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Domestic Discard in Mahesh Dattani's Plays *Tara* and *Where There's a Will*

M. Anitha

Mahesh Dattani's famous plays are *Dance Like a Man*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final solutions*, *Do the Needful* and others. The two plays chosen for the present study are *Tara* and *Where There's a Will*.

Tara

Tara (1990) is the play, predominantly about gender discrimination and about the mentality of Indian parents who prefer a male child over a female child. It is the story of a pair of Siamese twins, who love each other immensely, but are separated from each other by design.

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Tara, whose life is spoiled by a wrong decision of her mother, ultimately dies. Through her death, Dattani throws light on the unfortunate consequences of different standards of treatment for children on grounds of gender. Such incidents do much to hamper the mission of female uplift in a male dominated society. The writer has succeeded in stirring up the spirit of the reader to stand strong against such biased behaviour in life.

Where There's a Will

Where There's a Will (1988) is based on Dattani's motif of patriarchal dominance. In fact, this is a play which shows fairly optimistically, that there is a way by which men and women can find happiness on their own terms. The developments, twists and surprises in the action are not, however, based on contrivances of plotting alone, but far more appropriately on human motivations and wills. Dattani uses unstressed symbolism. The dialogues in the play are sparkling. Humour is a major redeeming factor and has its source largely in the interjections and asides of Hasmukh as the ghost. Dattani's depiction of a visible and invisible and audible and inaudible ghost extends the scope of naturalistic drama.

Portrayal of Patriarchal Society

A patriarchal society is perfectly presented in *Tara* where the important family decisions are taken by its male members. In a patriarchal society, a woman's identity is defined by others in terms of her relationship with men. It is suggested that unlike the radical feminists, who are seriously concerned with the tortures inflicted on the female in the patriarchal society, Dattani creates a real world – Indian society, infamous for bringing atrocities against its female members – and also introduces a dream world at the end of the play, when Tara and Dan are seen hugging

each other in some other place. A perfect combination of the real world and the dream world in Tara helps the dramatist pave out a new way for projecting his views on gender discrimination.

Patel and Bharati

Mr. Patel, the native of Gujarat, is married to Bharati, a Kannadiga. Cultural diversities and cultural prejudices turn their relationship into a failure. After this marriage, Mr. Patel was forced to leave his parental home, because this relationship was not accepted by his parents. The shadow of insecurity looms large around him. The insecurity of the separation from parents and subsequently the birth of Siamese twins, finds Mr. Patel isolated. The insecurity increases with the interference of Bharati's parents in his marital life. He was forced to decide for the surgery of kids for their separation. In this surgery, a tragedy was imminent.

Devastating Consequences of Gender Preference

The surgery was conducted, and one of the twins Tara becomes a cripple, Bharati goes insane and Mr. Patel becomes violent and aggressive. Bharati was helpless to assert herself against the stigma of society and yielded to the suggestion of her father. She allows the surgery with the hidden motive of her preference toward the saving of the male child, Chandan. She ignores the identity of Tara and does not care for the consequences involving the risk to life of Tara. It directly indicates the gender prejudices prevalent in society.

Dattani plays with the idea of female infanticide that is prevalent among Gujaratis through the various intimations that Roopa makes, and also suggests Patel's hegemonic patriarchy when he insists that 'proper' division in the gender roles be made with different sets or

plans for the boys and the girls. With the success of surgery, Chandan and Tara are separated, but after separation they start to reformulate themselves.

Mr. Patel due to his sense of guilt born of the injustice done to him by his parents, fails to do justice to his wife. Bharati, in order to escape the anger of Mr. Patel, unwittingly does injustice to her own daughter. Chandan suffers for the wrong choices of his parents. With a view to compensate for his loss, he alienates himself from his social environment. Mr. Patel's sadistic approach to Bharati is a desperate attempt to escape the pain of the deprivation of the parental authority.

Use of Flashbacks, Inner World of Human Consciousness

To get an insight into their internal insecurity, Dattani makes extensive use of flashbacks. Mr. Patel's past is reflected in his discontent in his marital life. Bharati, under the authority of her rigid parents, unknowingly allows injustice be done to her own helpless daughter.

In Dattani's dramatic world, the inner world of human consciousness is a focal point of tragic action.

Bharati is not only guilty, but also nervous. She is apprehensive about Tara's future. In her passion, she decides to donate one of her kidneys to Tara to restore some happiness to her. The emotional suffering of Bharati was a consolation for Mr. Patel. In Bharati's suffering, he finds the reflections of his own thwarted parenthood. In one flash, Bharati expresses her anxiety to donate her kidney and Mr. Patel's anxiety is to stop her from doing it. Mr. Patel is hostile

towards Bharati, apathetic to Tara and possessive of Chandan and all these three impulses seem to be under the control of some invisible forces, specific to the experiences of Mr. Patel.

Patel's efforts to keep Chandan away from Tara, is inspired by the motive to separate Chandan from his bond with Tara, so that he might be able to tolerate separation later. Bharati's possessiveness for Tara leads to a breach in the father and daughter relationship. First Bharati is responsible for Patel's separation from her father and then it is a question of the separation of Mr. Patel and Tara. Tara is the pivot of the play, and she maintains a stable position. It is the conflict of Patel and Bharati that weaves the pattern of the plot. Their conflict is generated not as a problem of gender discrimination, but as an expression of their personal insecurity.

Psychic Conditions of Bharati

The second act of the play *Tara* is designed to expose the psychic condition of Bharati. If the process is to be examined in the context of social perception, Bharati's suffering is more pathetic even than that of Tara and Chandan. Even the children have a realization of her condition. The last phase of the play in which the dramatist shifts the focus to the suffering of Dan, justifies the truth that social conventions must come only second to the spirit of human sensibilities. Man has to modify his mission in accordance with the expectations of society, but simultaneously, he must respond to the call of human sentiments; and this realization of human sensibility is universal. Bharati seeks consolation in her sympathy for Tara, and Patel tries to protect his ego through the torture of Bharati.

The play *Tara* is a tragedy of the confrontation of individual choices and social conventions.

Patriarchal Code in *Where There's a Will*

In *Where There's a Will*, Dattani takes up the issue of the Patriarchal code. The dominant note of the play, however, is the father-son relationship in Indian society. Dattani has often referred to the subversion of patriarchy in the play as one of the major concerns. He has in a sense chronicled the follies and prejudices of Indian society as reflected within the microcosm of the family unit.

Hasmukh Mehta

Hasmukh Mehta is one of the top businessmen in the city. He is a gritty, gutsy and stubborn type of man. He exercises hegemonic power over the rest of his family members to perpetuate his own conception of 'self' which he has in turn received from his father. He does not allow Ajit to speak to government officials or to discuss business matters with his friends. His absolute authority over his business, house and other articles is amazing and ridiculous.

Survival of Ajit

In the presence of Hasmukh, Ajit survives as a subaltern who can't even speak. He has a realization of his position, but has no power to express his choice. 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 come under its umbrella. Ajit in spite of being a simpleton is aware enough to ridicule the passion of his father. Hasmukh is confident that Ajit would not be able to make a space for himself without his protection and guidance.

Family versus Business Relations

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In Hasmukh's life, there are two distinctive spaces representing his interpersonal relationship – his relationship with his wife and son, and his relationship with his business world. One is chaotic and incomplete, while the other is perfect and complete. However, in both these conditions he maintains his absolute control. He accuses his wife of wasting money in preparing rich dishes. He considers Sonal's company as the greatest tragedy of his life. The irony is obvious, as Sonal who is the tragedy of his life takes great care of his health. Hasmukh's passion for authority and Sonal's extreme submissiveness produce sentimental humour.

Sonal's response is so mechanical as well as pathetic, "If anything happens to you, they'll say, I neglected my duty" (CP 19). He condemns his wife for her inability to realize the intricacy of business and even her failure to provide him a good and healthy married life.

Forceful Patriarchal Authority

Hasmukh's consciousness of his authority, his contempt for the simplicity of his son, and his mockery of the submissiveness of his wife, prepare an extremely ridiculous image of patriarchal authority. He has his own vision of happiness, but no happiness can emerge in the form of domination that he has been exercising over Ajit and Sonal. In the first part of the play, Dattani presents a comprehensive, but ridiculous concept of patriarchy. It is not confined to gender binary alone, but it includes all modes of power domination. It is not a matter of convention, rather a matter of thought and attitude.

Experiments with Theatrical Devices

Dattani is a tireless innovator who makes experiments with new theatrical devices to sustain nobility and dynamism. In the second part of the play, Hasmukh intends to govern the

fate of his family members even after his death. Ajit, a subservient of Hasmukh's authority, admits as he groans, "He has ruined us". Preeti, an obedient daughter-in-law emerges as a cunning and calculative woman, having formed a perfect idea of her father-in-law's intentions. The amazing reactions and witty remarks of Hasmukh at the reality of Sonal, Ajit and Preeti makes the play a sparkling comedy.

Assertion of Radical Views

Sonal expresses her contempt when she realizes that Hasmukh used to have a mistress. She gathers courage to challenge his authority, "If I'd known, he had a mistress, I would have left him" (CP 29) and Hasmukh in the background, points out crudely, "I should have told her years ago then" (CP 29). Preeti and Sonal assert their radical views, self-awareness and independent future plans. Their awareness works as a foil to the authority of Hasmukh, "I've misjudged the woman" (CP 29). Preeti does not like the decision of appointing Kiran, as the trustee. Her clever advise gives an insight into her character. She advises that they must try to prove that Hasmukh made his will not in the right frame of mind, since it would make the will 'invalid'. With exceptional ease she advises, "Everything will be all right. All we have to do is get a doctor to say that he wasn't all there during the last few months" (CP 30).

The Will – A Living Character

In the later part of the play the 'will' assumes the dimension of a living character. It controls and guides the actions and dreams of each member of the family. Sonal admits, "The will has left us all naked". Kiran, in spite of gaining control of the authority, is only a trustee of all his wealth and not the owner. It is not only the 'will', the document, but the 'will' the choice

of Hasmukh. Kiran also is subordinate to the will of Mehta. She is only an agent, having no choice of her own and her authority is confined only to the welfare of the business of Mr. Mehta. She comments; “My main duty is to run the Mehta Group of Industries on behalf of Ajit Mehta. I have the authority to make all the major decisions in the interest of the companies” (CP 41). Kiran sarcastically reveals that Hasmukh’s own identity was subordinated to her care and protection. Kiran appreciates Ajit who is at least free from the whims of his father to control the lives of others.

Self-assertion to Self-realization

The union of Kiran and Sonal, a collective force born out of the long annals of exploitation and suffering, is an effort to abolish sexual colonialism. Their collective voice is a declaration of woman’s emancipation against the ‘will’ of Hasmukh. The play *Where There’s a Will* also follows the pattern of self-assertion to self-realization. Hasmukh breaks his mask and faces the harsh reality with the realization:

Hasmukh: No! I don’t think I can enter this house. It isn’t mine
... anymore. I will rest permanently on the tamarind
tree. They are not my family anymore. I wish I had
never interfered with their lives. They look quite
happy together. (CP 63)

Recognition of Selfhood

Here at this point, the audience realizes that Hasmukh’s death paves the way for an entry to the new zone of awareness for all including Hasmukh. The play ends on a triumphant note establishing the claims of identity, and selfhood by setting forth the canons on which harmonious

interpersonal relationships could be actualized. *Tara* and *Where There's a Will* depict the domestic discord caused due to the gender disparity and the patriarchal code. Dattani has laid bare the complex realities of the family in the Indian context.

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