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Patriarchal influence and discrimination in Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's A Will*

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Abstract

HASMUKH. Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? No. There is more than that. What? May be he needs a faithful companion? No. If that was it, all men would keep dogs. No. No. I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son... (CP 475)

Hasmukh's words embody the true face of patriarchy and gender discrimination that prevails in a patriarchal society. A collection of individuals constitutes society. However, it is not a mere collection of individuals but the existence of intricate connection among them. Society is always dynamic and ever changing. An individual cannot live alone without co-operation and assistance of the great multitudes. The play *Where There's A Will* is rooted in the Gujarati familial value system. Dattani pictures the family ethics of Gujarat in his play. He chronicles the follies and prejudices of Gujarati society.

Keywords: Influence, Discrimination, Society, Gujarat.

1. Introduction

In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani has criticized patriarchy and calls the play an "exorcism of the patriarchal code" (Raina 451) and skilfully works his narrative around the intrigues and manoeuvrings of a dysfunctional Indian family. Through the complicated design of the 'will', the interactions between the four main protagonists of a joint family are painfully twisted as the play begins to come alive in performance.

The story revolves around a supposedly 'self-made' industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta, the patriarch who is the supreme malcontent, with the typical problems of familial expectations; his indolent wife Sonal and a colourless conjugal life; his spendthrift son Ajit; and a wily and conniving daughter-in-law Preeti; and his mistress Kiran Jhaveri. All the four belie their names. Hasmukh is a dour-faced man who seems unable to smile; Sonal hardly shines; Ajit is not in the least successful in his father's eyes; and Preeti is an unaffectionate as Hasmukh is sour. Yet they are family, yoked together with no choice in the matter and must function as a unit under the patriarchal order (R. Sharma, "Exploration").

The highly dissatisfied Hasmukh is decidedly unhappy with the manner his life has been spent – with no one living up to his expectations, the way he had lived up to his father's. He must, therefore get back at his family; and teach them an extended lesson.

It is only by way of the 'will' that he would attempt to tackle all obstacles that he has been unable to correct within his lifetime. Dattani works this out with the help of his extremely self-reflexive text, where Hasmukh speaks more to the audience, directly, than with any of the other protagonists, taking them into confidence. The play sketches a domineering patriarch who would revenge himself upon his 'avaricious' family by virtually cutting them out of his 'will', something they will discover only after his death. When he dies, Dattani's stage directions read thus: "The two women start sobbing. Lights fade out on them. Spotlight picks up Hasmukh, or rather, his ghost. He stands arms akimbo. And for the first time in the play, he grins from ear to ear" (CP 478).

For Hasmukh Mehta, the fun and games have just begun, or so he thinks. His 'will' bequeaths his entire assets to a trust to be managed by Kiran Jhaveri for a span of twenty-one years until his profligate son turns forty-eight. By the time, of course, the wealth would be of little use to his wife, son or daughter-in-law. In addition, they would have to put up with the mistress who will have to live in the same house for the understood period. The guarantee of an inheritance has all along held together his family. After his death, it is the wilful 'will' again, that keeps the family together with the mistress holding the reins. The stunningly humorous presence of the dead father deriving malicious pleasure from the utter discomfiture of his family, savouring the power of the 'will' is ultimately subverted by the coming together of the wife and the mistress.

The power centres are turned on their heads, with a female ably assuming authority and smoothing out the previously dysfunctional family. Hasmukh is more successful with his devious 'will' than he had imagined. Even his own presence is exorcised by the new order, and his Machiavellian intentions are laid to rest as the ghost hastily beats a retreat.

2. Conclusion

Thus, the play attacks the patriarchal code by deriding human follies and foibles in a very interesting way. The play turns out to be an exorcism of the patriarchal code and skilful narration of the intrigues and manoeuvrings of a dysfunctional Indian family (Raina 451).

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