earlier plays of the Dattani, *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Tara* etc, *Where There's a Will* concerns the formidable aspect of the old patriarchal code and resulting impact upon the complicated modern urban life. Kiran Jhaveri, Hasmukh's mistress and the executor of his will, is an intelligent, astute, and pragmatic marketing executive who, in Hasmukh's view, is the only person competent enough to manage his estate. Hasmukh entrusts her with the power to control his family after his death. Kiran initially seems to be a willing participant in Hasmukh's posthumous control, but she ultimately becomes a catalyst for the family's liberation. She bonds with Sonal and helps the family members realize their own worth and break free from Hasmukh's long-held tyranny. Kiran herself had a difficult past. Having been a victim of domestic violence, she took on the role of Hasmukh's mistress partly for financial security.

It is ironical that apart from the female characters like Sonal, Preeti and Kiran, a male character is also groaning under the burden of patriarchy. Ajit is another victim of patriarchal power of his father. We feel the burden of control in the dialogues of Ajit. Hasmukh Mehta had been an obedient son of his father and he expected the same on the part of his son. The absence of obedience in his son causes depression in him. His behaviour towards his son becomes rude. As a conventional father, he knows what is best for his son. The first half of the play presents the father's point of view. He regards Ajit as an incapable and irresponsible young man of twenty three. Ajit, on his part, considers his father to be a head strong person who is just not ready to consider any others' opinion except his own. Ajit tries to defy his father in the conversation. In a patriarchal system, the father acts more or less in despotic manner. In his eyes, the son never grows up; he thinks that his experiences are better than his son's. This is what happens in the play also. Hasmukh is unhappy with his son Ajit because he is not following the footsteps of his father. The father wants a typical submissive, hard working, obedient son; he does not accept an imaginative, individualistic and independent son. On the other hand, the son is not ready to be a prototype of his father. Ajit wants to be independent in the business, but his father refuses to invest in his new business ventures, thought upon by him. The patriarchy is so much dominant that it does not allow others to prosper and take new steps. In one of his dialogues, Ajit confesses that since his childhood, he had been governed and dominated by his father for doing things; he was not allowed to do according to his own will. And even after his death, his father is governing his life. Kiran Jhaveri explains the reason behind the domineering nature of his father and reveals the truth. This is the condition of the post-colonial Indian society where the patriarchal code has become rigorous to an extent of destroying the family structure and healthy family atmosphere. Hasmukh as a patriarch considers himself to be the most experienced and eligible member. He does not allow space to others, whether they are women or male members of the family. His authoritative, dominant role make the life of other members unbearable and suffocating. That's why, all of them want to break free of this patriarchal code. According to Mahesh Dattani, the real danger of patriarchal code is for the proper growth of individuals. As Mukesh Ranjan Verma writes,

"For Dattani, the real danger of the patriarchal code lies in denying an individual the opportunity for an independent growth. In the name of tradition and good manners and even duty, the son is expected to follow blindly, whatever, he is asked to do. This will deprive a man of his drive and initiative. Dattani calls the men who demand this kind of

obedience as “weak men with false strength”. He also condemns those who submit to this type of subjugation.”⁴

The will in the play functions not merely as a legal document but as a symbol of patriarchal control that extends beyond death. Hasmukh, though deceased, continues to exert influence over his family through the terms of his will, which reflects his biases and reinforces gender hierarchies. Mahesh Dattani's projection of Hasmukh's ghost wandering through the house and commenting upon the characters' dialogues and actions symbolically projects the lingering of the patriarchal code even after the death of the patriarch. This posthumous control underscores the enduring nature of patriarchal authority, which transcends individual lifespans and is institutionalized through cultural and legal systems. Dattani also critiques the performative nature of the will-reading, which resembles a ritual or ceremony. This ritualization reinforces the legitimacy of patriarchal decisions, even when they are unjust, and highlights the ways in which tradition is used to justify inequality. The play not only unravels the clash of two generations, but it also points out to the disastrous impact upon the coming generation whose future prospects are under threat.

In the nutshell, *Where There's a Will* is a powerful play of Mahesh Dattani which successfully projects the gendered subalternity of Sonal, Preeti and Kiran who are victimized by the power structure of the society where male agents exert their will upon women and women are helpless, silent and submissive. It unfolds the everlasting impact of patriarchy upon our society and the miserable plight of women. All the characters are victimized by patriarchy whether male or female. Each character reacts to patriarchal power of Hasmukh Mehta in his own way. Ajit chooses the way of protest through his verbal attacks, while Sonal chooses to remain silent and be subservient to her master. Preeti does not surrender herself to the dominating father-in-law and plans to murder him in order to get rid of his power. In the beginning of the play, the women are depicted as passive subalterns who cannot speak, whereas in the later part of the play, they become vocal and independent. In the company of Kiran, Sonal realizes her mistake that she should have learnt to be independent and self confident. She also realizes the shadow of her sister, Minal, who did not allow her to think and act independently. As long as the patriarchy will govern the lives of women, the women will remain handicapped, indecisive and puppets in the hand of male agents of the family. To redeem the situation, it is desirable to allot freedom in decision making so that they can become active agent in the development of nation.

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