



## Defiance/Compliance Over-play in Mahesh Dattani's *Where there is a Will*



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### Research Paper :

Introduction:

The history of Indian Drama can be traced back to the Vedic era but it came of its age, after much trials and tribulations, only in the modern times, particularly after independence. It flourished in the hands of Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Asif Currimbhai and Badal Sircar but their body of works revels in their respective regional languages, giving a fresh lease of life and local colour to the native sensibilities represented. The milieu they envisage carries the stamp of pan-Indian identity of the early times in India; Indian mythology, history, rural, cultural ethos of an average human being pushed to the margins by the elite and powerful—all get space on the canvas of Indian Dramatic writings till the arrival of Mahesh Dattani on the horizon of theatrical world. Dattani was the first Indian dramatist who chose English as

his medium, resultantly giving expression to the world of urban, middle class India in his works. The influence of the greatest social dramatist Ibsen and his followers like the common man tragedy writers Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams is perceptible everywhere in Dattani's works but the world he inhabits is the middle class Indian society and their sensibilities.

Dattani's multi-faceted personality—writer, director, actor, musician—all encompassed in one—puts him on a high pedestal in comparison to his contemporaries. His superb stage-craft, along-with the unique use of space at multi-levels, not to mention the English language, put him in the different league from the writers of independent India. As he spent his formative days in the metro cities like Bangalore and got the kind of lasting impressions on his consciousness, he felt at ease in depicting the world he was at home in. But the issues he chooses to address asks for a special type of milieu where his characters appear belonging to a taboo world, a world which has remained neglected so far and its issues unaddressed in a fast changing world. Dattani himself admits about the people he portrays with so much love and finesse in his works: "They live on the fringe of the society and are not looking for acceptance, but are struggling to grab as much fringespace for themselves as they can. (CP, xiii) The playwright candidly talks about the issues he wants to highlight: "A subject has to be inspiring enough for me to want to write a play about. I do believe the purpose of the theatre is to bring to the forefront issues that society would rather keep in the background."(Dattani's blog)

Dattani is a great votary of rights of the people living at the margins and a true representative of this class—LGBT—and draws on his canvas the invisible faces of society like trans-genders, eunuchs and the issues related to minority and gender, a world which brings a smirk on the face of so-called civilized, conservative Indian society. Sahana's post quoting Dattani observes: "A staunch believer in theatre's power to "reflect society", Dattani said the medium should be channeled to showcase the current scenario of increasing violence against women as well as bring out the "much-ignored" lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) community."( Sahana Ghosh) The playwright

himself gives reasons for giving voice to the invisible world of urban India: “I think one has to be true to one’s own environment. Even if I attempted writing a play about the angst of rural Indian society, it wouldn’t ring true, it would be an outsider’s view—I could only hope to evoke sympathy, but never to really be a part of that unless I spend a lot of time there.” (Dattani, *Performing Arts Journal*) He locates his characters in typical middle class Indian setting in the play under critical examination and lets the audience make observation about the changing outlook of the younger generation and women about the stifling prevailing order where the authority rested in the hands of the aging, tiring patriarchal forces. During the course of action in the play the dramatist celebrates the resistance, inherent or acquired in the life-journey of his characters, an archetypal post-colonial characteristic of independent India.

*Where there is a Will* is a complete social drama, having all the ingredients of Shakespearean tragedies like power struggle on gender lines, generation divide, patriarchal hegemony, feminine vulnerabilities, ego clashes, vaulting ambitions, and villainy. The play questions the existing power structures, inclining towards the man, having control over the relations between man and man, man and woman as well as woman and woman in a world where hitherto patriarchal forces ruled the roost. Woven into a typical Indian social set-up, the play highlights the human frailties like lust for money, power and flesh. Hasmukh the head of the family is the pivot around whom the whole action takes place; even after his death he remains alive as a ghost and his presence is felt till the end of the play. The Mehta family in the play—comprising Hasmukh the business honcho and head of the family and his wife Sonal, their son Ajit and daughter-in-law Preeti, and outsider-turned insider Kiran who gradually takes the entire Mehta family in her control—appears a divided house on account of their varied perspective; The omni-presence of Hasmukh with his sarcasm, even after his death, tickles the audience throughout the play, making it a comic-tragedy.

One finds deft delineation of hankering for power, love for status quo as the equation remains tilted towards the conservative, patriarchal forces on the one hand and resistance to this status quo and assertion of self and identity on the other— the attributes which characterize the post-colonial India. Hasmukh's desire to be in the control of each and everything in the family, even after his death separates him from the rest of the characters who oppose, openly or in a veiled manner, everything put forth by him. Being a bi-product of this patriarchal society and modeled on his father's likings, Hasmukh expects same kind of response and compliance from his son Ajit. The un-ending bantering leading to a conflict between the father-son duo makes the similar reverberations in the minds of the audience as one finds in Miller's *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, though the milieu and reasons are different. The vocal protest by Ajit and subtle resistance from Preeti, Kiran and even by Sonal towards the end against dictum of Hasmukh and his ghost underlines the challenge to the age-old power equations in the Indian social world, a point Dattani wants to take home in a post-colonial world.

Discussion:

*Where there is a Will*, the first play written by Dattani, is a typical family saga where the two generations of a Gujrati middle class business family are positioned as foil to each other. Even more than that every member in the family seems opposed to another's view point— father-son, husband-wife or mother-sister-in-law, except the motherly affection making Sonal to take the side of her son Ajit. Hasmukh is a conventional, power hungry middle aged business man who expects all other to conform to his wishes and wants everything as per his whims, business or other family members. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri very pointedly underscores the point Dattani was after in *Where there is a Will*: "Interweaving his narrative around the scheming and plotting of the family members who apparently have been put in a fix by a dead man's will, Dattani explores the dichotomy between the male/female roles within the archetype of the family headed by a man and what happens when a woman takes over." (Kuthari, 57)

The uneasy and tense situation in the Mehta house indicates about the kind of life the middle-class people in India live—far from joy, happiness, bonding, attachment where perversions, inflated ego, crudity, and bitching have the free run. All have their fair share of imperfections or perversions. Hasmukh is a Machiavellian incarnate who became what his father wanted him to be, and now has reached the high echelons in the business world. As he himself grew in the shadow of his father, and later claims to be self-made man, he expects his son also to belong to the same league. He searches for opportunity to mock at his wife, and his comments bring a comic relief to the audience. His dissatisfaction for everything becomes to the fore when he calls his marriage with Sonal as well as birth of his son as tragic incidents. He loves unfettered powers and wants to control the fate of his family members even when he is not alive, and this he does through his registered 'will', reducing his family to the state of paupers. His reactions as a ghost and commentary about various characters' design not only reveal his true self but also of the other members in his family. His 'will' is just like what Khushwant Singh the renowned Indian writer imagines about the reactions of the people close to him or otherwise after his death in his essay 'Posthumous'. Hasmukh is every inch a Singh—both like cutting people to size, make fun of them and love fleshy transgressions. He has no respect for the institution of marriage; it is just to get a male child— a heir to one's wealth. But Ajit's attitude in not becoming his father's protégé disappoints him, making him to betray his family by finding comforts in the arms of Kiran:

Why do I have a mistress? Because I am unhappy. (Pause) Why am I unhappy? Because I don't have a son. Who is Ajit. Isn't he my son? No. He doesn't behave like my son. A son should make me happy. Like I made my father.(CP, 475)

He not only betrays his wife and family by developing illicit relations with Kiran but also makes the latter the trustee of all the Mehta properties. As the story unfolds, the word 'will' assumes the metaphorical significance and the

bickering it causes unravels the so far guarded selfish longings, tearing apart the false pretensions of love and affection.

The play opens with the juxtapositioning of two couples, representing two different generations. Hasmukh is a conservative, male chauvinist middle aged businessman having scant respect for those who differ from him— be it his submissive and meek wife Sonal or his son Ajit, a good for nothing fellow in the eyes of his father or Ajit's wife Preeti who appears very sensible, cultured and obedient, hiding her true colours till the death of Hasmukh; but the latter understood her very well much earlier: "That's my daughter-in-law, Preeti. Pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake." (CP, 456) All three—Sonal, Ajit and Preeti—live in the shadow of Hasmukh who leaves no opportunity in belittling his wife and son. Having a very low opinion about the ability of his son, Hasmukh, much to the displeasure of Ajit, never allows him a free hand. He rather wants him to model him on his own self. But Ajit defies every thing the old man asks him to do: "...I would rather lie than agree with you!" (469) and this ensues the sarcastic barbs not only about Ajit but also about Sonal who being a mother has a soft corner for Ajit. Preeti looks like a traditional daughter-in-law but she is very calculative, cunning and politically correct. Her mask gets removed after the death of Hasmukh; all the wealth that belonged to Hasmukh has been bequeathed to a trust where the main trustee will be Kiran Jhaveri, the Joint Director of Hasmukh's company-cum-his mistress. Left to the mercy of Kiran, all the members as per the 'will' of Hasmukh will have to go by the terms mentioned in it, and to the satisfaction of Kiran, in order to get ownership of the property when Ajit turns forty-five. Preeti's selfishness, her love for money and her earlier façade of respect for her-in-laws stand exposed; now she shows little respect for anything, anybody. She chides Sonal: "As far as I'm concerned, you and your sister { Minal} can go jump into a bottomless pit!" (CP, 486) Further, Preeti shows same venom in showing the place to her husband:

I will not take orders from you. I'm your wife, not your mistress! It's bad enough having your father's mistress running my life. I won't have you doing it too! Every day is a torture with her around. (CP, 500).

Preeti makes the audience reminiscent about the greatest female protagonist by Shakespeare Lady Macbeth when she replaces the tablets of hers with those of Hasmukh and this hastens the death of the latter. The hypocrisy and wickedness in her character shocks everybody, even Kiran, except Hasmukh who read her designs very early. Dattani presents in Preeti a complete opposite to Sonal, a lady of no self of her own, while the former loves her own freedom and identity, quite alien to the conservative Indian ethos for a daughter-in-law. She is a rebel, rather a shrewd one much like Kiran, as both of them use their armoury at their disposal at appropriate time with delicate precision. Preeti knows the art of getting the things done to her advantage, but when Ajit doesn't show the same sort of machinations as those of Preeti, she questions his meaningless resistance, hinting that if 'resistance' harms in the long run, then there is no point in doing so:

What did he do? He! He was a slave driver, your father! He almost drove me mad with his bossy nature. He succeeded with your mother. But I didn't let him do that to me. How did I manage? Simple. I gave in. I simply listened to him and didn't 'protest' like you! I knew he didn't have long to live. I thought why not humour him for a few days? (501)

The characteristics displayed by Preeti and Ajit make them akin to the Macbeth couple; Preeti appears more evil-minded than Ajit, and echoes the shenanigans of Lady Macbeth in pushing her husband Macbeth to commit the murder of King Duncan. Lady Macbeth is evil-incarnation when she says:

Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done't. (Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act II, ii, 12-13)

Preeti did everything with a pattern in her mind, a quality Ajit is no match. Hasmukh's comments about her confirms this fact: "...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?...My son isn't after my wealth. That's because he doesn't have any brains." (456) She is as strong-willed as Lady Macbeth, having no compunction in hastening Hasmukh's death.

Kiran Jhaveri is one of the finest creations by Dattani who is completely focused on her goal. No doubt, she has a rough patch, but she is not a victim of other's designs; rather it is she who ensnares the Mehta family in her grip and the future of entire family depends on her decision. She is the most enlightened character; whatever she does she does willingly and not under any compulsion. Her life bears a testimony to the insensitivity of the male-world towards the women. In becoming a mistress of Hasmukh she becomes his mentor, guide, father and everything. Hasmukh is nothing without Kiran. She knows how much hollow men are and tears apart the inflated ego of the male world: "Mrs Mehta. My father, your husband—they were weak men with false strength." (508) But she is not a malevolent character, quite different from Preeti. When she starts living with the Mehta family, she instead of arm-twisting the family members, becomes a source of strength for Sonal, and assumes the role of a counselor or a guide. When she comes to know about the wickedness of Preeti, she becomes ready to keep the secret but not before making her realize about her misdeed. All this shows that Kiran's honesty in whatever she did— be it unethical or greed— she never played with the emotions anybody. She appears the sanest creation of Dattani. She does for Mehta family what Portia does in *The Merchant of Venice* with Shylock in the court when the latter was hell bent on getting his pound of flesh.

Kiran is a complete foil to helpless, compliant Sonal who even needs the help of her sister in condoling the death of her husband. She is a strong willed, independence loving lady, and doesn't allow her economic constrains come her way. She is the most practical woman in the play because she doesn't live in illusions; she witnessed all the insensitivity and callousness, not only in her own life after her marriage and her consensual separation from her husband to become a part of life Hasmukh's life, but also as a daughter and



a sister: "I learnt my lessons from being close to life. I learnt my lessons from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home everyday with bottles of rum wrapped in newspapers." (CP, 508) She experienced all sorts of violence inflicted on woman within the four-walls of traditional Indian homes, and these very experiences toughened her to take her own independent decisions and to come out of the shadow of men—father, brother, husband or paramour. By becoming the mistress of Hasmukh she not only becomes his master but also takes winds out of the inflated world male world built around hollowed masculinity, authority and influence:

He {Hasmukh} depended on me for everything. He thought he was the decision maker. But I was. He wanted 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!...Men never really grow up!...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. (CP, 510)

It is the free, liberal spirit of Kiran, acquired after going through so much pain and sufferings in her life, that she develops a liking for Ajit. She likes breaking the barriers, all the stereotyping associated with social forces in man-woman, elder-younger relationship, and the quality of resistance that she observes in Ajit makes her pronounce a judgement not only about father-son relationship but has over-bearings on all sorts of relationships going through changing times and divides between modernity and tradition: "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)

The rebellion or defiance displayed by the dramatis personae of Dattani speaks of the gradual loosening of grip of the parochial, conservative powers over the margins—women and young generation. Hasmukh loves subservience of others; whoever questions his authority or disagrees with him is ridiculed by him. Just to extract conformity and toe his line of thinking, even when he is no more alive, that gets a 'will' executed, dishonouring all his legal

heirs, and puts Kiran in the supervisory position. For him his mistress is more trustworthy than his own blood, his family and through his 'will' makes Kiran assume the most powerful position in the Mehta family. With her cleverness she outsmarts everybody, even her savior Hasmukh. The difference in the intelligent use of their respective powerful position, Sita Raina observes, separates the two:

To be the watcher of one's self is to make intelligent changes in this life. In *Where there is a Will*, Hasmukh has control over his family through his money and forgoes an opportunity to improve his interpersonal relationship. As do most of us. Consequently, when he became the watcher of his actions, he perceives that his desire for control has led him to be the victim of his own machinations unlike Kiran who uses power play to essentially improve her relationships. (CP, 451)

From the position of a margin she reaches the centre when everybody is dependent upon her. Her comments about Hasmukh after latter's death presents her an enlightened, confident, independent lady.

Kiran and Preeti are not vulnerable to the guiles of men-folk in their world; they are very conscious of their own self, and their every move reveals their ulterior motive. She appears the wisest person in the play when she opens her mind before Sonal about her clandestine relationship with Hasmukh: "Mrs Mehta, no woman has an affair with an older man, especially a married man, for a little bit of respect and trust. It was mainly for money." (CP, 506) But recalling her own past life, her bitter experiences in her own life as well as her observation of the maltreatment of her mother at the hands of her father, she feels a feminine affinity with Sonal, and her voice becomes the voice of all the feminine world against the unjust existing order: "I married a drunkard and I listened to his swearing. And I too have learnt to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever?" (CP, 508) But the strong-willed does not crave for pity; she doesn't rue over past and refuses to play the victim card, contrary to Sonal a traditional Indian woman. Rather, her comments show the pathetic place of Hasmukh who has

been reduced to the position of a dwarf: "I don't need your pity, Mrs Mehta. I think we should save it for Hasmukh." (CP, 508) The difference between Sonal and Kiran is obvious; while the former remains a mute spectator to all the injustice meted out to her and appears a helpless figure, the latter is a bold lady who doesn't crave for the pity of others. But the sufferings faced by both of them bring on the same platform where Kiran feels some sort of a communion with Sonal.

Towards the end of the play, there is a perceptible change in the personality of Sonal. Earlier she had no voice of her own; she was a butt of jokes for her husband while for Ajit and Preeti, she was an inconsequential figure. She always needed somebody to boss or guide her. What Hasmukh was to his father, Sonal was to her sister; the former having no existence of their own. Sonal admits: "I have always lived in my sister's shadow. It was always Minal who decided what we should wear, what games we should play. She even decides which maharaj is suitable for our family. Even at my husband's funeral, she sat beside me and told me when to cry." (CP, 511) But the presence of Kiran in Sonal's life brings a positive change in the latter's perspective. Now she can assert and is ready to come out of the shadow of other people. This becomes clear when she shows Minal her place in the closing scene: "Yes, Minal, this is Sonal!...No. Maharaj hasn't come back...No, I don't need another maharaj, not from you at least...I just don't, that's all...Well, as far as I'm concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit!" (CP, 516) The company of Kiran boosts Sonal's confidence; now she feels liberated and empowered lady, capable of taking her own decisions. This turnaround in the character of Sonal, along with the refusal of other characters to fall in line so far as the orders of the day is concerned underlines the crux of the matter in Dattani's theatrical world.

#### Conclusion:

All the characters show some degree of defiance or assertion against the long established social order represented by Hasmukh, and Dattani celebrates this defiance. There is constant power-struggle, plotting, scheming

of things for strong foot-hold in their own respective world. When alive Hasmukh used to call shots, and wished to do so even after his death, but the situation alters when he has been reduced to the position of a mute spectator, a witness to the resistance posed to his dictums. He is gradually pushed to the corner as become simply clear from the discussion between Kiran on the one hand while other characters on the other, Ajit, Preeti, Kiran, not to forget submissive Sonal, and all these steadily consolidate their position vis-à-vis Hasmukh's authority and assert their identities. They may be a group of crude opportunists or shallow in their approach, but their defiance of the authority and love for liberty mark a break with the stereotyped family set-up and this signals the arrival new set of norms in the matrix of human relations in a post-colonial Indian society. The play affirms the rejection of the old value system and power structure and celebrates the resistance—consequential or meaningless. With regard to the power struggle on gender or generation-lines or resistance to the existing hierarchy, Dattani's own words dispel the doubts about all the vague interpretations:

Well, of course there is, in the sense that it's about power play. So, nobody is a victim forever, and nobody is an oppressor forever. Oppressor and victims are roles that are fluid. So, if you're looking at liberation, then you're looking at a tip in the power scale as well. Very rarely do you have a balance. It's always tipping one way or the other.(Dattani, 2005)

The dramatist with his unique artistic craftsmanship makes Hasmukh, who has been depicted as wielding his authority over everybody, witness the change and pass from a position of invincibility to the position of a whimpering weakling whimper at the end where all the characters are taking their own decisions, completely disregarding the directions of Hasmukh. The man who wanted to rule the others' world even after his death through his 'will' appears a pathetic, silenced figure in a rejuvenated world of rest of the family.

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