



Reshaping Masculinity in Mahesh Dattani's Where There's A Will



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Abstract

Masculine and feminine are medical as well as cultural identities. As a cultural identity, the meaning of masculinity and femininity are always changing according to person and period. There are many socio-economical changes every day, hence, the traditional traits of masculinity are also simultaneously changing.

Mahesh Dattani's first play 'Where there's a Will' is best play, which notices the changing traits of masculinity in Indian society.

Keywords : Masculinity, dominance, identity, Mahesh Dattani, culture

Research Paper

Masculine identity is considered as superior, oppressive and consequently dominant. On the other hand, feminine identity becomes inferior, dominated and subordinate. Thus, to study masculinity is to study femininity because these identities are interconnected - one is dominating and another is dominated. It is a politics of gender identity to consider these identities different from each other. In the modern society, women have opportunities to be educated and seeking job or doing business makes them independent economically as well as socially. So, it is a challenge before men to maintain masculine identity as superior over the feminine identity. To maintain superiority man has kept all the power resources in his hand to keep women on deprived and dependent position. Therefore, relationship of one gender over the other is a power struggle. Thus, from very beginning masculinity is always referred as a power politics. In this connection Judith Habersham says,

The power of the state... Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance the consequence of the traffic in the women, and the promise of the social privilege. (Halberstam, Judith)

In past, the authority and dominance of men was simply accepted. But the contemporary period is representative of the loss of masculine rights. The breadwinner role of man is no longer credible as well as work dependent on muscle power is also declined. It results the growth in the number of female laborers. Now it is the time to change conventional masculine role of man into a companion of woman in the household works. John Beynon has quoted this change of masculine role in following words,

Moreover, generally speaking, men must now treat women as equals and participate more fully in domestic matters, including child care, although the extent to which they actually do so is debatable. (54 Beynon)

Coward speaks about the 'me – culture' as an emerging new culture of man which is not idealistic as previous culture because it is based on trivial things like pop music, computer, video games etc. He states on the new trends of masculinity,

... the moral status of masculinity, built on the foundation of hard work, a single career and the aim of providing for a family, has completely gone.... (Coward 1999:177)

(140 Beynon)

Masculinity is a complex idea. It is deeply entrenched in generations of social conditioning within tradition bound cultural set up. Mick Leach claims,

Unlike the biological state of maleness, masculinity is a gender identity constructed socially, historically and politically. It is the cultural interpretation of maleness, learnt through participation in society and its institutions. (Leach Mike 1994: 36-37)

Mahesh Dattani is Modern Indian English dramatist. He is Sahitya Akadami award winning dramatist. His plays are concerned more with humanity than to deal as the contemporary issues merely for entertainment. He deals with the contemporary issues of men and women along with the issues which remain taboo on the Indian theatre for a long time i.e. issues of queer and transgender.

Since the first play, Mahesh Dattani deals with the issues of masculinity through patriarchy. He shows that how patriarchy plays its leading role in the development of the masculine identity. In India, patriarchy is most dominant factor in shaping and reshaping the identity of men and women who come under its domain. This patriarchal dominance denies freedom to women and children. In **Where There's A Will**, Dattani comically satirizes on this serious issue of patriarchy and attempts to break the percolation of the patriarchy from its one generation to another generation.

The play set on the urban life of the middle class Gujarati family of Hasmukh Mehta. All the four members of the family are in the tangible position because Hasmukh expects from them to behave according to his expectations. Unfortunately, they could not reach up to his expectation that teases and troubles to him. He frequently quarrels with them and expresses his distaste on minor things also like the nibbling of the papad of his son before him. He considers his son is not good for anything. His wife is not wise to help him in his business. He thinks that she is not liable to run her family on her own because she can't do anything without the help of her elder sister Minal. His daughter-in-law is cunning, she has nothing importance of their relationship but has interest only in his property. No doubt there may be fault in his family members but it is also true that Hasmukh is egoist and proud on his achievements.

Hasmukh Mehta is a successful business-man of his own credit. Therefore, he is a strict patriarch but fails to keep his impact on his family members. His son Ajit, wife Sonal and daughter-in-law Preeti have never fulfilled his expectation. He is not happy on them that make the atmosphere of house in tense. Asha K. Chaudhari says,

Though the convoluted design of the will, the relationships between the four main protagonists of a joint family are painfully twisted as the play begins to come alive in performance. (p. 28. Asha Chaudhari.)

Chaudhari speaks on the humor of the play,

...it is in layers of Ibsenque black comedy with asphyxiated overtones.

(p. 28. Asha Chaudhari.)

Dattani has successfully handled the clash between the strict patriarchal father and self indulgent son. The son denies the old ideology of patriarchy of his father and becomes self revolutionary. The nature of father and son is in contrast. The aim of the dramatist is to reduce the role of patriarchy from family and society because patriarchy denies freedom to young generation and attempts to grow them with stereotypical ways. Therefore, Hasmukh Mehta may be successful to the rest world but unsuccessful man to his son and family because he fails to grow his son by the patriarchal stereotypes. His wife is the main obstacle to inculcate patriarchal teaching to his son. Hasmukh thinks that his marriage with Sonal is unhappy marriage and the birth of his son is the grave mistake of his life. Their presence in his life is his great tragedy. He confesses to audience,

... when I was twenty one, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married. ...

The following year Ajit was born. Tragedy after tragedy... (CP 464)

Hasmukh has a fear that his son would lose everything, which he has achieved. Thus, Hasmukh has made a will and appointed Kiran Jhaveri, his mistress, as a trustee to his property. The will has placed outside unit as a trustee that comes at the centre only after his death. He takes this step in disappointment but intends to teach lesson to his family especially his son. It is a great surprise to audience that the patriarch lives as a ghost after his death to see implementation of his rules through his will. Asha K. Chaudhari says,

The play piquantly sketches this 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. (p. 29 Asha Chaudhari)

At the age of forty five, Hasmukh Mehta suffers from physical and mental fatigue. It makes him patient of diabetes and blood pressure. He has first heart attack and expects second heart attack. While addressing audience, he smokes a number of cigarettes and predicts his own death. His prediction comes true and within a few moments, he dies. It is important to notice that everything has happened as he wished; even his wish of death is also fulfilled. But the only thing that doesn't happen by his wish is his son cannot follow him. Therefore, he plans to implement his hegemonic power over them by becoming ghost to control and watch them.

The next person who is not up to his expectation is his wife Sonal. His marital relationship with his wife is not satisfied. He believes that she has not any quality of a good wife. He considers her a tasteless woman. Asha K. Chaudhari comments on marital relationship of the couples as,

The colourless relationship between the two couples that compromise the family are developed in elaborate vignettes; portraying two singularly unexciting generations of couples; sexually insipid and loveless, who remain in typically materialistic and money oriented upper middle class milieu. (p. 30 Asha Chaudhari)

The strong patriarchal belief of Hasmukh makes him look at his wife as an inferior being. In his view, his wife is the most unsuccessful and tasteless woman. Therefore, he affords everything from outside to fulfill his own cravings. He tells to audience,

I started eating out. Well, I had the money. I could afford to eat in fancy places. And what about my sex life? Well, I could afford that too. These expensive ladies of the night in five star hotels! (Smiles at some pleasurable memories.) Some of them were really....! But that didn't go on for long. I mean, a man in my position has to be careful. I need a safer relationship. Something between a wife and a pick-up. Yes. A mistress! (CP472-73)

Dattani portrays the archetypical picture of Hasmukh Mehta by showing him as an overbearing father and dominating husband. When his expectations from his wife and son never fulfill, he frustrates and doubts on the motives of marriage. He asks audience,

Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? No. There's more to it than that. What? May be he need 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. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name? (Pause.) (CP 474-75)

In a patriarchal society, man demands son from wife to run his family name forward. He considers son as a real heir of family because daughter is only an object of exchange in marriages from one family to another. He expresses his motive of marriage, "Why did I marry? Yes, to get a son. So that when I grew old, I can live life again through my son. Why did my father marry? To get me. Why did I marry? To get Ajit. .." (CP473)

Hasmukh Mehta behaves as a strict patriot with his son because as a child he lived under the compulsion of patriarchal rules. But when he becomes father of one son, he expects the same obedience from his son. He believes that it is his responsibility to perpetuate patriarchy and its stereotypical rules from one generation to another generation. Hasmukh Mehta's rude and

strict conduct towards his family members is because of the strong impact of patriarchy on him. Expectation of obedience from his son is not wrong but the problem is that his son could not obey his orders and implement own ideas in his work. Hasmukh Mehta dislikes this conduct of his son. He expresses his disappointment in following words,

Why am I unhappy? Because I don't have a son. A son should make me happy. Like I made my father...happy. I listened to him. I did what he told me to do. I worked for him. I worked hard for him. I made him...happy. That is what I wanted my son to make me. (CP475)

Ajit needs money to modernize their plant. But Hasmukh Mehta never agrees to give him money. He thinks that it is a dead loss of money to give in the hands of his immature and foolish son. But Ajit's intentions are clear when he speaks with his friend on phone. He says, "I mean, it's not as if I want the money for myself. It's for his factory. But he just won't listen to me. I don't think he has ever listened to me in his entire life." (CP455) Hasmukh fears that instead of increasing his business, he will destroy what he has achieved. He expresses his fear,

But he failed! Miserably! He has not a single quality I look for in a son! He has made my entire life worthless! He is going to destroy me! It won't be long before everything I worked for and achieved will be destroyed! Finished because of him! Well, I won't let it happen! I won't let it... (CP475)

Hasmukh Mehta never trusts on his son. He thinks that he doesn't have a brain but his daughter-in-law Preeti has a brain. He thinks she marries to his stupid son only because of his wealth. He says, "My son isn't really after my wealth. That's because he doesn't have any brain." (CP456) The way he speaks with his son reveals his patriarchal nature. His tone shows his superiority in everything than his son. He considers his son as weak man because his young generation is not liable to bear the burden of his business. He says, "You are raw! Under all that pressure in the office, you will bend. You will break. That's why I'm toughening you up. Somebody tough has to be around to run the show." (CP460)

Hasmukh Mehta remembers his past when he sees to his son. He remembers that his father worked hard to make him a successful man. He thanks to his father to teach him a hard lesson and made him liable to become successful man at any mode of life. He becomes nostalgic to remember his past,

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 accounts and

counting our profits. The other half of the night we would dream of being millionaires! (CP464)

Hasmukh tries to perpetuate his self conception on his son which he had received from his father. He remembered how he proved good son to his father than his brother. He never liked to give trouble to his father like his brother. Thus, Hasmukh has willingly accepted the dominance of his father and considers that it is the key of his success. He reveals it as,

I do remember my brother. He ran away to God with some hippies. It was the sort of thing youngsters did then. Some months later we received a letter from him, from New York City, saying that he had joined a group which sang the praises of Lord Krishna on the streets and in airports. (Lights a cigarette.) He had to go to America for that! He could have sung bhajans at the Vishnu temple across our street. (Puffs on the cigarette.) Where was I? My father. My father had only me to help him out. (CP463-464)

Hasmukh is in frustration when his patriarchal power does not affect his son. He thought that his prayer to god to get a son is his mistake. He expresses his anguish to have a son, “I should have prayed for a daughter.”(CP460) His frustration increases at the height when he requests God to take him away from his life and never return him again to disturb him. He says,

...I actually prayed to get him. Oh God! I regret it all. Please let him just drop dead. No, no. what a terrible thing to say about one’s own son. I take it back. Just turn him into a nice vegetable so he won’t be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory, he has been my way. (CP455)

Hasmukh calls to his son as a big failure. He always compares his failure with his own success. He thinks his son as foolish and defames his name in the world of business. He says,

I, Hasmukh Mehta, am one of the richest men in this city. All by my own efforts. Forty –five years old and I am a success in capital letters. Twenty –three years old and he is on the road to failure, in bold capital letters! At his age, I was a mature responsible man, no eating my father’s head and nibbling at papads! (CP464)

Ajit faces trouble in living his own life due to his father’s treatment towards him. He expresses his plight,

Ever since I was a little boy, you have been running my life. Do this, do that or don’t do that, do this. Was I scared of you! Then when I grew up, I learnt to answer you back. And were you furious with me! I think it was worth disagreeing with you. At last I have the satisfaction of knowing that you were worried about me. (CP 487)

The condition of Ajit, because of the strict patriarch, becomes as a subaltern in the house. When he raises question about his rights, Hasmukh warns him and shows his position in the house, “You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.” (CP 458)

Ajit has no alternative than to live with him. He expresses his anguish, “Anything I do is a wrong for you! Just because you are a self-made man and had a deprived childhood, you feel that I am having it too easy. Nothing I do will ever seem intelligent to you. You are prejudiced.” (CP459)

Hasmukh Mehta is shocked by the arrogance of his son because in patriarchal society son could not dare to speak in such a way with his father. Hasmukh wants to know where he learned all these things. Ajit answers, “Nobody taught me anything! Why is it everything I say or do has to be something that somebody has told me or taught me to do.” (CP459)

Beena Agrawal focuses on the relationship between Hasmukh and Ajit,

The over interference of Hasmukh in the life of Ajit manifests the horrors of patriarchy that aims to control freedom and selfhood of all those who comes under its umbrella. (Beena Agrawal 108)

Even the death of Hasmukh Mehta has never made him free and valuable. The patriarch has never allowed his son to enjoy freedom. His will has given every right to his mistress. Thus, the will of Hasmukh Mehta keeps control on Ajit through Kiran Jhaveri. She has shown patriarchal authority on him which mentally tortures him. He expresses his anguish in the following words, “Everything she tells me to do is exactly what he would have wanted me to do. We are all living out a dead man’s dream! Quite a price to pay for a few crores of rupees to tide us by in our old age.” (CP501)

Here Dattani talks about the dangers of the patriarchy, which denies freedom for young man to seek an opportunity, which is essential for their overall growth. Dattani calls them, ‘weak men with false strength.’(CP508) Hasmukh Mehta treats his daughter-in-law as better than his son because she is wiser than his son. He speaks about her,

I expected my daughter-in-law to have more sense. But what did she say when I asked her the same question? You heard her. (Imitate Preeti.) ‘Yes’. But she is an intelligent girl, I can tell you. She has her eye on my money. Why else would she agree to marry a dead loss like my son? (CP 456)

The only person reaches up to his expectations is his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri. According to him, she is beautiful and has a brain like him. She is his mistress and later he makes her director of his company. He believes in her and hence, he makes her the trustee of his property. He praises her talent, “Not an ordinary typist or even a secretary. A shrewd hard-

headed marketing executive. If there was anyone in my office who had brains to match mine, it was her.” (CP473) Kiran, notices Hasmukh better than his family members, she reveals his true nature to Sonal which is still unnoticed to them.

He depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted me to run his life. Like his father had. (Pause.) Hasmukh didn't really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him! (CP510)

She ridicules not only Hasmukh but the whole race of men as, “Men really never grow up!” (CP510) She does not resist his patriarchy like Ajit but she has a pity on him. She says, “I should have hated him. Like I should have hated my father, my brothers and my husband. But all I felt for him was pity.” (CP510) Hasmukh Mehta starts to think about his exposure,

It is... true? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father's aspirations for me? Have I been my father's ghost? If that is true, then where was I? What become of me, the real me? (Realizing) Oh, my God! I sound like Aju! No-o-o! (Rushes out waving his arms.) (CP511)

The patriarchal spirit is so strong that he wished to implement it on them after his death also. Asha K. Chaudhari speaks about the will,

The will here becomes the iconic instrument to power to shape and reshape the destiny of the family / familial relationship after his death. But the irony is that Hasmukh, to give the devil his due, transfers this controlling power to a woman and changes the entire fabric of the monolithic that he is trying to preserve; immediately opening up the spaces for the individual identity that has all along sought to deny. (83 Asha K. Chaudhari)

Sonal while knowing the reality of Hasmukh discards his authority and makes a derogatory comment, “He was like a village buffalo. What did he understand about other people's feelings?” (CP507) Hasmukh starts to think about it,

Is it... true? Have I merely been to my father what Ajit has been to me? Have all my achievements been my father's aspirations for me? Have I been my father's ghost? If that is true, then where was I? What became of me, the real me? (CP511)

Kiran is happy to see that Ajit has challenged the patriarchal power of his father instead of accept it. He refused to follow his father's order. Kiran thinks that Ajit is escaped to become another Hasmukh because Hasmukh lived as a machine to fulfill the dreams of his father. She says to Sonal,

He may not be the greatest rebel on earth, but at least he is free of his father's beliefs. He resists. In a small way, but at least it's a start. That is enough to prove that Ajit has won and Hasmukh has lost. (CP 510)

Mahesh Dattani has expressed the existential anxiety of Hasmukh Mehta exists after his death also. Hasmukh compares the reverence of Ajit to him with reverence he had shown to his father. He compares, "What's this? A sandalwood garland? Don't I get fresh flowers every day? When my father died, I used to put fresh flowers on his photograph every day for a whole month before getting a sandalwood garland.." (CP487)

Hasmukh is pleased by seeing everyone happy. He could not like to disturb the happy picture of his family by entering inside the house. He says to himself,

No. I don't think I can enter this house. It isn't mine... any more. I will rest permanently on the tamarind tree. (Laughter at the table.) They are not my family any more. I wish I had never interfered with their lives. They look quite happy together. With Kiran sitting in my place. Oh, I wish I had been more...I wish I had lived. (Exits) (CP515)

In this play, Mahesh Dattani shows that the patriarchal authority shapes and dominates masculinity. If the man affects by patriarchy then it never allows anyone of his family to live happily. It teaches him to disallow freedom to woman and other family members and keep all the power strings in his hand only. But in this play it is an irony that this patriarchal masculinity is challenged by a woman who is his employee. Along with the patriarch's wife, she not only destroys the patriarchal domain but teaches the lesson that the house remains happy and complete not by ruling with power but by spreading affection and trust on everyone.

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