

## The Silent Struggles: Patriarchy and Female Empowerment in Dattani's Where There's a Will

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### ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will* examines the complexities of patriarchy and the unvoiced challenges encountered by women in a male-dominated culture. The narrative revolves around the Mehta family, whereby Hasmukh Mehta, an authoritarian patriarch, maintains posthumously influence via his will. Dattani astutely elucidates the gender dynamics inside the home, emphasizing the marginalization of women under patriarchal standards. The female characters in the play, especially Sonal and Kiran, embody quiet victims who adhere to the demands of a patriarchal society but ultimately discover their voices and assert their autonomy. Dattani elucidates the repressive power dynamics inside Indian families via characters and narratives, while also depicting a universal quest for equality and freedom. His use of humour and simplicity in the play amplifies the feminist subtext, articulating a robust critique of societal standards that constrains women's agency. *Where There's a Will* promotes female empowerment and the deconstruction of patriarchal ideals, advocating equality, freedom, and uniqueness for women. Dattani urges audiences to consider the extensive ramifications of gender inequality within familial frameworks globally, by examining the psychological and emotional effects of patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Female Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Family Dynamics, Oppression, Liberation

### INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani, a prominent character in modern Indian theater, has garnered significant acclaim for his adeptness in portraying the intricacies of Indian culture via his creations. Dattani, as a writer, director, and actor, use his theatrical skills to interrogate societal conventions, especially concerning gender roles, family dynamics, and identity politics. His works provide a perceptive examination of contemporary Indian society, with one of his notable plays, *Where There's a Will* (1988), serves as a compelling critique of the pervasive influence of patriarchy and the unvoiced challenges faced by women ensnared by it. Patriarchy, an oppressive social structure that gives males more power than women, is present in the home in subtler but not in less harmful ways than in society at large. "Patriarchy is a historical construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end," writes Gerda Lerner in her influential book *The Creation of Patriarchy*. "The clock is ticking". (Lerner 1986, p. 217). In Dattani's play, female emancipation is attained by subverting male authority, and this phrase highlights the itability of change under oppressive institutions, a concept that is close to home. The patriarchal structure binds Sonal and Kiran, two women whose lives Dattani uses to highlight the ways in which women's pain is often ignored and silenced by cultural and family norms.

Hasmukh Mehta, patriarch of the Mehta family, represents the dominating influence of males in family systems in *Where There's a Will*, a character created by Dattani. Even after he passes away, Hasmukh's will dictates how his wife Sonal, daughter-in-law Kiran, and son Ajit should conduct their lives. The title of the play is a pun that alludes to both the physical will that Hasmukh abandons and the metaphorical "will" of patriarchal power that tries to limit and restrict the agency of women. Literary critic M. K. Naik notes that Dattani's writing "addresses the social and emotional complexities of Indian society with a sharp sense of irony and keen insight" (Naik, 1993, p. 118). *Where There's a Will* exemplifies this concept. Dattani's portrayal of patriarchy in the Mehta family serves as a microcosm of the broader patriarchal framework existing in Indian culture. In this framework, women are assigned submissive positions and are expected to be quiet, compliant, and reliant on male authority. Sonal, Hasmukh's wife, epitomises the conventional lady who has assimilated patriarchal

conventions, embracing her position as silent suffering. Her passivity contrasts with Kiran, a younger, more vocal woman who finally challenges Hasmukh's authority, showing possibilities for resistance and strength under patriarchal constraints.

Fundamentally, *Will* is a feminist drama. It calls attention to the ways in which women are excluded and their contributions are underappreciated, thereby challenging the strongly rooted patriarchal ideals that rule Indian homes. In her pioneering book *The Second Sex*, feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir contends that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267). This implies that, rather than naturally, the roles women are supposed to play are socially created. Dattani's drama captures this concept as it investigates the conflict between women's need for autonomy and self-assertion and their socially enforced duties. In particular, Kiran captured the female fight for emancipation. Originally seen by the Mehta family as an outsider, she eventually shows herself as a strong-willed lady who defies patriarchal expectations imposed on her. Literary historian Anita Myles advises, "Dattani presents women not as mere victims of patriarchy, but as individuals with the potential to reclaim their power and assert their identity" (Myles, 2006, p. 92). Kiran's last confrontation with Hasmukh's will, both real and symbolic, for control marks the assertion of female agency and the bursting of patriarchal bonds.

Representing the concept that men must lead, protect, and rule women in their lives, Hasmukh Mehta is a classic example of patriarchal authority. Hasmukh's spirit remains big over the Mehta family even now, after his death. This ghostly appearance represents the tenacity of patriarchal power, even after the patriarch is no longer. Men writers often "exercise the greatest imaginative control" by depicting women as "haunted" by patriarchal characters, as Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar contend in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 44). Hasmukh's ghost in Dattani's play stands in for this terrible presence, a metaphor of the relentless hold patriarchy has on the feminine mind. However, unlike the conventional depictions of women as docile victims, Dattani's female characters are not helpless. Kiran's contact with Hasmukh's spirit captures her will to question his power and reinvent her role within the family. At the conclusion of the drama, Hasmukh's spirit was metaphorically expelled to represent the release of women from patriarchal control. By means of this exorcism, Dattani confirms the feminist message of his work that women must challenge and destroy the systems that subjugate them, thus attaining their autonomy. Although *Where There's a Will* is set within the framework of an Indian household, its subjects are universal. Patriarchy is not unique to Indian society; rather, it is a worldwide phenomenon that has historically persecuted women in many different civilisations and nations. Dattani's depiction of the Mehta family therefore functions as a microcosm for the greater world, as women worldwide fight for equality, liberty, and independence from comparable challenges.

According to critic Bruce King, Dattani "explores the particularities of Indian life but always with an eye towards universal relevance" (King, 2004, p. 141). This universality is evident in Dattani's approach to the commonality of patriarchal tyranny, which transcends cultural and geographical borders. Sonal and Kiran's secret difficulties mirror those of women worldwide, whose contributions are often devalued, and whose voices are silenced by cultural conventions. By placing these challenges within the setting of a single family, Dattani emphasises the intimate and personal character of patriarchy, making the topic of gender inequality more accessible and sympathetic to viewers.

Dattani's plays are distinguished by their use of stylistic minimalism. *Where There's a Will* is a short play, yet it carries a lot of meaning with its succinct language and strong characterisation. This basic technique enables Dattani to concentrate on the emotional and psychological intricacies of his characters, especially the ladies. The set's minimalism and the shortness of the scenes create an intimate atmosphere, taking the audience into Sonal and Kiran's inner lives, as they deal with the weight of patriarchy. As critic Erin B. Mee points out, "Dattani's minimalism is deceptive; beneath the surface of his seemingly straightforward plays lies a complex web of social commentary" (Mee, 2008, p.63). In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani's social criticism is aimed firmly at the institution of patriarchy, using his characters' emotional problems to criticise the larger societal systems that perpetuate female inequity.

Using the Mehta family as a microcosm for a greater society in which women are enslaved and silenced, Mahesh Dattani offers a clear, cutting indictment of patriarchy in *Where There's a Will*. Dattani shows that women negotiate the complexity of patriarchal tyranny in their pursuit of empowerment by means of the characters of Sonal and Kiran, therefore exploring the conflict between compliance and rebellion. Combining the general appeal of the play with its feminist overtones offers a timeless investigation of gender relations and the quiet battles of women in patriarchal countries. Dattani's work is both strongly anchored in the particularities of Indian society yet resonant with universal themes of power, control, and emancipation, as critics like M. K. Naik, Anita Myles, and Erin B. Mee have noted. In this sense, *Where There's a Will* is a powerful monument to the bravery of women who, despite patriarchal silence, find the will to recover their voice and authority.

#### **Discussion:**

Domestic play and Indian family dramas are two possible subtitles for the show. It primarily addresses the patriarchal structure of Indian culture, the oppression of women by males, and the desire for emancipation from male rule. Because patriarchy is rooted in men's psychology, it can permeate society and exert power over

women inside families. For some reason, males tend to think of themselves as the ultimate arbiters of women's goals, interests, and freedoms as well as creators and controllers of everything. In most Indian households, boys and girls play together as siblings and receive equal love and attention from their parents. However, as the kids get older, adults start to instill in them the values of "manhood" and "submission" by establishing clear gender roles. On the one hand, the play shows patriarchy in all its ugly glory, and on the other, it showcases powerful female characters who are just as capable as the males and can make their own choices, even when faced with resistance from their superiors and the patriarchal system. Modern feminism, in which women fight for equality in all spheres of society and their own homes, is an offshoot of this brave resistance to patriarchal conventions. Even in the drama, hitherto subjugated women take center stage as they fearlessly fight for Hansmukh Mehta's rightful share of the estate. Mistress Kiran Jhaveri, who is responsible for Hansmukh's estate and will, endures hardships throughout her life. Every night he drank, Jhaveri's intoxicated father would beat her mother. Kiran saw her father hit her mom, but she and her younger siblings were seldom the targets of his aggression. In addition to being violent against Kiran, Kiran's spouse was alcoholic. She agreed to be Hansmukh's mistress, because she needed money for food, shelter, and transportation.

While Hansmukh was both a parent and spouse, he dominated. He had strong feelings toward Sonal, his wife, and Preeti, his daughter-in-law. He hopes that his son Ajit would marry well and become a great businessman, much like Hansmukh. Ajit is also expected to obey his direction and adhere to his ideals. Once Hansmukh achieves his goal of imposing his will and patriarchal eccentricities on his family, he stops at nothing to ensure that he controls their life. However, he felt embarrassed when his son and wife did not do as he asked, so he sought Kiran, grew close to her, and enjoyed being in her company out of irritation. As time goes on, they get closer, and Kiran becomes his faithful companion and mistress because of her willingness to comply with his desires and suggestions. In these words, Hansmukh's tyrannical nature and the underlying patriarchal tendencies are shown.

How do I am unhappy? Reason: I am not my father. Ajit, who is he? As he says, I have paid attention to. I followed his instructions. I was his employee. I was toiled away for him. He was pleased by me. I hoped my child would make me that. Unfortunately, the treatment was unsuccessful. My mistress is a mystery for me. Just because I'm sad...(MD 36)

To put it simply, Ajit wants to be free to do, as he pleases. He disregarded Hansmukh's advice on how to become a wealthy businessman. Hansmukh inherited his father's domineering personality qualities and had no problems following orders. His natural inclination is to direct others' lives so that they serve their own goals and desires. On the other hand, Ajit had an innate tendency to disobey his father's desires and commands. Ajit's character is seen by his remarks; "I mean that you want to run the show, play Big Boss as long as you can...And can do it through me. In short, you want me to be you...And what becomes of me? The real me. If I am you, then where am i?"(MD13)

Ajit's remarks reflect his struggle for existential self-identity and his rebellion against the patriarchal system's controlling and dominating forces. He longs to believe in his own greatness and is recognised as an accomplished individual in the world. He longs for the autonomy that comes with his own unique self. Since Hansmukh Mehta is a patriarchal figure, his choices pertaining to the family are final and enforceable. Ajit, his son, disagrees with his father and refuses to participate in the activity. A confrontation between the two patriarchal figures occurs as a result of disagreements between the father and son. Despite the Hansmukh's dominance in this bout, Ajit refused to give up to him. Ajit is expected to adhere to certain workplace regulations set by Hansmukh. These include consistently attending the office, refraining from using a cell phone, eating lunch from the tiffin, and refraining from engaging in office amusement. However, at &T is Ajit's dream-firm. Conflicts between Hasmukh and Ajit sometimes arise because Hasmukh is uncourteous to Ajit because Hasmukh is opposed to Ajit's choices. The capabilities of Hasmukh's son Ajit remain a mystery. He writes Ajit off as a naive, obstinate, and worthless kid; "...you are nothing. Just a big zero. No matter what you do, you will remain at zero. Over the years, you will keep adding zeroes to your zero. Zero, zero, zero...the zeroes don't mean a thing." (MD13).

Hasmukh claims that his wife Sonal is a wonderful chef and a kind person, but that they have never had sexual interactions outside of marriage due to Sonal's lack of interest in the subject. Consequently, Hasmukh has an intimate connection with Kiran Jhaveri and takes her as his mistress. "Hasmukh saying"

Ditto our sex life. Mud .twenty five years of marriage and I do not think she (Sonal) has ever enjoyed sex. Twenty five years of marriage and I have not enjoyed sex with her. So what a man do?...I started eating out .Well, I had money.... A mistress. An Unmarried lady...A shrewed hard-headed marketing executive. If there was any in my office who had brain to match mine, it was her.'(MD33)

Hasmukh maintains his self-assurance even after passing away, despite the fact that he neglected to impart a

patriarchal moral lesson to his family members while living. No effort on their part would yield even a single cent of Hasmukh's estate. Kiran Jhaveri is Ajit's supervisor and boss both at work and at home, in addition to being trustee and custodian of the will and the property. His family is expected to adhere to a set of norms and principles outlined in his will for property.

Kiran is a clever and a knowledgeable woman, thus Hasmukh picks her to be a trustee of his will. Hasmukh believes that Kiran can keep an eye on his crafty and devious daughter-in-law, Preeti. Kiran still has an intellect that can compete with Hasmukh, despite all these other things. Her thoughts were similar to those of Hasmukh. To ensure that his son-in-law, daughter-in-law, and wife continue to live according to his desires, Hasmukh delegates his patriarchal responsibilities to Kiran upon his death. Everyone in Hasmukh's family knows that they can obtain a piece of wealth if they choose. After Kiran Jhaveri's death, Hasmukh took control of his family in his name, providing a chance to educate his relatives about patriarchy. As the members go about their days, Hasmukh's spirit watches over them and offers commentary. The drama reaches a tipping point after Hasmukh Mehta's death: Suddenly, Kiran Jhaveri, a woman, plays the role of a patriarch. The family members' lives and activities were controlled and manipulated by her. This role allows her to act patriarchal, even if she is a woman. According to Kiran Jhaveri, the patriarchal system includes both males and females. In a patriarchal society, both men and women actively participate in and tolerate one another. Following the death of Hasmukh's wife Sonal, Kiran Jhaveri takes on the role of a father figure for Ajit. Sonal's sister, Minal, also played a controlling role. As a patriarchal figure, moral rules over Sonal and Sonal submit to her authority. Once members of the patriarchal system accept it, they can work.

The reason for Hasmukh's controlling character is because his lover Kiran Jhaveri, his daughter-in-law Preeti, and his wife Sonal have all agreed to live under his shadow. Family and society embrace patriarchy because it provides stability to both men and women, even if these women suffer from Hasmukh's dictates. They waited for his death and blessed the day when they would earn their shares in Hasmukh's property. As a woman who has endured patriarchal household and culture, Kiran Jhaveri shares Hasmukh's perspective and conduct. In general, she despises men. Both her father and spouse have committed horrific acts on her. Opportunities for vengeance against men present themselves to her while she is in Hasmukh's hand. Hasmukh grants complete control over Ajit's life. Kiran is truthful when she performs her job. After seeing Hasmukh, Kiran moves in with Ajit, Sonal, and Preeti. Kiran stated;

All I am is his wealthy trustee. Not the proprietor. All of this is rightly yours, you three. And if you listen to what he says, then.... Running Ajit Mehta's dependable collection of enterprises is my primary responsibility. I am also obligated, as trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, to teach Ajit Mehta and, in due course, to gradually transfer most of my duties to him (MD 66,67,68). Since you are all disobeying the restrictions laid forth by the decedent, I am within my rights to declare that the trust's assets will be distributed to certain charity organisations specified by the decedent. This means you will never see a rupee in your lifetime. (MD69).

Both Ajit and Hasmukh were used by Kiran, who acted as patriarchal figure, forcing them to live in fear. Kiran Jhaveri used Hasmukh more as a pawn. For Hasmukh, Kiran was both a father figure and a pivotal role in his life. She was responsible for everything. Kiran stated;

"In everything, he is reliant on me. He wanted to believe that he was in charge. And yet, I was. He desired intervention in his life. Just like his dad had. "I don't want a mistress", Hasmukh said. Having a father figure in his life is important to him. I was a woman he thought would be his mother. Boys and men never really mature." (MD 94).

It is now clear that the patriarchal code is in control of patriarchy, which was formerly dominated by men. Females find the courage to challenge male-imposed conventions and standards.

As a result of males realising their own frailty in projecting an image of false strength via erroneous gender norms and regulations, women gain autonomy and freedom at home and in society. As women have become more self-aware, they have begun to demand equal rights in all spheres of society, including home. The feminist movement was largely responsible for amplifying the need for gender parity. Feminism emerged when women realised their power and were granted equal rights to family and society. Consequently, they must be granted the same rights as men. Like Kiran Jhaveri, women have the power to influence men, just as much as men have authority over women. Like Minal, a woman may control the lives of other women. The restricted perspectives of family and society have expanded and new ways of thinking have emerged as a result of feminism. Kiran was stern with Ajit at first, but she eventually came to see that he was different from his father. Ajit treats women with respect to their humility. Unlike his father, he does not exhibit domineering traits or authority. Because he has guts to defy his father's disapproval, Kiran learns that she ought to be kind and courteous to Hasmukh's relatives. For the simple reason that Hasmukh had already made his family's lives more difficult while he was living, and now that he was dead, he imposed even more stringent regulations, further adding to their misery. Because Kiran wants to stop the misery that the patriarchal system is responsible for, she decides that she would be friendly with Hasmukh's family. In her previous incarnation, she endured immense cruelty in the hands of her father, brother, and spouse.

Like you, I figured out what I needed to know the hard way through experience. Observing my mother's patience as she put up with my father's daily ritual of returning home with rum bottles wrapped in newspapers taught me valuable lessons. As I saw him physically abusing her and yelling her! Beloved sibling. Like their dad, they now bring home rum bottles wrapped in the newspapers. Abusive behaviour against spouses. I am like my mother. Because I was an alcoholic, I had to put up with his profanity.

Like you, I learned to bear my pain in silence. Oh! When will this be over? (MD 91)

Every one of Kiran, Sonal, Preeti, Hasmukh, and Ajit are all under someone's thumb, and their conditions are quite similar. Why should a woman not have the guts to defy patriarchal norms if men do so with such bravery? After realising this, Kiran resolves to stop the patriarchal code's rule over the people. Kiran learns that Praati killed Hasmukh, but she keeps the news to herself so that Hasmukh may suffer in silence while he is caught in his own traps. So, feminism triumphs against patriarchy in the end. Thus, we need to revolutionise our perspectives on women and stand in solidarity with feminism.

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