

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# *The Criterion*

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

April 2014 Vol. 5, Issue- 2

5<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Patriarchal Pathology: The Case of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

**Mehvish Syed**

Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Kashmir.

### Abstract:

In this paper, I have tried to compare and contrast Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* (1979) and Mahesh Dattani's *Where There is a Will* (1988). The plays (*Buried Child* and *Where There is a Will*) are based on the concept of failed Patriarchy. Sam Shepard in *Buried Child* provides a criticism of patriarchal ideals where men often end up resorting to violence in their desire to enforce the codes of patriarchal ideology having realized their masculine and patriarchal failures. Dattani too exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal code which marginalizes not only the women folk of the family but also other male members of the family. How the time and ambiance changes the family bonding and interpersonal relationships has also been showcased. Both the dramatists expose the evils of society but in their individual style. The paper throws light on the tools and techniques used by the dramatists which make their plays unique and successful. One is an apostle of experimental dramaturgy, other the revolutionary dramatist who tends to prioritize the invisible issues in post modern Indian society. Sam Shepard draws his characters from all strata of society while Dattani's characters are epitome of urban society. Sam Shepard and Dattani belong to different country, cultures and time span but are the votaries of art for life's sake, yet both dramatists tend to peep into the past for bringing out the reality lying in the darkness. Both work their narratives around the intrigues and maneuverings of a dysfunctional family. Family unit for Sam Shepard and Mahesh Dattani is a microcosm of the larger American and Indian lives.

**Keywords:** Sam Shepard, Mahesh Dattani, patriarchy, identity, power, dominance, individualism, gender.

Sam Shepard and Mahesh Dattani belong to different countries and time span. They come from different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Sam Shepard belongs to the cream of the crop of 20th century American dramatists. He was involved with New York's Off-Off Broadway Theater - the new experimental theaters that sprung up in church halls, lofts, basements and cafes after the Off-Broadway theater had become expensive. He was closely allied with Theater Genesis-an Off-Off Broadway venue based at St. Mark's in the Bowery, an Episcopalian church in the East Village at 2nd Avenue and 10th Street. Mahesh Dattani is a well known cotemporary Indian-English playwright, the first Indian playwright writing in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Sam Shepard explores the complicated relationships within American families. In order to ensure the myth of the American Dream, however unattainable, family life is seen by playwrights like Sam Shepard to pay the price. The family is breaking up from within by their adherence to public values. Although his plays explore deeply the American psyche and investigate the cultural heritage of their nation, yet they have a mainstream plea to people all over the world.

Mahesh Dattani writes on the burning issues that beset the post-independence Indian society, whether it is communal discord, politics and crime, growing homosexuality or the

gender bias. He uses stage to condemn many of the drawbacks prevailing in society. His plays depict marginalized groups of society, people who are considered misfits in a society where stereotyped attitudes and notions reign supreme. His plays have varied content and varied appeal.

The works of Sam Shepard and Mahesh Dattani thus represent different literary traditions. In spite of differences, both in themes and style, there is a profound connection between the two writers, a connection that pertains to a shared world view and the place that **'failed patriarchy'** occupies in each author's oeuvre. However, the two authors approach the subject from different angles. According to Carla McDonough "Shepard is fascinated by the patriarchal inheritance of American frontier mythology". Shepard's male characters are still not willing to abandon the masculine myth of the frontier-the myth of rugged individualism and western hero. His characters inherit such traits from their fathers, thus reflecting the extent to which these ideas are imbedded not only in the American self-image, but especially in American ideas of masculinity. Shepard's male protagonists are creatures of the West-of open spaces, plains and deserts and their concomitant images of freedom, isolation and independence. However, Shepard's men are hardly positive images of complete hood and individualized self hood. Their mythologies of gender do not lead them into security or even into real power. Sam Shepard provides acute critiques of the destructiveness of patriarchy for both men and women. The men of Shepard's plays often end up resorting to violence in their desire to enforce the codes of patriarchal ideology. Because violence is directed towards women in Shepard's plays by men attempting to shore up their sense of self, Shepard's plays tend to expose his male characters' weaknesses more than to empower them through this violence. The male identity that insists on this narrow definition of women as being necessary for its own self-image is thus certain to be in continued peril. While feminist theory has long talked about how women are silenced by male oppression and power, Shepard's plays demonstrate that men are often destroyed by this oppression as well.

Working within his own time and place, and not an alien and distant westernized world, Mahesh Dattani chronicles the follies and prejudices of Indian society. His plays are embedded within the mechanisms of the middle class Indian families. Besides dealing with various other concerns in Indian society, Mahesh Dattani takes up the issue of Indian patriarchy and aims at exorcising the patriarchal code, and subverting all existing stereotypes. Indian society has been a very traditional society with strong patriarchal values. Here fathers have desired to have sons because they are supposed to carry forward the name of the family. In the past, this has led to a situation where a father demanded unquestioning obedience from his sons because he firmly believed that he alone knew what was best for him. This denied the son any opportunity for independent growth. Similarly, an Indian woman was generally looked upon as a commodity. Her only function was to attend to the wishes of her husband. She was dependent on man for financial and physical security. Man always looked upon woman as a liability and a source of requirement. With changing times, this has begun to change.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Indian economy was predominantly agrarian, which fostered the patriarchal code. Codes of Social and family life were fixed. Business was carried forward as a family enterprise from one generation to another. Life was organized around families rather than individuals as it is in villages or in towns. With changing economic scene, all this began to change. With the spread of education and employment opportunities in industry, commerce and service sectors, the youngsters from villages have been drawn to cities and towns. This has led to breakdown of joint families and growth of nuclear families, resulting in individualism. The young man has learnt to look after himself and has developed an independent thinking where the guidance of the father or elders has but a limited role. This has affected the patriarchal code. Dattani's play thus shows the craving of the older

generation to preserve its authority over the young and the proposition of the young to break free of the patriarchal code. Mahesh Dattani exposes the hollowness of the patriarchal code.

The term "patriarchy" indicates the social authority-or-rule-of men, both within the family realm and the public sphere. Within the patriarchal system of the United States, Dodge in *Buried Child* (1979) is expected to be a leader, both within and outside the family sphere. He is expected to be successful in professional terms; to be a breadwinner and a guiding head of his household, exerting authority over wife and children. However, Dodge represents the exact opposite of the traditional 20th century patriarch. "I am an invisible man!"(68).He is described as a "very thin and sickly looking". According to Dodge,"he is dependent on the whims of others" (96) and can't be left alone for a minute!"(79).He asserts that his family was once "well-established" and the farm was prosperous, "producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over".Then 'outa' the middle a 'nowhere', his wife Halie gives birth to a baby boy, revealed to be a result of incest between mother and son. The child marks a major shift in Dodge's sense of manhood by challenging his position of authority within the family.' It made everything we'd accomplish look like it was nothing". Dodge resolves to kill the baby who threatens his patriarchal power.

Unlike Dodge, Mahesh Dattani in his play "*Where There's a Will*(1988)" initially makes his protagonist Hasmukh Mehta enjoy the position of the ablest and the perfect boss at the business house, exercising patriarchal authority over all the members of his family. However, unlike the unredeemed, liminal Dodge who dies at the end of the play, Dattani introduces the ghost of Hasmukh Mehta to make him a watcher of his own actions after his death. Gradually, Hasmukh realizes that his desire to control is collapsing slowly. The two dramatists reveal the fractured interpersonal relationships within the range of familial relationship. In both of the plays, there is a lack of emotional attachment and understanding towards other's views and opinions. Both Dodge and Hasmukh's relationships are plagued with grievances and unrest at home. If Shepard family's suppression of the secret of the buried child has a deleterious impact on all interpersonal interactions in the play,Dattani's family is forced into harmony with both men and women being the victims of man's vain pride and false ego.

Dodge is trapped by the established ideas of masculinity laid out for him already at birth. However, Dodge realizes that he is utterly disempowered as he recognizes his inability to control the actions of his oldest son, Tilden, and even the sexuality of his own wife, Halie. He attempts to compensate for his lack of power by bossing his wife and sons around. None of them, however show any sign of obeying the defeated Dodge. Thus, he evades his role as authority figure within the public sphere and the farming is brought to an end. Undoubtedly Dodge has utterly failed as family patriarch. Dodge sees paternity only as a phallic exercise of potency. He rejects caring for his children, for he fears death at the hands of his progeny. Dodge, the father has always 'dodged' his responsibility for his sons. "You think just because people propagate they have to love their offspring?"(Dodge, 53). Dodge is a threatening father whose infanticidal impulse still haunts him. The powerless mother figure Halie is not only unable to protect her children but has the violence of the father projected onto her; "You never saw a bitch eating her puppies?"(54) Like Dodge, Hasmukh Mehta believes in 'absolute power'. Besides exercising authority over his son, Hasmukh criticizes his wife Sonal by calling her mud and a good for nothing woman. Hasmukh even blames Sonal for his own extra marital relationship. Sonal Mehta has been victimized and exploited by the patriarchal social systems.

*Buried Child* and *Where There is a Will* focus on the conflicting relationship between father and son. Shepard's early plays establish his interest in male individuation, especially in regard to the father/son conflict where the son's identity is at stake. In his 1970 play, *The*

*Holy Ghostly*, for instance, the son must "kill" the father, or at least the father's spirit, in order to assert his own identity. But sons in Shepard's plays never escape the father's legacy, even after the father's death, because they inherit patriarchal ideas of violent masculinity from their fathers. Like Hasmukh and Ajit, the relationship between Dodge and Bradley in *Buried Child* is marked by a struggle for dominance. Shepard reveals the struggle of the father to keep his son from gaining power. In this play, however, the father and the son obtain power through extreme means. They yearn to break each other down and both are performing acts of emasculation on each other. Bradley brutally cuts the hair of his sleeping father, leaving him vulnerable, bleeding from numerous cuts. Symbolically, the cutting of hair may be seen as an invasion of privacy. On a later occasion, Bradley leaves Dodge helpless on the floor, and covers his head with a coat. This act may be interpreted as an imaginary 'burial' of Dodge. He suggests "we could shoot [Dodge] ... We could drown him". Dodge also yearns for power over Bradley as his advice to Shelly serves to illustrate "All ya gotta do is take his leg and throw it out the back door. Helpless. Totally helpless." By removing the artificial leg which Shelly eventually does, Bradley is left literally crippled and powerless.

Hasmukh regards Ajit as an incapable and irresponsible young man of twenty-three who resists all his attempts to take him under his wings. The father believes that he has the right notions regarding son's life, whereas son rejects the idea of complete command over his life. As the play opens, Hasmukh's son Ajit is talking to a friend on phone, telling him how he would modernize the whole plant if he were given only five lakh rupees. Ajit seems to have internalized the fact that his father won't listen to him, a thing usual with him- "I don't think he has ever listened to me in his entire life". Hasmukh's reaction to Ajit's statement that after all he is his son reveals his whole attitude towards his son: "What makes it worse is knowing that I actually prayed to get him. Oh God! I regret it all... Just turn him into a nice vegetable so he won't be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory, he has been in my way."

Ajit, on his part considers his father to be a hard-liner and a stubborn person who is just not ready to consider any other opinion except his own. When they talk to each other, Hasmukh is brusque and contemptuous, and Ajit is defiant;

Ajit: Don't I have any rights at all?

Hasmukh: You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.

.....

Ajit: You are stubborn!

Hasmukh: I'm stubborn because I know I'm right. You're stubborn because you are a nincompoop.

Hasmukh is unhappy with his son because he would not follow his footsteps. He tells him that he needs 'seasoning' 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 of him:

Hasmukh: I should have prayed for a daughter. Yes, I want you to be me. What's wrong with being me?

Ajit: And what becomes of me? The real me, I mean, if I am you, then  
Where am I?

Hasmukh Mehta seems to have succeeded in his attempts at controlling his family through his will after his death in which he has left no property to his son or wife without



some conditions. He has left his entire property to the care of a trust and the members of the family are to get regular allowances from the trust. The trust will be dissolved when Ajit turns forty-five and then the entire property will go to him. However during the intervening years, he has to go to office everyday at nine a.m. and remain there till six p.m. If the members of the family don't abide by the conditions of his will, the trust will donate its funds to various charities mentioned in the will. What comes as the greatest shock to the family is the fact that Kiran Jhaveri, a marketing executive turned company director, and Hasmukh Mehta's mistress.

However it is only when we hear Sonal and Kiran talking about their families that the dimensions of the issue are unfolded before us. We realize that it is not merely a question of obeying or defying one's father but involves the whole issue of one's individuality. On Kiran's asking, Sonal confirms that Hasmukh never contradicted his father, nor did he ever do anything without consulting him first. Kiran observes that Hasmukh Mehta was living his life in his father's shadow. She pities him, "where were his own dreams? His own thoughts? Whatever he did was planned for him by his father" (509) Kiran's last blow comes when she says, "Even his attempts at ruling over you after his death, through his will are pathetic. The only reason he wanted to do that is because his father had ruled over his family. All his life he was merely being a good boy to his father." (510).

This is the basic conflict between the father and the son in this play. The father wants a typical submissive, hardworking and obedient son. He has no use for a son who is imaginative, individualistic and independent. The son on the other hand, is not ready to be merely a prototype of his father. He believes in living his own life and thinking his own thoughts-"Why is it that everything I say or do has to be something that somebody has told me or taught me to do!". This is representative of the changed society. A spirit of individualism has pervaded. A young man now working with his father or other elders of the family, has his own views on different aspects of the work he is involved in, and wants them to be heard and respected.

Sam Shepard, over the course of his career has exposed an America in which citizens cannot ever attain the fundamental characteristics that constitute his perception of the "American" created by America's history and culture, specifically a strong connection to the land and an unwavering belief in the self-sufficiency of the individual to forge his own success. Shepard's American is unable to attain a sense of self that corresponds to the principles that he associates with the nation itself. Yet he is also unable to dissociate himself from the national character and find a sense of identity outside his status as an American. Thus if Ajit asserts his individualistic identity in the play by protesting against parental hegemony, sons in Shepard's plays are unable to do so being caught in a paradox of identity as they attempt to achieve a semblance of American identity, an identity which Shepard posits as ultimately unrealizable. Their dissatisfaction with their current condition in life leads them to try to escape their misery. Hence, Vince's arrival in *Buried Child* hastens the family's destruction that began once the secret was revealed, and he joins in the power struggle. He tells them that he "devour[s] whole families in a single gulp" and that he has returned to "usurp [their] territory" (126; 3), phrases that conjure images of control and domination.

Shepard and Dattani explore 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. Like the outsider Kiran in *Where There's a Will* who becomes the new mistress of the Mehta house, Shelly in *Buried Child* assumes an air of confidence, laughing with disdain when Halie tells her that she is no longer welcome there. Shelly tells them defiantly, "I'm not afraid . . . You're the strangers here, not me." Halie appears to regain control of the house by the

end as she takes Dodge's blanket and gives it to Bradley, issuing commands to everyone, telling Shelly to sit down and Bradley and Dodge to shut up. But control of the family begins to shift once Shelly takes Bradley's prosthetic leg. With physical possession of a part of the family, her tone changes, and Halie is now powerless. Defeated, Halie eventually retreats to the stairs. Likewise Sonal's condition becomes more pathetic as now she has to depend upon Kiran-the mistress of her husband. However she learns new lessons and new things about her husband through Kiran. Therefore she tells Kiran "How little I knew him [Hasmukh]..." Kiran Jhaveri is bold, assertive, and open minded. She doesn't let patriarchal authority to rule over her life. Kiran tells Sonal, "He [Hasmukh] depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He saw in me a woman who could father him! Men really never grow up". Thus, Kiran has maintained her relation with Hasmukh only for monetary reasons. She has no sentimental attachment with him. It shows her self-centeredness which is one of the characteristics of modern woman. Both Shelly and Kiran are thus endowed with the ability to assess and subsequently shake off the unjust shackles of patriarchy.

Hasmukh realizes his failure with a horror, albeit too late as he is now only a ghost watching the whole thing: "Is it...true? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father's aspirations for me? Have I been my father's ghost? If that is true, then where was I? What became of me, the real me? (511). Kiran recalls her father who used to come home drunk everyday and abused her mother. Her brothers did the same with their wives and that she herself has been suffering silently like her mother by marrying a drunkard. At last she asks pathetically, "Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (508). The play thus focuses on the emptiness and uselessness of strict adherence to patriarchal code.

Death provides Hasmukh many new revelations that he could not realize while alive. Looking at the world from a detached perspective, he "can see the world it really is". Hasmukh (whose name literally means 'a smiling face') ironically failed in providing laughter to his family. Hasmukh realizes that he could have utilized the opportunities life provided him for leading a life of quality, projecting himself to enter into meaningful relationships. He failed in imparting any specific meaning to his life. His statement "Oh, I wish I had been more...I wish I had lived" suggests that he lived an inauthentic life on the model of his father as does his statement "...They look quite happy together. With Kiran sitting in my place." In contrast to this, When Vince assumes the identical position of his dead grandfather [Dodge] on the couch, his body "in the same relationship as Dodge's" (131; 3), we realize that the play will end exactly as it began, only with a new man—Vince—assuming Dodge's role in front of the television. Nothing has changed in the family; reinforcing the play's circular causality. His place next to Dodge indicates that the cycle will endure because the family has been unable to extricate itself from their negative feedback loops. The cycle of dishonesty, strengthened by the deception associated with maintaining the secret, results in an erosion of trust so severe that none of the family members can stand each other, a harbinger of the family's slim chances of survival.

Dattani indicates the compulsions under which Hasmukh behaves in the way that he does: on him lies the onus of perpetuating patriarchy and its stereotypes. 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". Likewise, Sam Shepard provides a scathing look at the damages inherent in patriarchal ideology. In Shepard's world, the patriarchal structure fails not only the women who are explicitly subjugated by it but also men who are supposed to benefit from it.

However, Shepard's men are unable to come to terms with the notion that their fantasies of power and wholeness may never be made a reality-that these fantasies may be the root of their problems in the first place. They lack the strength of character to face their own failures and to move beyond them.

### Works Cited:

- Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. Vol 2. Screen, Stage and Radio Plays. Penguin Books: New Delhi, 2005. Print.
- Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child*. Vintage Publications, 1979. Print.
- Deeba, Farha. *Prioritizing the invisible: A Study of the Select plays of Mahesh Dattani*. Diss. University of Kashmir, 2013.
- Mathisen, Kari. *What's Happened to this Family Anyway? The Disintegration of the American Family in Selected Plays by O'Neill, Miller, and Shepard*. MA thesis. University of Troms, 2009.
- Ranjan, Mukesh. "Mahesh Dattani's Where There's a Will: Exorcising the Patriarchal Code". *The Dramatic World of Mahesh Dattani-A Critical Exploration*. Ed. Amar Nath Suri. Sarup Book Publishers, 2009. 136-144. Print.
- Shepard, Sam. *Buried Child*. In *Sam Shepard: Plays*, Vol. 2. London: Faber and Faber, 1997. Print.
- The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Ed. Mathew Roundane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.