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Patriarchal Possession and Familial Resistance in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will* focuses on the grim and oppressive structure of patriarchy in the modern Indian family, as a sharp black comedy. The play revolves around Hasmukh Mehta, a rich industrialist who has the will to control his family even after death through a meticulously prepared will. This article argues that the play critiques patriarchal possession as an instrument of domination, which includes property, inheritance, masculinity and familial authority. Hasmukh's compulsion to control is expressed through his will which becomes a symbolic extension of his patriarchal ego, indicating how masculine authority seeks to govern not just money but also emotions, relationships and individual identities. The article goes on to argue that he offers alternative responses through the figures of Ajit, Sonal, Preeti, and especially Kiran who slowly unveils an underlying fragility behind Hasmukh's patriarchal authority. Utilising humour, irony, spectral presence and domestic strife to do so, Dattani makes this familial sphere a battleground of ideologies. Chaudhuri further notes that he situates his plays within "the contemporary urban Indian family," which becomes "the site of the ensuing conflict" (25). The play ends up suggesting that patriarchy wounds both men and women, because it cuts off the freedom and emotional growth, not to mention mutual recognition.

Keywords: Family, Patriarchy, Finance, Inheritance, Culture, Resistance, Indian drama, Society

Where There's a Will, Dattani's debut full-length play, was written in 1986 and had its world premiere by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore on 23 September 1988. Sita Raina called the play, in a note for its published form, "the exorcism of the patriarchal code," and that women, "be it daughter-in-law, wife or mistress," are dependent on men till they are "pushed to the edge" (450). Dattani holds a crucial position in contemporary Indian English drama on account of the fact that his plays surface the

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repressed tensions of the Indian middle-class family. His dramatic world is principally domestic, though the home space is never just private. It becomes a microcosm of society, and power, gender, sexuality, class, tradition and modernity all fight for dominance. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, Dattani “deals with sexuality and gender issues, religious tension, and the workings of personal and moral choices as he explores a gamut of human relationships” (19). As the piece points out, though, the play is not really about one authoritarian father; It is about a cultural system that trains men to own, dominate and reproduce themselves via family and property. The title *Where There’s a Will* is, itself, double-edged. On the surface, it concerns Hasmukh Mehta’s legal will, by which he tries to rule his family beyond death. At an even deeper level, it is the will to power of the patriarch, his need to control others’ lives. Hasmukh is a wealthy industrialist, husband, father and lover and he fails at all these roles as all this man knows about relations is through command. His money gives him power, and his power is the lexicon he uses to negotiate with Sonal, his wife; Ajit, his son; Preeti, his daughter-in-law; and Kiran, his mistress. One analysis of the play underscores this comic but cruel situation, when after Hasmukh dies his family learns that his will both bars them from inheriting immediately and ushers a mistress into their home.

Hasmukh’s relation with Ajit is the most obvious example of his patriarchal possession. He wants Ajit to become an extension of himself rather than his son becoming a self-sufficient individual. When Ajit tells his father, he expresses this intention quite clearly: “you want to run the show, play Big Boss as long as you can” and even after death “still want to play Big Boss” through him (Dattani 457). Ajit’s final statement in the same exchange is crucial: “In short, you want me to be you” (457). Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 20). The underlying violence of patriarchy is also revealed in this moment. The father tries to erase the son’s differences in addition to giving him instructions. Patriarchy becomes a vicious circle in which the new generation is forced to uphold the beliefs of the elder generation, support their economic practices, and mimic their emotional shortcomings and masculinity.

The play’s greatest aspect is that Hasmukh is also a result of patriarchal conditioning. His father, who shaped his own manly character through control, effort, and discipline; he inherited the authoritarian system, is his inspiration. Therefore, Hasmukh’s predominance is not an exception; rather, it is his narrative. He returns to the brutality he endured in the past. Dattani’s perceptive viewpoint is therefore nuanced: he holds patriarchy accountable for both generational malaise and individual acts of brutality. The tragedy of Hasmukh is that he mistakes intelligence with inherited rule. He feels that rigorous discipline was the key to his own success, and he anticipates that Ajit will do the same. But Ajit refuses to be a replica of his father. His resistance is not heroic in the conventional way, but significant nonetheless because he asserts the right to have his own mind. A critical article notes that Dattani presents “the clash between the strict patriarchal father and self indulgent son” and shows how the son rejects “the old ideology of patriarchy” (Pawar 111).

The most effective tool in Hasmukh’s patriarchal control is property. He uses money as a tool of punishment rather than as a shared family resource. His will permits him to stay in the family even after he passes away, demonstrating how economic and legal frameworks can uphold patriarchal control even after the patriarch’s physical existence has ended. According to Sita Raina’s remark, Hasmukh has financial control over his family and, as a result, misses out on opportunities to strengthen his bonds with them. As a result, his will is a dramatic representation of posthumous possession rather than just a written

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document. It transforms family into an administrative structure, love into a transaction, and inheritance into punishment. And the ghost device deepens this criticism. Hasmukh's ghost witnesses the effects of his own will, but has no full control over how it unfolds. This is dramatically significant because the ghost embodies patriarchal afterlife: in this instance, even when the patriarch is dead, his authority endures through memory, property and social habit. But Dattani also makes the ghost comic and finite. Hasmukh can see but cannot wholly control. In this way, the play transmutes patriarchal power into theatrical irony. The man who sought to dominate everyone becomes a viewer of his own defeat.

Sonal, Hasmukh's wife, stands in for the woman drowned out by the patriarchal household. Her life is defined by dependence, habit and emotional neglect. On the other side, she is living under Hasmukh's authority but has still not been given affection and respect. Dattani portrays through Sonal the wife as a captive of respectability. Socially, she is recognized as the real woman of the house, but this recognition does not bestow on her any real power. Her marriage is rooted in obedience and emotional starvation. But Sonal's relationship with Kiran slowly upends this old order. The wife and the mistress stop being rivals, but instead begin to know each other as women under a similar male-oriented system. If that is the major character of resistance in play, that person is Kiran Jhaveri. She initially seems to be Hasmukh's mistress and thus an outsider in the respectable family. But Dattani reverses this expectation. Thus, Kiran emerges as the character most insightful about the psychology of patriarchy. She reveals Hasmukh's power to be empty and fragile. Her statement is heartrending: "My father, your husband—they were weak men with false strength" (Dattani 505). This line is among the strongest critiques of patriarchy in the play. Patriarchal masculinity seems powerful because it orders, menaces and dominates; but what Dattani uncovers is that such strength is illusory since it relies on fear, money and emotional brutality. Kiran also links generational recurrence to patriarchal tyranny. After posing the question, "Isn't it strange how repetitive life is?" she considers how fathers, spouses, brothers, and wives all repeat the same violent and painful patterns (Dattani 505–06). The drama becomes more psychologically complex when she asks, "Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (506). In this instance, Dattani transcends societal satire and delves into the topic of inherited pain. The family is a place where wounds are passed down as well as a place of belonging. Kiran is no longer a victim because of her insight. She turns into the play's moral and analytical focal point. Ajit's wife, Preeti, is a different kind of familial resistance but her resistance is morally fraught. She's practical, ambitious and keen on inheritance. She does not conform to the stereotype of the silent daughter-in-law. Her existence shows how patriarchy can create not just passive victims of said systems, but also crafty survivors. Preeti has learned how to survive in a system where money decides security. Her selfish desire for property may suggest greed, but it is also a reflection of the economic insecurity brought on by patriarchal dependence. Dattani does not romanticize her; rather, he uses her character to explore how oppressive systems pervert all of our emotional lives.

The family in *Where There's a Will* is therefore a battlefield of conflicting desires. Hasmukh wants control; Ajit wants to be special; Sonal desires recognition; Preeti just wants stability and Kiran, dignity and change. The house becomes a stage where patriarchal authority is scrutinized, ridiculed and eventually unmade. Dattani's achievement is the dark satire he weaves through his comedy. The play is funny, enchanting even, but this comic writing does not remain on the surface. It lays bare the absurdity of male authority that imagines itself eternal. Hasmukh's effort to rule from beyond the grave is funny for

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exactly this reason: It is overblown. But it is also unsettling because it imitates actual social practices where fathers, husbands and property-owning men still get to decide how family life goes. The play also interrogates the old association of masculinity with success. Hasmukh is full of money, but bankrupt when it comes to emotions. He has accumulated wealth but not intimacy. He has built an empire of business but not a loving family. But Dattani separates economic achievement from moral maturity. Hasmukh's riches will not protect him from loneliness or earn his family's love. His tragedy is that he equates obedience with respect and fear with authority. This false equation is among the play's central targets. Saptarshi Mallick observes that Dattani presents men "stuck in their roles of power and authority," while other male characters question "the hegemonic social structure" (Mallick).

Familial resistance in the play is not a kind of open revolution: Rather, it emerges by way of exposure, conversation, irony, emotional recognition and the slow transfer of agency. Kiran's ascendancy to authority is particularly poignant, for Hasmukh unwittingly empowers the very woman who can unmake his patriarchal blueprint. He brings Kiran into his family, uses her as a tool to keep his family in check, but she uses her place to create new potentialities of relationship. Raina notes that unlike Hasmukh, Kiran uses "power play to essentially improve her relationships" (Dattani 450). This distinction is central: power in Hasmukh's hands becomes possession; power in Kiran's hands becomes negotiation and healing.

A key component of the play's indictment of patriarchy is Dattani's black comedic sensibility. Although Hasmukh's attempt to rule from beyond death is humorous, it highlights a disturbing social reality: patriarchal dominance frequently endures through property, memory, and familial duty. Hasmukh becomes a helpless observer of his own failing design as a result of the ghost device. By doing this, Dattani exposes the ridiculousness of a masculinity that sees itself as permanent and lowers the grandeur of patriarchal dominance to theatrical irony.

In conclusion, *Where There's a Will* is a damning feminist indictment of patriarchal ownership in the Indian family. Dattani serves up the authoritarian male ego, through Hasmukh Mehta, demanding wife, son, daughter-in-law, mistress, property and the future. Through Ajit, Sonal, Preeti and Kiran he posits different modes of resistance to this possession. Patriarchy endures through things like inheritance and repetition, silence and economic dependence; it can be undermined by self-awareness and solidarity. Rashmi Jain observes that the play "not only marginalizes the female but male also" (5486). Because human connections cannot be permanently governed by legal documents or patriarchal desire, Hasmukh's will fails. In the end, Dattani's dark humour turns into a sombre social drama about identity, independence, and the necessity of eradicating the patriarchal code from family life.

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