

WHERE THERE'S A WILL: THERE IS A 'WOMAN'*Dr. Komil Tyagi, Senior Assistant Professor, MCMDAV College for Women, Chandigarh***Abstract:**

*Models of femininity have never been static in any society, and now they must be understood from the changing cultural, political and social contexts. The presentation of women in Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani's work carefully reconstructs the manifestation and individuality of the 'female' in present-day India. His characterization is unique as his women are non-conformists in their own ways and schematically bring about change in the incoherent group called family. Her dynamics of evolving roles and their socio-financial mechanics have placed the 'New Woman' in a substantial position but for this transition, she has turned into a transgressor of ascribed gender boundaries. To realize how the Indian 'female' has transgressed gender boundaries today, the paper shall attempt to study the evolving roles of women through the play *Where There's A Will*.*

Key Words: *Role, reconstruction, female, sorority, Theatre, Dattani.*

The position of women today appears to be very strange. Like a pendulum she is swinging between the contrasting forces of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality and revolt and compromise. (Somjee 4)

The feminist movement that began as a social struggle for legal, academic and political rights, denied to women, later developed into literary criticism that questioned the then existing gender hierarchy established through literature, and also examined the representation of the 'female' through texts. This movement played a major role in evaluating the social conditions that forced women to behave in a particular 'gendered' manner, and also helped in establishing a novel image of the twenty first century 'female'. Major efforts of feminist critics were invested in exposing the biased mechanisms of patriarchy and social boundaries created through literature and culture. They noted the limited and secondary gender roles allotted to fictional heroines in literature. Indeed, the depiction of women in classic and pre-modern literature as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives and mother figures, was an integral means of perpetuating the traditional ideologies of gender.

This movement revealed the facts that not only were women deprived of the legal rights and financial independence universally, but they also had to struggle against a male ideology pushing them to virtual silence and obedience. It laid emphasis on the examination of gender-power relations, and representation of women in texts and in life. It also drew the attention of the world towards the fact that only the body of the 'female' found representation in texts, her soul was silenced. Feminist critics raised significant questions about social mechanics that are used to construe men and women differently. It was observed that the presentation of women in literary, religious, philosophical and mythological texts formed the social construct of the 'female'. These images or constructs were formulated from the perspective of the 'male' and were therefore discarded by feminist critics. French feminist critic, Helene Cixous wrote in her powerful manifesto *Le Rise de la Meduse* (translated as *The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1976) that men have riveted women between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. Critic M.A.R. Habib reproduces Cixous' idea of feminism:

The 'abyss' refers to negativity and dependence in a woman's life and the other myth that of women as 'Medusa', a demon, beautiful and laughing, is a symbolic code of refusing the history of male

conceptuality, of truth as defined by masculine traditions of thought. She has focused on the laugh of Medusa, suggesting that it could be a potential symbol of redeeming women, of liberating her from the degraded status in the history of literature. (Habib 702)

Feminist movement recognizes that in order to create a new image for the 'female', it is necessary to carefully deconstruct the previous ones. With an aim to dismantle the existing gender power relations, the new age literature tries to reconstruct them in favour of the 'female'. In India, the *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been the major influences in shaping the behaviour towards women and of women themselves. Gender identity created through religious texts is not simply a classification of male or female roles; it largely affects the representative identity of an entire culture.

Brahminical texts such as *Manu's Code (Manusmriti)* and mythological texts as *The Ramayana* played a decisive role in formulating the social status of women in India. They confirmed her initiation into a patriarchal order, reinforcing her subordination and repression. Images of Savitri and Sita were sold to the Indian women as models worthy of emulation. Through these texts, it was established that women who submitted to the codes of patriarchy were able to reap familial bliss and eternal happiness. These texts created the construct of the Indian 'female' as one that is self-sacrificing, composed, unchallenging and subservient. The differences were woven so intricately in the cultural patterns of our nation that they now appear innate. Women and their perspectives were deliberately kept away from the forums of education and their intelligence was doubted by many. In this particular context, Max Muller states:

Indians did not communicate their metaphysical doctrines to women thinking that if their wives understood these doctrines and learned to be indifferent to pleasure and pain, and to consider life and death as same, they would no longer continue to be the slaves of others, or if they failed to understand them they would be talkative and communicate their knowledge to those who had no right to it. (Chakravarti 41)

Therefore, to redeem the 'female' from her insignificant status, feminist writers from around the world have tried to produce influential works that re-evaluated literature from the perspective of the female. The academic course of feminist criticism in the past forty years has taken us from a concentration on women's subordination, mistreatment and exclusion to the study of her emancipation and reconstruction of her image. The attention of the literary world switched from contradicting the male perspective to exploring the nature of the female world, its outlook, and restoring the lost or suppressed records of female experience. With the help of novel writers, women's experience is re-presented, her ascribed boundaries are challenged and she is offered an assemblage of contemporary roles and reflections in the twenty first century. Helene Cixous named this contrasting new image as 'New Woman': "It is to liberate the New Woman from the Old. The New Woman will dare to create outside the theoretical and will bring about a mutation in human relations. The New Woman is struggling against the meanings and values of the male-oriented world. The struggle takes place within each woman when she refuses compliance with the male-attributed identity (Habib 703)."

In the twenty first century (after the Feminist Movement), women are observing a major revolution in their roles. The rapid equalization between the sexes in educational and professional sphere and a marked increase in women's self-confidence are probably the most lasting legacies of the women's movement of the west, but in India the primary aims of the feminist movement are yet to be achieved. Indian women are still swinging between contrasting forces. On the one hand, the 'female' in India is fed on the success stories of the feminist movement in the west and on the other, Indian religious and philosophical texts still compel the female to follow the tradition of submission. This ambivalent condition of the Indian female, where she has to choose from her stereotypical image and a more progressive one has become a crucial factor in the reconstruction of the identity of the female in India.

This course of reconstruction can be traced especially through the plays of Mahesh Dattani. He sincerely comprehends the state of the Indian female, explores her social space with great passion, and presents the changed meaning of her existence. There are issues concerning the 'female' which are still un-

discussed and unrevealed on the Indian stage but Mahesh Dattani dares to acknowledge their existence. Assistant Professor of Theatre at Swarthmore College, Erin B. Mee, recorded his statement: "You can talk about feminism, because in a way that is accepted... But you can't talk about a middle class housewife fantasizing about having sex with a cook or actually having a sex life- that isn't Indian either-that is confrontational even if it is Indian (Mulatni :163)." Dattani amazes his audience with his ingenuous introspection of the life of women. Defying the tradition of portraying them in an oppressed state of social condition, he presents 'his' women as assertive individuals. As he constantly shifts his women from the state of being trapped in the social matrix to an authoritative space of control and power; his profound understanding of humanity becomes evident.

Women in Dattani's plays transgress gender boundaries as they challenge the very processes of gendered categorization of roles. From one generation to another, women's traditions have had their own part to play in countering the patriarchal tradition that has limited and silenced them. Mahesh Dattani explores these traditions and through his characterization challenges the limits levied by constructions of gender. His stage is a potent site of presentation of grave issues; concerns of gender that are often locked up in cupboards of Indian families are brought out for discussion and debate.

Dattani's feminist perspective and the idea of reconstruction of the female identity resonate in his very first creation *Where There's a Will*. He summoned patriarchal standards to contest in his debut play and it turned out to be a major success. Mahesh skillfully worked his narrative around the intrigues and maneuverings of a dysfunctional Indian family. Through the convoluted design of a 'will', the relationships between the five members of a 'joint' family are painfully twisted, and the characters struggle for freedom and happiness under the weight of tradition, patriarchy, repressed desires and cultural constructs of gender.

The play revolves around a supposedly self-made industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta, the patriarch who considers himself supreme, his wife-Sonal, his only son- Ajit, his conniving daughter-in-law, Preeti and Hasmukh Mehta's mistress- Kiran Jhaveri. In the first half of the Act I of this comedy, the highly dissatisfied Hasmukh is miserable with the way in which his life has been spent, with no one living up to his expectations (the way he had lived up to his father's). Hasmukh is discontented with everyone for; Ajit is a dimwit and spendthrift, Sonal is a 'salt-less' wife who has failed as a wife and a mother, and Preeti is sly and avaricious. He keeps reprimanding Ajit, treats him like a child, is afraid that he may fall victim to the vices of the rich and so he plans a 'Will'. Hasmukh's wife Sonal spends majority of her time talking to her sister on the phone, either she cooks unpalatable dishes that no-one eats or complains about her train of servants and her daughter-in law. Hasmukh nags one and all but they all ignore his futile interventions.

The play traces the absurdity and injustices of the Indian middle class family and in the first half the plot appears to be dreadfully simple. Everyone lives in their own world, their interests clash with each other and their house resounds with the noise of their petty quarrels. However, a sudden hush descends on the house, once Hasmukh Mehta dies of a heart attack. Though he could never teach his family any lesson while he was alive, he thinks of a plan that would work after his death. He makes an interesting Will that unfurls many truths later. Humour flows naturally in the second half of the play as Dattani generates the wonderful idea of a living ghost. Hasmukh gets back as a spirit intending to enjoy the exasperation his family would go through after reading the Will. Soon after his ghost, enters his mistress- Kiran Jhaveri. She remains invisible until the death of the patriarch but surfaces all of a sudden, as she is declared the trustee of Hasmukh's wealth. He bequeaths all his assets to a trust that is to be managed by Kiran Jhaveri for the time span of next twenty one years.

The Will of Hasmukh places her in the central position within the Mehta family and she pulls the strings to manipulate their lives. Meanwhile, Hasmukh Mehta returns as a ghost to relish the discomfort experienced by his family. Conversely, it is he who suffers from major trauma and the audience/readers derive great pleasure out of the situation. Initially the family resists Kiran's entry into their house, but after realizing that they will be able to access Hasmukh's wealth only after they allow her to live with them, they

decide to welcome her. Gradually the family befriends Kiran; she becomes Ajit's mentor, Sonal's 'friend forever' and also unravels the mystery of Hasmukh's untimely death. Kiran discovers that Hasmukh's death was triggered by the tablets replaced by Preeti, and she uses this secret to tame Preeti. An unusual bond develops between Kiran and Sonal as they discuss Hasmukh Mehta in accordance with their role, that of a wife and a mistress. They share their 'shared' life and with each passing day and the relationship gets better.

The only 'soul' unhappy about this unusual bond is that of Hasmukh Mehta. He (more precisely his ghost) loudly disagrees with whatever the women unveil about him. His ghostly outrage does not synchronize with the voices of the two females who rediscover their identities through their new-found friendship. Rubbed the wrong way, Hasmukh Mehta decides to hang his ghost from the tamarind tree outside their house. The audience is told that the tree will be chopped off the following day, which suggests that the family will finally get rid of him. Though Hasmukh Mehta tries to control the lives of his family members even after his death (through his Will) all his plans are ultimately put paid to. This play is as much about a dysfunctional, middle class family as it is about the social dynamics of women studied with respect to control, authority and hegemony.

Kiran's characterization in the play is the inversion of stereotypical representation of a mistress, and to that extent, Dattani overturns our theatrical or dramatic expectations. He deconstructs the popular image of 'mistress' in the Indian context, in which she is often perceived as a caricature (an abominable woman who wishes to rob the wife and extended family of all comforts and pleasures). In this play, she is the only character with a strong presence and a definable personality. Kiran is the epitome of 'New woman' as she is well-groomed, judicious, dynamic, worldly-wise, has the competency to train Ajit and the strength to befriend Sonal. This ground-breaking idea of the mistress befriending the wife is uncharacteristic of Indian constructions and (even after twenty years) appears new to the Indian audience. The moment the two women are placed centre-stage they begin to interact, introspect, analyze and criticize. They stop looking at themselves through the perspective of Hasmukh Mehta (that creates division), instead they begin to resolve their conflicts by re-defining and re-constituting the patriarchal space in female terms. The women in the play are transformed from objects to subjects, and their passive acceptance of gendered roles turns into a pro-active analysis of socially imposed codes of behavior.

The play helps the audience understand the complexities of the 'New Woman' as she is both the sculptor and the sculpture. The play explores the traditional Indian middle class family headed by a male and describes what happens when an unconventional female holds the reins. The power center becomes matriarchal and that is not just a positional shift; it is a strategic maneuver which clearly explains the reconstruction of the 'female' Dattani's perception of strength and dignity is invariably that of a woman like Kiran Jhaveri, almost invisible, secluded, suddenly thrust into action, accepts the challenges for what she is worth, and eventually emerges a winner. She exercises authority with the sensitivity that is considered atypical of Indian women. The association of women with wealth and authority that finally falls to their keeping is seen as problematic in countries like India, where women usually do not play an instrumental role in financial matters. Mythological texts attribute all wealth lies to a goddess-Lakshmi but ordinary Indian women are still nowhere close to it. However, in the case of Kiran, capital and clout couple together to produce symphony.

The roots of women's present social status lie in the traditional gendered division of labour that places the man above the woman in every respect. For women to attain equal social status, it is important to eliminate this asymmetrical distribution. Kiran does that meticulously and also teaches Sonal to do the same. She claims that she is respected by Hasmukh Mehta for she is educated and can supervise his work diplomatically. Kiran acknowledges, "He respected my judgment and intelligence. That gave me a lot of confidence. He trusted me" (*WTW* 506). Famous psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (who is known for his anti-feminist stance because of his penis-envy theory) suggests in his essay "Civilizations and its Discontents":

Women are incompatible with a fundamental bond of civil society and justice and only men are capable of sublimating their passions and thus capable of the justice that civil life demands. Men's involvement in public life and their consequent dependence on other men means that they have little energy left for their wives and families, thus a woman finds herself forced in the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it. (99)

However, Kiran defies Freud's generalized opinion about women. She is a wise woman who is able to bring the family together and tackles complicated situations with great ease. Kiran enters the troubled Mehta house as an outsider and consequentially faces the hostile behaviour of the members of the family. Preeti tries to dissuade the mistress but Kiran persuasively asserts her purpose and positions herself comfortably within the house. The sharpness of her tone, the clarity of her conception and her manipulative temperament distinguish her from the clichéd image of the traditional Indian female.

PREETI: What if we refuse to let you stay with us?

KIRAN: (*Studies Preeti*) You are forcing me to say this. I

never intended saying it outright, but now I have to make it clear to you. As a trustee of the Hasmukh Mehta Charitable Trust, I have the right to make a statement declaring that since the recipients of the trust, namely you all, are not complying with the rules set down by the deceased, the holdings of the trust will be divided between certain charitable institutions recommended by the founder. Which will mean that you won't ever get to see even a single rupee earned by your father-in-law. Now will you refuse to let me stay here?

PREETI: Welcome home. (*WTW*494)

Dattani skillfully draws a novel role-play for the Indian woman. Unlike Hasmukh Mehta, Kiran does not flash a strong arm and never claims to be the master of the Mehta family. She explicitly states that her duty is to run the Mehta group of industries on behalf of Ajit Mehta. Understanding the mechanics and economics of the Will, she clears the misunderstanding that she is just the trustee of the wealth and not its owner. Kiran stands against the image that considers the female 'incompatible with a fundamental bond of civil society'. She wields authority with a sensitivity that is perhaps considered peculiar to women. Hasmukh admits, "Any woman who is a mistress and a wife has to be clever" (*WTW*496) and "if there was anyone in the office who had the brains to match mine, it was her" (*WTW*473).

Hasmukh Mehta, the patriarch is never able to knit the family together in his entire life, the way Kiran does in a few months. Gradually, she becomes a 'father-figure' for the family; Hasmukh should have been, but could never be. The mistress skillfully teaches the son, how to live a disciplined life, something his father could never edify through his life-long nagging. She extends training to Ajit that helps him manage his life at official and personal level. Sonal finds a confidant in the mistress; she actually talks her mind, something that she had never done before. The wife's useless squabbling turns into meaningful sentences and she gains self esteem. Kiran eventually proves that it is not necessary to be a male to be the head of a family or an institution. The play avers that headship of a family is not a position that gives a commanding edge to an individual; it is a position that demands timely fulfillment of responsibilities and the 'New Woman' is adept for this role too. She acknowledges that after the death of his father, Hasmukh found his 'father' in Kiran and trusted her for all the important official decisions. The play provides the audience/readers with an idea that the 'female' too has the capability to father a family and man a house. Kiran discloses, "He wanted me to run his life...Hasmukh really did not want a mistress. He wanted a father... Men really never grow up (*WTW*510)."

The transformation of gender roles becomes obvious through this play, as it creates the presence of

a distinctive 'female' perspective and portrait. In the process of controlling the family through money, Hasmukh loses the prospect of bonding emotionally with his family. On the contrary Kiran uses the given authority to make such eternal and strong ties that the entire household gradually accepts her as family, even as its head. Ironically, it is not the father but the mistress who brings the family together by striking a balance between reason and emotion. Her struggle is directed at denouncing the age old differential practices that are seeking re-definition. Kiran realizes the social distinction between a wife and a mistress, and commits herself to her own sense of personal fulfillment in all areas of relationship -sexual, maternal, economic and social. Though Kiran appears to be determined and manipulative (one who has always enjoyed the comforts of Hasmukh Mehta's wealth) but the audience and readers learn gradually that she too has learnt her lessons by wading in difficult waters:

SONAL: You are so lucky. You are educated, so you know all this.

KIRAN: Wrong. I learnt my lessons from being so close to life. I learnt my lessons from watching my mother tolerating my father when he came home with bottles of rum... As I watched him beating her up and calling her names! I learnt what life was when my mother pretended she was happy in front of me and my brothers, so that we wouldn't hate our father And I learnt when I kept my father away from my mother... I served him those drinks, watching... when he would become unconscious and I would say a prayer... Thank God, he was too drunk to impose himself on us! Yes, Mrs. Mehta my father and your husband were weak men with false strength. (*WTW* 508)

Economic resource is perceived as an imperative and influential factor that helps in tilting the balance of power in favour of the 'female'. Indian women are generally not involved in the realm of financial power (the percentage of women as supreme commanders is still minimalistic), but the play attempts a strategic shift and creates conditions within which Kiran surfaces as a hero. The play rationalizes Kiran Jhaveri's relationship with Hasmukh Mehta and also her status as a mistress. Kiran speaks her heart out, "No woman has an affair with an elderly man, especially a married man, for a little bit of respect or trust. It was mainly for money... It is strange how repetitive life is? And I, I too am like my mother. I married a drunkard and I too have learnt to suffer silently. Oh! Where will all this end? Will the scars our parents lay on us remain forever" (*WTW* 508). She carefully understands the mechanics of the present world that are governed by capital and Kiran maneuvers the situation in her favour. She says, "It all worked out to be quite convenient. I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got... well, you know" (*WTW* 491).

The emotional ventilation of the wife and the mistress (much to the horror of the dead man) leads to a timeless bond. The affable relationship between the wife and the mistress ultimately undermines the oppressive patriarchal structure and the 'female' assumes authority unobtrusively. The docile house wife gains her confidence and also an eternal friend:

KIRAN: Yes, we all have to remain friends for another 21 years.

SONAL: Not for another 21 years. Forever. (*WTW* 515)

Sonal and Kiran exchange notes produce fissures in the strong patriarchal foundation which rests upon the principle of suppression. This bond of the wife and the mistress, an atypical grouping, turns out to be a critical blow to the power and machinations of patriarchy. The coming together of the wife and the paramour in a harmonious manner is an unconventional hypothesis to explore patriarchal standards from a dual perspective. An archetypal mistress ripens to be a father, an avant-garde concept, sets roots for the deconstruction of the image of a typical Indian chatelaine as presented by previous texts. In his own unique

way, the playwright presents female camaraderie and explores how her reconstruction is catalyzed by shouldering of newer roles and responsibilities.

Apart from the problem of matriarchal space within which female identity is reconstituted, Dattani also draws attention towards the idea of 'sorority' or 'female bonding' or 'sisterhood' especially, through his treatment of Kiran-Sonal relationship. A strong female bonding is emphasized for a mature relationship. However Preeti, the daughter-in-law, remains an outsider in this process. Does it mean, 'sorority' is based upon some kind of 'code' that governs it? It probably works upon the principle of collective struggle against subjugation that Sonal and Kiran launch together, but in which Preeti plays no role, whatsoever. Kiran and Sonal survive under the patriarchal oppression and could work (or talk) against it, only after the patriarch had died. On the other hand, Preeti purposely designs a mechanism to get rid of Hasmukh Mehta for her material gains. She says, "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 . . . After he's gone we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money" (*WTW* 501-502). That is the reason probably why Preeti is kept out of the sorority. Earlier, Kiran tries to equate her position with Preeti, "Don't think of her as lower or me as higher. It's just a question of circumstances. I got my money one way. She is trying to get hers by another . . . She hasn't learnt to give" (*WTW* 506-507) but later she understands the difference, "Your mother-in-law was right. I compared myself to you. We both desire money. She said; don't lower yourself by comparing yourself to her. You are low" (*WTW* 513). This verdict by Kiran is a clear indication of the fact the 'New Woman' does not uphold pestiferous means to attain sovereignty. Preeti is as ambitious as Kiran but her modus operandi is pernicious and causes death of a family member. The play lays emphasis on the fact that feminist struggle aims at egalitarianism and not burning the bridges between the two indices of gender.

The dramatist aims to expose the actuality of male domination, while struggling for the creation of a world in which women try to establish a separate identity of their own. India's cultural ideology involves a definition of men and women as different, contrasted, complementary and unequal. Gender identity as a phenomenon is omnipotent and imperious and it affects both men and women in distinct ways. The question of female's liberation from patriarchal dominance is more moral than social as it depends upon voluntary actions and modifiable attitudes illustrated by both sexes. Traditional power equation among males and females has undergone a transformation in the present context. The 'female' is now gaining power through financial independence and the male is trying to cope with this change. C.G. Gupta writes in his book *Colonial Transactions*, "Today the fact that most of them (females) have become highly successful enterprises supports the new age theory that women are far stronger, more ambitious, aggressive and adaptive to changing circumstances than most men believed. . . This change is however recent, amounts to a dramatic change in gender equation. (18)

Kiran is one such woman and she tries to infuse a similar confidence in Sonal as well. As soon as they discover that the commonality between them was not Hasmukh but the fact that they are both women struggling to recreate their respective images, they get a chance to reconstruct their individualities. Kiran helps Sonal recover from her inferiority complex that was cautiously constructed by her sister Minal. All through the play, Sonal is shown emotionally dependent upon her sister but once Kiran moves in, she strengthens her by infusing confidence and authority. At the end of the play, Sonal is able to answer her sister back, "Well, as far as I am concerned you can go jump into a bottomless pit" (*WTW* 516). The idea of the feminist movement was not to create a pool of self-pity for women but to inculcate substance and strength in each other through varied means. This powerful play clarifies what feminism exposes and what the 'female' opposes.

In his comprehensive research on female subordination titled *The Subordinate Sex*, Vern Bullough mentions: "Compared to men only a handful of women have managed to break into the pages of history. Men have been generals, kings, writers, composers, thinkers and doers, women have been wives,

mistresses, companions, friends and helpmates” (3). The role of women (wife or mistress) is time and again considered subservient, but through Kiran we meet a mistress who eventually assumes the role of a master. This bold attempt at characterization reveals the fact that even after prolonged subjection to oppression; the 'female' has the power to revert. Kiran does not attack the prevalent patriarchal system in any way; on the contrary, she attempts to improve the conditions of the family by working her way within the familial framework. In the play, no bold issues are raised, no melodrama takes place, no women take to streets, no slogans are raised and yet two women find meaning in their existence and vocation.

The play skillfully probes into the models of the 'female' that have never been static in our society and Indian social structure has seen a remarkable transition in its classical model. Its characterization corroborates that male supremacy excludes women from highly valued forms of life such as government, capital, creative and artistic endeavour and also forces them into a league of supportive or secondary roles but the woman today delineates a new course for herself where she is all, the chiseler, the chisel and the figurine. *Where There's a Will* reconstructs the 'female' in a deviating role, demanding a different performance and delivering a different world. It establishes that the 'New Woman' has endless disguises; she is a mistress of multiple selves.

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