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## Complex Familial Relationships in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

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Indian English drama, though said to be a failure in the past, has emerged well of late. Contemporary Indian drama shows a special penchant for the study of man and his milieu where playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani set their microscopes to study man's social and familial relationships. Man's social, emotional, economic and physical needs have driven him to form association with his fellow beings resulting in the emergence of the institutions like family and society. But the increasing complexity of life and the phenomenal change in all spheres of man's life have redefined the role of human relationships; and this is more so in India, a country where people believe in ancient and age old customs and traditions. In personal and social relationships man has moved no doubt but perhaps in a zigzag motion that the threads of love and affection or even betrayal have got tangled and intertwined in such a way that the knots are strangling him to such an extent that normal and natural life seems to be a distant dream.

With the changing wheel of time human nature has become very complex. Though great writers like William Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter and many others have delved deep into human psyche to comprehend his social and familial behaviour yet there is always a need to probe deeper into human life and psyche. "One of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights" (Alexandra Viets) writing in English, Mahesh Dattani has also undertaken a similar task in his dramatic works. He is the first Indian playwright to be awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his unique contribution to theatre. His endeavour is different from earlier attempts at staging Indian drama in English as he chooses to entertain his spectators at the same time making them feel at home with the incidents on the stage. This can be done by depicting contemporary social reality in dramatic form, believes Dattani. Towards the end of his preface to *Collective Plays* Dattani says, "Where does one begin? By ending this preface and carrying on with the business of holding a mirror up to society . . ." (Preface to *Collected Plays* p. xv). Thus thematically Dattani's plays belong to the existing times dealing with sexuality, gender issues, religious tension, and the workings of personal and moral choices as he surveys a gamut of human relationships.

In his very first play *Where There's a Will*, Dattani chooses a dysfunctional family to explore intricate familial relationships. The play is rooted in an Indian middle-class Gujarati business family wherein he shows how stupidity, prejudice, and desire for domination play havoc with the very existence of a family unit. Here Hasmukh Mehta, the head of the Mehta family, fights an open and a secret battle against rest of the members of the family.

All the members of the Mehta family live under one roof but they differ widely in their thoughts and beliefs. The garment tycoon Mr. Hasmukh Mehta finds his wife Sonal listless, his son Ajit an "idiot" and "a nincompoop" and his daughter-in-law Preeti "sly as a snake." The son finds his own father "a pompous fool" and dull as a "thick-skinned buffalo"; and the daughter-in law Preeti gets a husband who, she thinks, is "silly stupid idiot" and a "lout". Hasmukh's wife Sonal

believes that her husband is fittingly comparable to a “village buffalo.” Nevertheless they are yoked together when the play opens.

Of late a big success in business and one of the richest men of the city, Mr. Mehta, to teach his family a lesson, leaves behind a will which places his mistress Kiran Jhaveri at the centre of action. Now onwards his entire assets will be managed by a trust to be directed by her for twenty-one years - a time which will see his son turn forty-five, when the wealth would be of little use to the son and other spendthrift members of the family as they all will be too old to relish it. Moreover, the will bequeaths that Kiran will live with the family in the house of Mehtas, and that the son has to work in his office according to the well defined directions to bring back the money after twenty-one years. Hasmukh assigns the duty of correcting his family to his mistress with the conviction that she will remain faithful to him forever.

Underneath the Mehta family's glint and veneer of material comfort lies the ugliness of greed and brutality. Leading a life under the shadow of his father, Hasmukh Mehta is never ready to allow space to others in the family. Moreover, he loves money. While living, he could not forgive his family for wasting money, after his death he is not able to forget his love for the hard earned money. It was the fear of his money being wasted lavishly that made him bequeath a will. How he cherishes memories of earning money speaks volumes about his attitude towards money:

HASMUKH. No more school. No more loafing for me. Hard work. And I am happy he did that! We made money! I remember we used to spend half the night going through our accounts and counting our profits. The other half of the night we would dream of being millionaires! (WTW 464)

The money in hand and such pleasing memories of earning money make him feel mighty and conceited. Since his son Ajit does not worship money the way his father does, he is considered a big failure by Hasmukh Mehta. Now he compares himself to his son; and the more he weighs himself against his son, the more he comes to love himself and hate his son and the consequent difference becomes bone of contention.

Apart from the head of the family, the other members of the Mehta family also worship money as their God. The daughter-in-law Preeti says that she married Ajit because he was rich. That she loves money more than anyone else in the family gets established from the way she goes upset on finding out that her late father-in-law has made a will against them. Now all the efforts she has put in to see the end of her father-in-law Hasmukh Mehta (by replacing the bottle of his medicine with her own) seem to end in fiasco. Again, all limits of love for money seem to get crossed when we find that Kiran Jhaveri's husband allows her to be the mistress of her boss to get money for his own booze. Thus money stands like a potent living entity in the play and it is this money which creates the love-hate relationship in the household.

In addition to money, which undoubtedly is the most compelling force in destroying human relationships in the play, Hasmukh Mehta's domineering nature and the ghost of past are two more devils who play a part in destroying familial relationships. Hasmukh is one who had had no dreams and thoughts of his own, one whose achievements are nothing but translations of his father's aspirations. Such a hard-headed man cannot allow others to have their own thoughts and dreams. This is how he advises his son not to ask for any room:

AJIT. Daddy, you have no right to humiliate me in front of my friends!

HASMUKH. Wrong! I, Hasmukh Mehta, have every right...

AJIT. Don't I have any rights at all?

HASMUKH. You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders. (WTW 458)

When opposed, the authoritarian and domineering devil Hasmukh calls his wife “a senile old bag” (WTW 497) and his twenty-three years old son a “swine”. In return he expects everything good from others and asks his son to learn how to behave with elders. His dictatorial nature makes Kiran Jhaveri conclude that he was “intoxicated with his power” and “thought that he was invincible” (WTW 508).

Hasmukh Mehta’s choice of using possessive pronoun 'my' in the beginning of the play helps us not only to have a peep at his nature but to estimate how much important he considers himself to be *vis-à-vis* other members of the family. His pride and arrogance do not do any good to him or to his family. Indeed the desire to dominate others has done an untold damage to him and his family, and has destroyed his interpersonal relationships.

The way Dattani depicts his characters in *Where There is a Will* appears to highlight his hate for the undesirable passion for money. On the one hand Hasmukh and Preeti are presented in an unfavourable light, on the other, Ajit is imparted the virtue of passion for life as he opts for his own path unmindful of what his father wanted. He is just different from his father whose only yardstick for measuring success was money. In Hasmukh Mehta’s world achievement has to struggle against expectation. Thus obsession for achievement, love for money, desire for domination and prejudices prove decisive in destroying human relationships in this play.

It is strange that Hasmukh never bothers to think on the question why to earn money but he never fails to contemplate why to marry. He had neither humane nor any noble causes whatsoever for which he could have strove so hard to earn money. He could never manage to see his wife smiling or shining; perhaps what he could do was simply satisfy his lure of marrying ‘gold’ (Sonal). Nor could he ever win appraisal from a member of his family. Above all, he was not much pleased with himself even as we see him repent towards the end of the play and he wishes that he “had never interfered with their lives.” (WTW 515)

Coming to the emotional and sexual life of the characters in play one comes to think that there cannot be a room for emotional or exciting sexual life where there is such an awful wish for earning and saving money. There are not only no moments of affectionate love in the play but the wedded partners are found leading a cat and dog life. Ajit is very mechanical in his relationship with his wife Preeti, and she rather than welcoming her husband home, starts fighting with him and does not fail in abusing him in the worst possible language as soon as his comes back home. Again the relationship of Kiran Jhaveri and her husband is based more on convenience and material need rather than heartfelt emotions. Talking to Ajit Mrs Jhaveri explains her relationship with her husband:

KIRAN. Anyway, it all worked out to be quite convenient. I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got... well, you know. (WTW 491)

Similarly, the third one but most important couple, Mrs. and Mr. Hasmukh Mehta, who belong to a different generation, is sexually bland and loveless. Hasmukh tells us:

...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. Twenty-five years of marriage and I haven't enjoyed sex with her. So what does a man do? You tell me. I started eating out. Well, I had the money. (WTW 473)

Smashing the faith of his wife, whom he himself describes as “faithful” (WTW 475), Hasmukh Mehta develops an extramarital relationship with his assistant Kiran. And through this relationship of Hasmukh and Kiran the playwright invites our attention towards degradation at social, familial, moral and personal level.

Dattani depicts life as it is. He hardly seems interested in idealising it. However, he never fails in highlighting good over evil in life. Being an avant-garde feminist he establishes woman at the centre of his fictional world and confers upon her qualities like frankness, confidence, intellect, power and judgement but at the same time maintaining her so close to essential human nature and thus probability. Kiran Jhaveri, the quintessence of ‘new woman’ in Dattani makes her emergence in his very first play. Out of her wisdom and sense of duty, she comes to be an insider in the Mehta household pushing aside even the last memory of the real outsider Hasmukh Mehta. Kiran’s sense of belongingness to the unit is perceptible in her use of language - ‘I decided I’ll come and stay here for a while in *our* house” (emphasis added, WTW 488) as against Hasmukh’s refusal to it with his repeated use of phrases with possessive personal pronouns like “*my* house” (emphasis added, WTW 458) in the play. Again it is her intelligence and shrewd nature that helps her in transforming a group into a family. Secondly, in the duty of correcting the family she has been assigned by her late boss, she does not work like one who has been blindfolded but distinguishes between what is right and what is wrong. Finally she stands head and shoulders above all others’ as she “uses power play to essentially improve her relationships” (Raina,46). Then again Sonal may be weak in the beginning of the play but in the end she turns towards Kiran and seems to bid good bye to her dependence on anyone.

Characters’ struggle against hard times and their eventual movement away from repression make one ponder over the comparisons and contrasts in the play. In the first half of the play the family relations are ruled by a prejudiced patriarch Hasmukh Mehta while in the second half the reins get controlled and caressed by a woman Kiran Jhaveri. The first half of the play is marked with lack of faith and loads of chaos and confusion in the family in contrast to the later half where an atmosphere of trust and faith prevails and the family sails smoothly. Again the mood of compromise of Act I turns into a mood of confrontation in Act II as Ajit fiercely refuses to be another extension of his father:

AJIT. All right. I can't fight him now. He has won. He has won because he's dead. But when he was alive, I did protest. In my own way. Yes, I'm happy I did that. Yes. I did fight back. I did do 'peep peep' to him! That was my little victory. (WTW 501)

So also Kiran, a victim, refuses to stay victimized. She becomes part of Hasmukh's life with her eyes wide open and aware of the benefits that she will get from the relationship and finally she comes to bond with Sonal. Thus the patriarchy gets strangulated and seems to breathe its last towards the end of the play giving room to normal family relationships. Kiran Jhaveri the strong and wise woman has been contrasted with Sonal who has been left crippled and handicapped with no thought of her own by the strict vigilance of her sister Minal. "Even at my husband's funeral, she

sat beside me and told me when to cry" she tells (WTW 511). But in the end of the play Sonal tells Minal:

. . . No, I don't need another maharaj, not from you at least! ...I just don't, that's all. . .  
Well, as for as I'm concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit! (*Slams the phone down and turns towards Kiran*) (WTW 516)

Thus finally the decider emerges as Hasmukh Mehta himself chooses a female Kiran ("somebody tough") "to run the show" (WTW 460) and lo! she proves tougher than he expected her to be. Thus the shift in the Dattani woman from a weak creature of Act I to a powerful and strong force in Act II, and the effect this shift makes on human relationships is remarkable.

Again suppressed under the system of custom, tradition, gender, and sexuality Dattani's characters are in constant search for identity. Hasmukh Mehta exercises his power over the rest of his family to carry on his own conception of the hereditary egocentric self. He is a believer in patriarchy and wishes to dominate and exercise his power. But it is perhaps a quirk of fate that he hands over the reins to a woman and changes the fate of his own conceptions that he was trying to preserve since long. Upside turns down and the spaces for the individual identity, that he has all along wanted to deny, get opened up. He has to learn his identity from the lips of Sonal and Kiran that he was "living his life in his father's shadow." (WTW 509) Moreover, all other members of the family resist Hasmukh as they also search for their own identity. Kiran who survived in the given circumstances till now, has been constantly in search of an identity for her 'self'. This wife of a dependent drunkard and a mistress to a despot strikes the iron when it is hot and gets identified as a powerful force. Similarly, Ajit is all mouth in demanding and obtaining some space for his 'self'. Towards the end of the play Ajit says that he will get the tamarind tree chopped off as soon as Damoder comes; thus symbolically getting rid of the last remnants of the bitter past.

Family and society are two essential parts of Dattani's dramatic world. His characters are surrounded by a social system that doesn't allow one to do what one wants. Parents make their children do what wins applaud from the society never minding what a child's wish is. Instead of leading a life of urge, one is made to lead a life directed by invisible social pressures and visible family pressures. When the members of Hasmukh family talk about Hasmukh Mehta's keeping a mistress, Preeti worries less about what is going on in her family and more about her neighbours' listening to them and their turning of their TV off (WTW 485). Moreover all the members of the family feel insulted when they learn that Hasmukh has bequeathed a will. It is merely the fear of society that makes the family feel: "...The will has left us all naked. The whole world is saying, Hasmukh Mehta didn't have faith in his own family..." (WTW 493)

On the other side the ghost of Hasmukh feels good on finding what newspapers have to say about him, though he never senses what his son or wife has to say about him. John MacRae, a theatre director, says:

"... as the characters' masks fall, their emotions unravel and their lives disintegrate. For the fault is not just the characters' - it is everyone's, in a society which not only condones but encourages hypocrisy, which demands deceit and negation, rather than allowing self-expression, responsibility and dignity." (*Collected Plays* 451)

In the changed Indian scenario where commerce is emerging too fast, something is needed to be done to rebuild a social system with harmonious family relationships. And here Mahesh

Dattani makes an interesting reading whose favourite area of interest is the social fabric where he discovers many a thing wanting in individuals' behaviour and accepted wisdom as a whole. Commenting upon relevance of his plays today Madhu Jain says:

"One cannot deny the reality of the world that Dattani presents. It stares you in the face, making you involuntarily flinch in each of the plays. It is a reality you may not wish to encounter."(n.p.)

Yes, Dattani never fails to have an eye on social institutions like family. Dysfunctional family and brittle relationship form the backdrop of many of his plays. But he never intends to change the society; what he seeks to do is to make the spectators reflect on their own lives. Talking to Anita Nair, Dattani says:

"You can't treat a play like a roller coaster ride which even at its most terrifying moment you know will end soon and quite happily when you hit terra firma. It's only when you are left hanging in air you start to question your own personality, perceptions etc...the audience have to finish in their own heads what the playwright began."(Dattani in an interview)

Dattani does not write a play with an intention of teaching lessons to the audience. A moral or a lesson that is learnt is always a by-product.

Social suppositions are always different from realities of life. One cannot expect a son always to be an obedient or a blind follower of his parents. Benjamin McLane Spock asserts that "rebelliousness against parents is a natural, inevitable aspect of adolescence. It assists them in giving up the comforts and security of home, achieving real independence, working for progress" (Spock, 30). Clash of traditional and modern values is an essential part of the life of the people at present. And this is what Dattani shows through his plays in general and *Where There's a Will* in particular as here all family relationships are unconventional (except the mother-son relationship). Again in case of his treatment of women some critics have found him "a woman hater" (Preface *Collected Plays*, xii) but it does not seem to be so because Dattani reveals the truth by showing a woman silent in words but powerful in action in comparison to man who howls a lot but fails to do much. Though denying a place among dramatists who can boast of universal appeal will be an injustice to the talent of the young playwright yet it is not wrong to say that his plays are about Indian life where people lead a way of life which is neither entirely Indian nor purely Western but a mottled mixture of the two. The emotional half of an Indian attracts him towards his parents just like his other fellow mate Indians while his desire for an independent identity like Westerns makes his other half repel him away from them.

To explore the reasons that make the Mehta family dysfunctional in the play *Where There is a Will*, Dattani contrasts the working of the patriarch Hasmukh Mehta who is dominant, selfish and dead to the other people's wishes, and brings only lack of faith and loads of chaos and confusion in the family, with that of Kiran Jhaveri, the woman who is intelligent, democratic, frank, humane and alive to other people's needs and brings an atmosphere of trust and faith to prevail in the family. Thus it can be deduced that compassion, trust and cooperation are needed to form good and healthy relationships in a family.

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