

Revisiting Family Dynamics: A Study of Contemporary Issues in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's A Will*

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Introduction

Mahesh Dattani has emerged as a trendsetter in the Indian English drama scene, primarily for his uncompromising presentation of complex family and social issues. In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani has launched an unflinching inquiry into the anatomy of the Indian family through issues of identity, gender dynamics, and patriarchy. Dattani's nuclear family concept is a portrayal of the tension between strict social norms that define life, especially in aspects of gender, and patriarchal dominance, which is very widespread. The protagonist, Hasmukh Mehta, is portrayed as an archetypal Indian patriarch who continued to assert his dominance even after death by making an enforceable will. This paper attempts to evaluate the different modes by which Dattani challenges such entrenched social conventions that control the identity of family and self, particularly in the person of Hasmukh. As Dattani travels through this journey, Dattani advocates reconsideration of the ancient system, supporting the modern family structure, founded upon freedom and solidarity of family.

Literature Review

While his works are accorded serious attention from the critics as they have unveiled complexities perennially within Indian families and the systems associated with them; in fact, social hierarchies are embedded within those paradigms. As noted by Aparna Dharwadker and Tutun Mukherjee, irony is what he resorts to as a subversion of existing social norms, especially the ones related to family and gender roles. The

feminist theorists argue that patriarchal structures not only oppress women but also restrict the individual's autonomy within the family system. These views go to show how the character of Hasmukh serves to reinforce the criticism Dattani levies against the way in which patriarchal attitudes transform family relationships into sources of conflict instead of support.

Methodology

This paper employs thematic analysis and textual evidence in examining Dattani's critique of patriarchy, gender roles, and identity in the play. The relationships between characters, symbols, and dialogues discussed throughout the paper reflect Dattani's comment on the emotional and social costs resulting from such structured family systems.

Analysis and Discussion

Patriarchal Power and Rule

Hasamukh Mehta is the quintessential Indian patriarch. Everything to do with family life speaks of the power he exerts over the members. Dattani describes Hasmukh as the patriarchal figure whose need to control his family finds expression even in death and, therefore, becomes the exemplar of how entrenched patriarchy is in the Indian family system.

This is achieved through the action performed by Hasmukh in establishing a trust, which links his family to his will even after he is dead, dictating very intricate details of their lives. Through this action, Dattani illustrates and underscores how far patriarchal authority extends to absurd levels, thus showing how these extend to adversely affect the emotional well-being of family members. This tendency of Hasmukh to exercise his authority clearly shows how common it has been in patriarchal worlds where the head of family has all the power at his discretion and cannot be negotiated upon. Dattani challenges this situation by showing how Hasmukh's autocratic behavior leads to resentment and emotional disconnection among the family members.

Instead of inspiring love or respect, his obstinacy makes the family regard him as a tiresome master instead of sure support. Here, Dattani

targets the patriarchal authority that works like a barrier between the families and thus makes it a life of duty rather than love.

Family Dynamics and Gender Roles

In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani challenges the rigidity of formalized expectations of gender, particularly regarding women in the family situation. Aparna is Hasmukh's wife-the quintessential submissive housewife-dark, silent, obedient and extremely submissive. Dattani describes Sonal as one who had imbibed social expectations and, thus, had resigned to life with quiet acquiescence. That way, her character rightly shows how patriarchal expectations load psychological burdens upon women, pointing to how such roles suppress originality and give birth to feelings of inadequacy. On the other hand, Kiran is Hasmukh's daughter-in-law, but she has a more progressive view of gender roles. She is unlike Sonal because Kiran wants to gain freedom within the confines of the traditional family setup, thereby challenging Hasmukh and questioning the legitimacy of his will. Through the character of Kiran, Dattani gives voice to the counter-narrative against Sonal's passive reception, thereby creating a woman who actively resists patriarchal norms that impose limitations on her.

Through Sonal, Kiran brings forward that these women can redefine roles and thereby prop the dynamic to work by which women are positive in their attempt to stay as self-responsible. Sonal, therefore, personifies the psychological effects due to lengthy submission, but by placing the contrast between Kiran and Sonal Dattani shows divergent female lives living under patriarch authority. This contrast illuminates how women react to patriarchal systems, thus highlighting Dattani's advocacy for an egalitarian structure of family that propels women to expand beyond societal expectations to maintain their identities.

Irony and Satire as Social Comment

The author uses irony and satire as tools in criticizing the absurdity of hardened familial expectations and patriarchal authority. Hasmukh's authoritarian approach is taken with a great level of humor, making his extreme measures almost farce-like. The satire that Dattani employs

will enable the reader to unveil the irrationality of Hasmukh's attempts at domination of every aspect of his family's life even after his demise. The insertion of comedy does not really reduce the seriousness of the criticism leveled by Dattani but instead is amplified through irony centered on the absurdity of such a measure.

The family, in particular, shows an absence of love and respect that are with them towards Hasmukh and that is ironic in the action. His dictatorial attitude toward family management alienates his family, and his kin start to see him as far from a helper toward them but as an opponent to their actual joy. Dwelling on this contradiction, Dattani invokes the audience to question patriarchal authority in the family. The comedical sense of describing the character Hasmukh allows Dattani to touch upon a very important subject through the mode of accessibility, prompting viewers toward critical engagements with social norms that help sustain such dynamics.

Identity and Autonomy

Questions of identity and self-lodge at the heart of Dattani's deconstruction of patriarchal patterns in *Where There's a Will*. The quest for self is most poignantly instantiated by Hasmukh's son, Ajit, who remains financially and emotionally dependent on his father.

The psychological cost of Hasmukh's domination is that it highlights how patriarchal power can stifle the formation of a self. Further, Ajit's quest for independence echoes a damning criticism of patriarchal might at large in Indian families, where customary control can redirect the growth patterns of immature members of a family. The play of Dattani, Ajit's dependence unfolds the fact that the dogmatic expectations from the family do not restrict women alone but also bring down the liberty of males from the patriarchal setup. The character portrayal of Ajit brings out a question on the assumption that patriarchy is liberal to all males when, in fact, such systems restrain individual development with no respect to gender. In making this evident conclusion that Ajit is internally conflicted, Dattani unveils the repercussions of patriarchal authority on family members' personal growth and, therefore, is actually campaigning for this kind of familial.

Conclusion

In *Where There's a Will*, Mahesh Dattani gives a critical deconstruction of patriarchy, what to expect in the family, and gender roles among Indians. Through the character of Hasmukh Mehta, Dattani expresses the role of patriarchal powers in the family and how strict societal expectations burden identities emotionally and psychologically.

The juxtaposition of characters such as Sonal and Kiran brings forth the different reactions of women towards patriarchal norms, choosing between subservience and resistance. According to Dattani, the use of irony and satire helps well in revealing the absurdity involved in strict family structures and provokes individuals to critically interact with the social norms that outplay authority. The family dynamics in Dattani's *Where There's a Will* demand an open dialogue on matters usually tabooed in Indian society. By advocating the cause of the egalitarian family model, Dattani argues that the time has come to shift from traditional structures to a more dynamic understanding of personal autonomy and mutual respect.

This critique assumes great importance in the contemporary Indian scenario wherein questions of gender equality and personal rights are constantly brought face to face with the status quo. By the means of *Where There's a Will*, Dattani places himself as a powerful voice for social reform, prompting Indian society to rethink the family as an arena for self-discovery, personal evolution, and true bonding. Structure that promotes individuality and self-discovery.

Works Cited

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