

The Plight of Women in Mahesh Dattani's Play *Where There's a Will*

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Abstract - The current scenario of Indian English Theatre has completely changed thanks to the innovative ideas, artistic insight and futuristic vision of the playwrights like Mahesh Dattani. He beautifully blends the traditional urban Indian issues with post-modernist ones. *Where There's a Will* is a tragicomedy manifesting some characteristic traits of Dattani. The play has a Gujarati setting, which is a trademark of Dattani. The playwright shows a woman as a subaltern in her own home.

Dattani is an expert in finding reality by presenting us glances of the past. His mining of the past shows us the truth hiding at the unfathomable pit of the past. He does not want to mine the past for myth as Girish Karnad does. Dattani has a view that realization of errors done in history helps us to be better in the present. This touch of history makes his plays lively and audience never feel bored.

Humanity has progressed in every sphere and education has touched the new horizon, but conditions of women have not changed for centuries. It is said that by giving education and job, we can change the current situation of women. But Dattani shows us that only imparting knowledge and providing employment is not enough to improve women's conditions in Indian society.

Keywords: Innovative, futuristic, post-modernist, subaltern, unfathomable.

Introduction - The play is set in Hasmukh Mehta's big house. Mr Mehta is a Gujarati business tycoon and an adamant patriarch. Mehta family consists of four members, and the head of the Mehta family is Mr Hasmukh Mehta. He is shown as a tyrannical elder who insists on absolute submission from his clan. Hasmukh Mehta's wife, Sonal Mehta, is quite submissive and subordinate. She is a perfect Indian wife who loves to make food. Hasmukh's comment on the behaviour of women shows his patriarchal thinking. He says, God made women empty-headed, and they are greedy for money.

Where There's a Will starts with a talk between Ajit and his father, Hasmukh Mehta. Ajit is speaking with someone on the phone, and from the main door, Hasmukh Mehta enters:

"Ajit: (on the phone) Five lakhs. That's all. Give me five lakhs, and I'll modernise the whole bloody plant. That's what I tell my dad. I mean, come on five lakhs is nothing.

Hasmukh: (to the audience) My son, the businessman. Just listen to him." (*Collected Plays*: 455)

Hasmukh had bitter and impoverished childhood. His richness is from his hard-working. Hasmukh criticises Ajit's ways. He declares firmly:

"One of the richest men in this city. All by my efforts. Forty-five years old and I am a success in capital letters.

Twenty-three years old and he is on the road to failure, in bold capital letters." (CP:464)

At the age of twenty-three Ajit's position is that of 'Joint Managing Director' in Hasmukh's factory. But Ajit is not happy with Hasmukh's restrictions, and he desires to become free. Dattani presents the Mehta family's issues in a very realistic manner. Hasmukh is a father who never trusts upon his son. He shouts over him, rebukes him. Hasmukh thinks that Ajit wastes money, and this wastage of money will lead him to insolvency. Hasmukh makes a harangue announcing that 'God has just forgotten to open an account for Ajit'. So, his son gives no respect to him. Hasmukh tells his audience that not only his son, but his wife is also a cause of his hypertension. The direct addresses by Hasmukh Mehta, both when alive and dead, owe their effectiveness to the employment of the beautiful craft of theatre. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri says:

"This is because a play lives in its performance and performance can derive its life only in complicity with an audience that shares the entire exercise. The play's an almost rollicking comedy." (Chaudhuri: 57)

Movements of Ajit are controlled by Hasmukh Mehta very tyrannically. In his opinion, Ajit is not managing director of the company or heir of his property, but he is a slave. Being quite humble, Ajit has no status both at home and

office. Ajit is just like a rubber stamp to implement Hasmukh's orders and commands. Ajit's wife, Preeti, is an antithesis to him. She is a teenaged, attractive, and beautiful woman. She is a calculative and confident woman. This fact is quite clear to Hasmukh. Thus, Hasmukh tells us:

"That's my daughter-in-law, Preeti, pretty charming, graceful and sly as a snake." (CP: 456)

Dattani shows how as a patriarch Hasmukh not only controls the life of his family's women, Sonal and Preeti, but male members are also under his strict control. Dattani shows us a psychological fact that independence is the first cry of a young Indian person, but this comfortable life is not allowed by his parents. Ajit utters:

"And what becomes of me? The real me. I mean if I am you, then where am I?" (CP: 461)

Hasmukh's answer to this question is noteworthy that Ajit is nothing but a big zero. The question asked by Ajit is one of self-identity. The young people want to live free from the control of their parents. They have a mindset and thinking which is different from their parents. The generation gap is the main reason why youths do not welcome interference of parents. This play of Dattani is about this self-identity.

Hasmukh says that his son and his calculating daughter-in-law are giving him high annoyance:

"At the rate I'm puffing, I should be dead in four minutes." (CP: 476)

And true enough he dies in less! In trying to fill the 'empty spaces' in his son's head with some sense, the exasperated Hasmukh cries,

"Son, how do I start explaining to you (To the audience) yes, how? You tell me. Well, I'll try."

He waits for his wife to discover his death as he watches with delight. While Sonal thinks, "Of course, he's asleep. He just has to lie down on the bed; he is dead to the world." (CP: 476).

The news of the death of city's business tycoon Hasmukh Mehta was the focus of attention in the newspapers. 'Garment tycoon dead' was the caption of the news:

Hasmukh: "Garment tycoon dead! That felt good. You never really know how famous you are until you are dead. Of course, it's at the bottom of page seven, and it's only six lines. But look at the obituary page. Filled with my photographs. All inserted by different companies.!" (CP: 479)

Hasmukh feels quite relaxed after becoming a ghost. Modern life has become so much hectic, and everyone is suffering from one or the other disease. Hasmukh says after his death:

"It feels good to be dead. No more kidney problems, no backaches, no irregular heartbeat, no heartbeats. Of course, it isn't always so peaceful here All those people, my friends were down here in the living room. Quite a gathering! They kept going up, batch by batch to my bedroom to pay their last respects to me." (CP: 479)

This statement presents the selfishness of modern urban people. They believe in formality. After the death of Hasmukh, the behaviour of Preeti changes very surprisingly. She never gives respect to her mother-in-law, Sonal. Dattani shows the cunning nature of Preeti. It reflects the trait of modern urban women.

By writing the 'Will' Hasmukh dismisses all legal rights of the whole Mehta family over his property and donates his entire belongings to 'Hasmukh Mehta charitable trust'. The members of the Mehta family will receive only a regular allowance from the trust, and it will nullify when Ajit Mehta turns forty-five. After that, Ajit will become the sole heir with full right to use and utilise property and money as per his wish.

There were some other instructions also in the 'Will'. For instance, Ajit's office timings will be morning nine to six P.M. Sanctioning of new projects proposed by Ajit will be banned. If Mehta family will not follow these terms and conditions, the trust will donate its funds to certain charities mentioned by Mr. Mehta.

Mehta family was double surprised by Hasmukh, his making of 'Will' and appointing Kiran Jhaveri sole executor of 'Hasmukh Mehta charitable trust'. Kiran was an astute and practical marketing executive who later became his mistress. Hasmukh gave her a company flat in the high-class locality. Kiran, who becomes caretaker of the Mehta family, shows the high class of urban mentality. She believes in the money-making policy. Hasmukh was very cautious about the validity of his 'Will' and to avoid any challenge he took precautionary steps in advance. His first witness of 'Will' was a trained doctor and Hasmukh attached his sane mind certificate given by their family physician, Dr Jhunjhunwalla. By these steps, Hasmukh made sure that no one could challenge his 'Will'.

As per the 'Will' Kiran Jhaveri has to stay with Mehta family in their house. Kiran realised that the Mehta family was very disappointed with her coming. They do not want to believe that Hasmukh tried to control them, as Kiran has become his representative. Preeti opposed Kiran's living with them, but the dominant urban lady declared:

"I never intended saying it outright, but now I have to make it clear to you. As the trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust, namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holdings of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder. Which will mean that you won't ever get to see even a single rupee earned by your father-in-law? Now, will you refuse to let me stay here?" (CP: 494)

Dattani closely observes working women's condition. Kiran Jhaveri is thirty to forty years looking young blonde. Nowadays, a woman is no less than a man in any case. Even business tycoon like Hasmukh Mehta depends on Kiran, the modern working lady. Kiran is the central figure of modernity and very much precise about herself. Kiran

communicates to Sonal about her intentions that Hasmukh trusted her, but her real interest was in Hasmukh's money. "Kiran: Mrs Mehta, no woman has an affair with an older man, especially a married man, for a little bit of respect and trust. It was mainly for the money." (CP: 506)

Dattani beautifully presents Kiran as a liberal and educated working-class urban lady. But she is also dominated by males in this male-centred society. Sonal is very much impressed by her. Because she is never free from the shadow of her sister Minal. She always did whatever Minal said. Sonal was also impressed with Kiran's straightforward statements:

"Sonal: I'm talking about my daughter-in-law. Preeti was never like this before. She was nice and caring when he was alive. Now, after the Will, she has become unbearable. She frightens me, and sometimes I think she is capable of doing anything for money. You yourself once said that there is something wrong in desiring money with such.....passion."

"Kiran: Don't think of her as lower or me as higher. It's just a question of circumstances. I got my money one way. She is trying to get hers by another." (CP: 506)

The play also presents the importance of education and freedom for women. Kiran has her mentality. She is all because of circumstances:

"Kiran: I learned my lessons from being so close to life. I learned my lessons from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home every day with bottles of rum wrapped in newspapers." (CP: 508)

Kiran describes her pathetic life through her past. Her brothers and father were very dominant, and they ruled over their wives. She also married a drunkard, and his drunkenness was the main reason for his suspension from the job. Whiskey was out of budget. It was the real reason that Kiran frequently met and visited Hasmukh without any objection from her husband. Some burning questions are asked by Kiran as to where will all this end? It is not the question of Kiran alone, but the entire womenfolk are affected by this male-dominated society. Dattani portrays Sonal with some contempt in contrast. We can see Hasmukh as unfortunate prey of woman's intrigue. Dattani says about this,

"It's to do with my perceptions. I don't mean to say that this is a definitive view of life. But several of the images that we carry around in our minds are politically generated images, and we accept them to be as true. However, I don't think so, and my characters are simply a personification of my perceptions." (Nair: The Invisible Observer)

In the play, Mahesh Dattani has presented that desire for money turns Preeti into a killer, who kills her father-in-law just for money. But what does she get? Nothing. At the end of the play she becomes calm and tries to be kind to other family members. It shows her sensible thinking which makes her thoughts positive. Dattani shows Preeti as a treacherous and self-centred woman but her behaviour changes after reading the 'Will'. She thinks to challenge

the 'Will' but can't find any lacuna. The 'Will' was completely safeguarded and the confused Mehta family can't find any way out.

Where There's a Will shows a modern urban lady armoured with intelligence and education. She is expert in intrigues and achieves all her dreams by hook or crook. This lady never minds crossing limits set by the society. Modern urban lady discards the ancient concept of the male lead. The society now accepts her decisions. Urban women live frankly due to the inspiration of urban sensibility. Kiran is the dominant figure in the play. She is a beautiful, energetic, and intelligent woman, who lives her life on her conditions. It is the time for women's liberation, and we are going to live in an age where men will follow women. Kiran says that she should hate Hasmukh like she has hated her father and brothers, but she feels pity for him. In her opinion, both the concept of 'Will' and Hasmukh's wish to control his family are pitiful. Kiran says:

"Hasmukh was intoxicated with his power. He thought he was invincible. That he could rule from his grave by making this will." (CP: 508)

In Hasmukh's view, no member of the Mehta family is trustworthy. Their intentions and conducts always give birth to suspicion in his mind. Hasmukh confined trust in Kiran Jhaveri only. Hasmukh's sensual desires and other needs were also looked after by Kiran. Hasmukh says:

"I mean, a man in my position to be careful. I needed a safer relationship. Something between a wife and a pick-up. Yes, A mistress! It didn't take me very long to find her. She was right there in my office. An unmarried lady. Not an ordinary typist or even a secretary. A shrewd hard-headed marketing executive. If there was anyone in my office who had brains to match mine, it was her. She is now one of the directors of the company. Not entirely due to her shrewd head. She lives now in a company flat in a posh locality. I won't tell you where. Well, it's walking distance from here. Convenient for me. All right, what's wrong with having a bit on the side?" (CP: 473)

Hasmukh praises Kiran for her mind and body. Hasmukh maintains secrecy so effectively that his affair with Kiran remains secret in his lifetime. Even after his death, this mysterious love story comes to light as per his wish. Only Kiran has won Hasmukh's confidence and praise. In Hasmukh's opinion, his wife Sonal is a dry and worthless lady. She is even called 'mud' by him. In Hasmukh's point of view, Ajit is an incompetent person for running the business. The fundamental techniques of business are not known to him. In his opinion, Kiran Jhaveri is the only capable lady with smartness and proper temperament to be a leader in the industry. She is an impressive, calculative, bold and diplomatic lady. Hasmukh has a desire to control everybody after his death. But his passion starts to crumble slowly. Hasmukh appoints Kiran for this purpose only. But now Kiran tells us that:

"He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision-maker. But I was. He wanted me to run

his life as his father had. (Pause) Hasmukh didn't really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him! (Laughs Hasmukh cringes at her laughter.) Men never really grow up!" (CP: 510)

Hasmukh's efforts to exercise control over Mehta family by writing a 'Will' only add pity in Kiran's heart. Hasmukh's desire to control over the family is basically because his father also ruled over his family. Hasmukh was a papa's boy in his life, and he wants Ajit also to be like that. Dattani shows the disharmony and conflict in the relationship of Hasmukh and Ajit. Hasmukh and Ajit are continuously fighting with each other. Disharmony deeply prevails in Mehta family and Dattani shows us a fake and enforced concord in the members of the Mehta family.

All characters of the family are a mixture of tragedy and comedy, but the most tragic character is surely Sonal. Dattani presents Sonal as a low-esteemed woman who is entirely dependent on others. Other members of the Mehta family are predominant in her life. Minal is the sister of Sonal and deciding hand of every affair of her life. Sonal gives a comic relief in the play. Sonal's character shows us the psychological insight of family, where everyone blames others for his or her failure. In the same fashion, Sonal blames other characters for her tragic life. After the death of Hasmukh, Sonal finds her life more pathetic, and the entry of Kiran in the home makes the matter worse. But Kiran and Sonal become good friends. Kiran teaches new lessons to Sonal about life and her husband, Hasmukh. It is quite eye-opening as Sonal says,

"How little I knew him. If I had understood him when he was alive, I would have died laughing." (CP: 510)

Sonal comes into her own aura, moving beyond the influence of her sister under whose shadow she has lived. She tells Kiran,

"You have made many things clear to me. I am glad; you are living with us. I hope you'll stay with us forever." (CP: 511)

Her stay with Kiran changes Sonal's thought and attitude about life. Sonal who was previously dependent for every affair on Minal now becomes confident, and refuses to take any help from Minal by the end of the play.

"Kiran: (to Sonal) your sister just said some of the rudest things to me. Sonal: Oh, did she? Give me the phone. (On the phone) Hello? Yes, Minal, this is Sonal! don't another Maharaj, not from you at least! I just don't that's all well, as far as I'm concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit! (Slams the phone down and turns towards Kiran)" (CP: 516)

Fortune secures education and job for Kiran in Hasmukh Mehta's office and by hard work she ensures the post of director. Fortune does not favour Sonal with school education, so in her view, Kiran is lucky. Sonal says:

"Sonal: you are so lucky. You are educated, so you know all this." (CP:507)

Dattani does not clear what is the leading cause of the suffering of women. Is this due to their fault or due to

lack of job and education? The leading hand behind the present condition of women is masculine arrogance or male narrow-mindedness. It is detected:

"Interweaving his narrative around the scheming and plotting of the family members who have been put in a fix by a dead man's Will. Dattani explores the dichotomy between the male/female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman takes over." (Chaudhuri: 57)

Undoubtedly Dattani emerges as a true representative of the side-lined persons. He is deeply concerned about the condition of females, and his plays show this concern. In the play *Where There's a Will* Dattani portrays two types of women. The first type of women are those who suffer silently throughout their life. Example of this type of woman is Sonal Mehta. She silently suffers from male patriarchy. The second type of women are those whose fate is to endure throughout life, but they resist their exploitation. Examples of this type of women are Kiran Jhaveri and Preeti Mehta. They are courageous, self-confident and rebellious. They resist their exploitation. Kiran Jhaveri and Preeti Mehta are smart, money-minded, crafty Machiavellian type of ladies. They do not accept other's point of view quickly.

Dattani's plays turn between the core and the periphery. In the beginning of *Where There's a Will* Kiran lives at the margin. This situation changes dramatically after the 'Will' of Hasmukh Mehta by which Kiran comes to the core of the play. Sidelined Kiran becomes the core symbol of rule and command.

The role of women and their miserable condition is the main issue dealt with in this play by Dattani. For generations, women have been used as sex toys and subjugated physically and mentally. We have not yet given due respect to the female gender. The main reason behind the worry of Dattani is that this subjugation continues from one generation to other. This dialogue of Kiran shows clearly the pain of Dattani.

"Kiran: Isn't it strange how respective life is? My brothers. They have turned out to be like their father, going home with bottles of rum wrapped up in newspapers, beating up their wives. And I- I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard, and I listened to his swearing. And I too have learned to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (CP: 508)

Peripheral people have their repressed feelings, and Dattani provides fronts to them to say about their feelings. Marginalized characters make contact directly with the inner self of the audience and by this audience think about their thoughts and ideas.

At the end of the play, Sonal asserts her complete faith in Kiran. This faith is a symbol of reciprocated understanding and confidence between Sonal and Kiran.

"Dattani exploits the death of Hasmukh as a dramatic device – the soul of Hasmukh surveying and commenting on the ongoing affairs, the ensuing responses - all these

definitely have comic overtones, but simultaneously these are also imbued with philosophical import.” (Jha: 130)

In his life, Hasmukh had higher blood pressure, Kidney and heart problems etc. Hasmukh’s ghost funnily tells this:

“There’s nobody home. Ah! (Rises and stretches) It feels good to be dead. No more kidney problems, no backaches, no irregular heartbeats.” (CP: 479)

Gender discrimination, patriarchy, the relationship between father-son and husband-wife and capitalism are some issues that are raised by Dattani in this play. According to Hasmukh, Sonal is responsible for his affairs with Kiran. Hasmukh says:

“Enjoyed sex. Twenty-five years of marriage and I haven’t enjoyed sex with her. So, what does a man do? I started eating out. Well, I had the money. I could afford to eat in fancy places. And what about my sex life? Well, I could afford that too. Those expensive ladies of the night in the five-star hotels! (Smile at some pleasant memories.) Some of them were really……! But that did not go on for long. I mean, a man in my position has to be careful.” (CP: 473)

We cannot find admiration and love in the eyes of Hasmukh Mehta for Sonal. He thinks her good for nothing. Sonal is a typical Indian pure and submissive ‘Sati Savitri’ type wife, but she can’t fulfil the expectations of Hasmukh. Hasmukh’s comment is disgusting one:

“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.” (CP: 475)

Hasmukh’s marital problems are rooted in his lusty sexual nature. It is quite clear from his comment. Sonal is a dedicated wife, but Hasmukh is a corrupt and mean person. At the end of the play, both Sonal and Kiran jointly try to eliminate the malicious sexual colonialism. God gifts them with the capacity to evaluate and afterwards throw off the unfair fetters of patriarchy. In the opinion of Hasmukh Mehta, only the rule of patriarchy can maintain bliss and contentment of the Mehta family. It is an irony of fate that excessive physical control kills the happiness of heart and excessive control on soul kills uniqueness and personality of the controlled person. Philosophers think ultimate control as the most substantial obstacle in construction of the building of contentment and pleasure. Beena Agarwal says: “The garb of authority maintained by Hasmukh was Method to save his inner self from clashes of the outside world.” (Agarwal: 110)

The playwright presents this play with a logical twist and a happy ending. He shows the horrible reality of metropolitan cities as to how worse can be the relationship between the family members. Every member of the family like father, son, husband, and wife is on a constant fight and chasing money like a mad dog. Hasmukh is the protagonist of the play, and he gives live commentary of his deeds. Hasmukh tries to control the lives of the Mehta family, but later he knows the drawback of his ‘Will’. In his

‘Will’ he makes trust and his concubine Kiran as the trustee. But Kiran is brilliant, and according to situations, she uses her allotted powers to improve relations with other family members. Mehta family and Kiran dismiss Hasmukh because he is just a shadow of his late father, as a person to forgive, as a person without his aspirations and yearning, ideas. In the end Mehta family finally discards supremacy of the ‘Will’, the normality of their life retains, and the frustrated ghost of Hasmukh hangs himself from a tree.

Thus, we can say that the play is very brilliantly deep-rooted in the Gujarati middle-class family atmosphere. Dattani presents Indian society as macrocosm and family as the microcosm. Critics consider this play as a dark comedy packed with sense of humour which sticks the audience to their seats till the end. Dattani sets this play in an orthodox joint Gujarati middle-class family. The base of the show is a ‘Will’ made by an elder of Mehta family who tries to dictate family members after his life. But his family turns the table against him by forming a close, cordial relationship between his wife and his mistress. Dattani presents the comic element in the form of the ghost of Hasmukh whose superior observations and commentaries add mind-blowing humour in the drama. His commentaries after observation throw light on his relationship with his deceased father, spouse, son, daughter-in-law, and mistress. Dattani portrays modern materialistic society who chases money like a mad dog. This money-minded mentality affects the interpersonal relationship in the family. The play raises so many social issues which are always a part of Dattani’s plays.

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