

Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's A Will*: A Study Of Stage Craft

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Drama, being a visual medium, has to be understood taking into account all the minute details a dramatist shows on stage. The dialogue, including asides and monologues, is a part of the whole meaning. Signs and symbols add colour to meaning. The dramatist makes all these happen on a stage. The stage by itself makes difference in the overall understanding of the drama. The stage and stagecraft are arts in their own terms.

There are different kinds of stages that are being in practice in the world of drama. The most important are the proscenium stage, open air stage, round stage, hippodromes, and the promenade stage. Each stage has its grammar of staging and meaning. The dramatist plans his action as per the stage presented to him. The actions in drama are largely determined by the kind of stage a dramatist wishes to use. Thus stage is an integral part of drama and its meaning.

Greek architecture showed the form of a stage to the Western world. They called the stage as orchestra, *orchester*, meaning dancer. Drama at the early stage of development is meant as a festival of dance in name of the Greek God, Dionysus. Later Thespis, a priest in the temple of Dionysus, added dialogue and slowly proper drama evolved during the course of time. The English stage had Greek stage as their role model in creating a stage of their own. They followed the dramaturgy of the Greek in the production and execution of drama on stage with some changes. This format was taken to all parts of the world wherever they made colonies. The colonies on their part made bold innovations by combining their indigenous stage with the western stage to create a stage of their own. Many innovations were made in the English stage itself to make it in tune with time. These stage developments gave so many theatrical stages with variety and paved way for experimental staging.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the well known contemporary Indian dramatists. He is the first dramatist in Indian English Drama to have won the Sahitya Academy award in 1998. His dramas are known for the bold innovations in theme and stage craft. His stages are complex in structure and suits with the radical theme of his plays. Commenting on Dattani's stage Eric Bee observes,

...dramas are played out on multi-level sets where interior and exterior become one and geographical locations are collapsed- in short, his setting are as fragmented as the families who inhabit them. (319)

Dattani's *Where there's a Will* is a comedy based on a Gujarathi family. It is his first drama, staged on 1988. Dattani uses only five characters and two invisible characters to bring out filial human relationships. Hasmukh Mehta is the head of the family. His wife is Soal. He has a son Ajith and Preeti is his daughter in law. Kiran Jhaveri is his secretary cum mistress. Two characters never appear in the play but have a say on the action. They are Minal, Sonal's sister and Maharaj, the cook. The play has been received well critically. Manzoor is of the view that "*Where There's a Will* does both delight and teach" (23) and "is a comedy with slight farcical touches" (24). Tharini observes that, "the play focuses on fractured interpersonal relationship within the range of familial relationship" (40). Naatak, a performing company based on New York, observes in their note to the staging play as a play "in which traditional family values meet the seven deadly sins". Bhumika Agrawal is of the view that the "play is a comic caricature of patriarchal authority and the politics played by the protagonist" (526). Sanjeeb Kalita, looks at the play from the post-modern point of view and points out the play "explores socio-cultural dynamics of postmodern society" (371).

The stage of the play is unique. The stage follows the conventional format of acting spaces. *The Nāṭyaśāstra* lists three types of theatre. They are large sized (*jgēṣṭha*) medium sized (*madhya*) and small sized (*avara*). Bharatha Muni in his book states that the structure of the theatre is divided into three parts namely, the acting area, the tiring room and the area for the audience to sit. Action of the drama is strictly done in the acting area. Bharatha Muni also talks about the other aspects of drama such as dialogue, costume, music, song, action, sentiments, and so on in his treatise. They all converge for the success of the play.

Dattani's *Where there's a will* has three division or spaces. The stage direction reads thus:

There are three spaces: the fancy dining-cum-living room, the bedroom belonging to Hasmukh and Sonal Mehta, and the hideously trendy bedroom of their son Ajit and his wife, Preeti (455)

The "fancy dining –cum-living room" becomes the acting area for the most part of the play. The characters retire to their bed (tiring) room after their action. The bed (tiring) room works more like the hidden space in the Elizabethan stage which worked as tomb of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Dattani uses that space to reveal the mind of his characters in introspection using monologues or dialogue.

The geographical three spaces in the stage stands for the spacial three spaces. The real acting place stands for the world at large where all kinds of action takes place. The other two bedroom acts more like the inner spaces of every human being where everyone introspects what happened in the main stage/world. The one space being the authoritative/ conventional space and the other being the liberal/modern space of thinking. The characters complete their action and move to the room. The movement signals the change of attitude on the part of the character.

Hasmukh stands for the convention. He goes to his room and articulates his notions of life, mostly conventional. Hasmukh "comes down" to the acting area. The bed (green) room is used only to narrate the past of Hasmukh and his notion about his son and his brother. In this speech Hasmukh says more about how he was brought up and how obedient he was.

The other bed (green) room, the one belongs to Ajit and Preeti stands for the modern/ radical thinking space of human. The action in this room is confined to Preeti and Ajit. Preeti is more vociferous in her idea of becoming independent. She challenges him,

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! (CP 500)

The action in this space is also modern in all sense of the word. Ajit accidentally discovers Preeti's vitamin tablets lying behind the sarees in her cupboard. He enquires about why she has not taken them. Preeti is offended that Ajit is intruding into her personal space and chides, "How dare you go through my things?" (CP 502). The scheme to passively kill

Hasmukh also gets its shape in this space. Preeti replaces Hasmukh's blood pressure tablets with her vitamin tablets. Hasmukh dies of heart attack as he had vitamin tablets instead of blood pressure tablets. Kiran comes to know of Preeti's scheme at the end of the play and the place of action is Preeti's bedroom.

This space is also used to show Kiran and her motive behind being the mistress of Hasmukh. Kiran had a bad personal life and was happy to be the mistress of Hasmukh for the money. Her conversations with Sonal and Preeti at different places prove that.

(To Sonal)

Kiran: 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 the money. . . .

Kiran: Yes. We are not very different, Preeti and I. . .

Kiran: Don't think of her as lower or me higher. It's just a question of circumstances. I got my money one way. She trying to get by another (CP 506)

Her conversation with Preeti in bed(green) room reveals that she and Preeti are the same. Preeti wanted the money, for which she was ready to kill Hasmukh by replacing the tablets. Kiran on the other hand is ready to act obediently and as per the wish of Hasmukh to have his money. Kiran waited and Preeti didn't.

(To Preeti)

Kiran:.... Were you so impatient? Couldn't you wait a few more years? . . .

Kiran: 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. I don't know what to do with you (CP 513)

Thus the two spaces have been used to mean the two spaces of thinking one being conventional and the other being modern. Besides the dramatist shows there are other rooms too, signaling other thinking avenues too, as Kiran says, "Well this is a nice house. Much better than the company flat. Plenty of rooms." (CP 489) The house stands for the world and "plenty of rooms" stand for the thinking spaces in the minds of everybody.

The living room space in the drama is the main acting area. Here all the characteristics of all the characters merge and all look normal. They show neither love nor hatred for others.

Hasmukh remains the dominant character till his death and continues to be character in debate even after his death. Ajit is not happy with his father's attitude. He 'protests' but succumbs. Sonal shows herself as a devoted wife preparing parthas and salads, whether any one likes or not. Preeti is an obedient daughter-in-law. Kiran is introduced as an intruder but later becomes part of the family. Dattani slowly transfers this space into the minds of the audience by casting Hasmukh as the Sutradhara of the traditional drama. The Sutradhar does the role of interpreting and linking various actions in a drama. His role is more like the Chorus of the Western drama.

His dialogues thereafter are often addressed to the audience. He addresses audience in seven instances. His talks reveal the deep rooted conventional notions. They also serve to control the audience thinking with his powerful remarks about all the characters and actions. Ajit is "Twenty-three years old he is on the road to failure, in bold capital letters!" (CP 464). Preeti is "Preety, charming, graceful, and sly as a snake" (CP 456). Sonal is "My wife. My son's mother. Do you know what Sonal means? No? 'Gold'. When we were newly married, I used to joke with her and say she was as good as gold. But that was when we were newly married. I soon found out what a good-for-nothing she was" (CP 472-473). Kiran is "A shrewd hard-headed marketing executive. If there was anyone in y office who had brains to match mine it was her." (CP 473). His observations on all the characters including himself as "Forty-five years old and I am a success in capital letters." (CP 464), helps the audience to look at all the characters from his angle. The happenings in the family are controlled by Hasmukh when he was alive and the audience was made to accept it as the norms.

Hasmukh ghost takes the role of Hasmukh after his death. All the dialogues are addressed to the audience. The ghost controls the thought process of the audience with its witty remarks. The ghost does the role of adding colour to what is happening in the real stage. The ghost is happy when Kiran enters the life of Mehta's family. It feels exalted when the mission is accomplished successfully. The ghost says,

"Bravo! That's what I wanted to hear! (*Dances*). She has learnt her lessons! She has learnt her lessons! (*To the audience*) Now you can go home and I can go to heaven (CP 507)

The real drama starts only after that. Kiran and Sonal are able to understand each other. The character of Hasmukh is thrown down to pieces by Kiran,

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 a woman who would father him!" (CP 510)

Sonal adds, "All of what you said is true. Even Hasmukh would have to agree, if you had told him" (CP 511). Hasmukh realizes,

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? (*Realizing*) Oh my God! I sound like Aju! No-o-o! (CP 511)

The ghost of Hasmukh leaves the stage lamenting,

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*) (CP 515)

The exits of the ghost mark the exit of the interpreter. The audience is now free to draw conclusion free from Hashmukh and his ghost.

The three spaces in the drama have been used well by Dattani to execute the drama in three mind spaces of the audience. The audience is not allowed to associate themselves with any of the characters due to frequent interruptions from Hasmukh. They are also not allowed to create their own idea of what the drama is about. Hasmukh's observations about the characters and action in the play control the action of the drama. The observations of the Ghost on the other hand help to understand the aspirations of Hasmukh.

Dattani successfully combines the conventional space arrangements with the modern setting to bring out the protest element in the play. The conventional space arrangement in this play is the division of the stage into three spaces. *The Natyasāstra* talks about three spaces. The one is the acting stage. The other is the tiring room. The third is the space for the audience. In this play the main acting stages is represented by the living room. The two

bedrooms act as the tiring room. The third space is the metal space of the audience which is controlled by the disassociation effect produced by the chief character. The modern setting is also followed as the dramatist uses elaborate stage directions. The meta dramatic atmosphere adds meaning to the drama. This convulsion is used successfully to bring the protest, a post colonial element, against the conventional notions.

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