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THE LACK OF FAMILIAL GUSTO IN POSTMODERNINDIAN SOCIETYAND
MAHESH DATTANI'S "WHERE THERE'S A WILL"

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani is one of the forerunners of Indian English literature. Playwriting is a fine outlet for his ability to penetrate into Indian urban society. His "Where there is a Will" is based on an upper-middle class industrial Gujrati family and its relation to individuals. As a protagonist, Hasmukh Mehta had overriding influence over the family members until his mistress-cum-trustee overrode his obnoxious attempts to ruin filial harmony. Hasmukh is an obdurate sinner whose one-upmanship nature compelled him to believe that he is inferior to none. And he considered his son as dull as ditchwater. He created rifts in the family to exercise his patriarchal utilitarianism. In a nutshell, he feared that his son would override him. A fretful, Hasmukh died while enjoying cigar. But the playwright skillfully brought the ghost of Hasmukh as an onlooker.

The meeting with the lawyer was in ferment after the declaration of Hasmukh's clandestine 'will' that denied property rights to his family members. Hasmukh's flagrant 'will' that made rigorous onslaught on the expected inheritors testifies his loose moral fibre. Kiran, the trustee of Hasmukh, was a victim of circumstances but she rose to occasions and created successfully a peaceful space in the 'unhomely home' of Hasmukh and fraternized with the family members to be free and easy.

The ghost of Hasmukh realized that it was a grave oversight that he did not smell a rat in his adulterous partner. Thus, Hasmukh overreached himself and finally his ghost had to move away and the sounds of his cry faded into distance. Thus, his obnoxious 'will' is offset by the family members' power of adaptability and determination to rise to occasions.

Keywords: Ethical Standards, Postmodern society, Patriarchal utilitarianism, Un-homely home.

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INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of the renowned Indian English playwrights whose penetrating insight into Indian urban society is widely extolled. His "Bravely Fought the Queen", "Dance Like a Man", "On a Muggy Night in Mumbai" are esoteric to some extent but the vogue for socio-economic plays is well explored with

subtle effects. These plays testify his predilection for exploring a perverse relationship between postmodern urban society and individuals. Pseudo work- ethics, facades of honesty and an antipathy towards society and world at large have precipitated the ethical standards of the Indian urban society. Home has become an eyesore where people fight and clash to create own space and time. A perverse refusal to follow family bonding coupled with lack of adaptability and preposterously narcissist attitude have precluded from strengthening family relationship. This paper is an attempt to explore such magnitude of serious issues that are in vogue to precipitate ethical standards of postmodern society.

An Introduction to Mahesh Dattani's "Where There's a Will": Mahesh Dattani's "Where There's a Will" explores socio-cultural dynamics of postmodern society. The play is an insight depiction of the underlying tensions, interpersonal relations, and power fabrics existing within an urban middle-class Gujrati family. The play is a type of unique critique on the changing ethos and relations in urban India. Moreover, the play exhorts a thoughtful response to gender roles and gender-based power equations existing within present society.

Objectives:

The basic objectives of this paper are-

- i) to find out if there is any dearth in value-based education in the postmodern Indian society.
- ii) to explore whether a dearth in value-based education affects the postmodern Indian man living in the industrial set up.
- iii) to explore if the lack of an effective value-based education system in the postmodern Indian society accounts for the sheer tragedy faced by Hashmukh Mehta, the protagonist of Mahesh Dattani's novel "Where There's a Will".

Review of Related Literature: Quite a number of works have come out on the issue of ethical standards and value-based education in Dattani's "Where There's a Will" though, the presenters have thought them inadequate in terms of depth and intensity. For instance, the authors have consulted the following literature in the related arena-

- i) Beena Agarwal in her book "Mahesh Dattani's plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre" has highlighted on the lack of ethics and the issue of value based education in the postmodern Indian society, and says that such a poor show has resulted in below par development of the personality of the Indian man in an industrial set up
- ii) Sita Raina in her 'A Note on the Play' in "Collected Plays" opines that "Where There's a Will" has several interesting aspects and Dattani described it as the perverse patriarchal code.
- iii) In his essay "We Live in the Flicker: Reflections in Time on the plays of Mahesh Dattani" suggests that Dattani is endowed with the rare capability to laugh at himself and his plays have no pretences. He also opined that Dattani has interspersed the two different taboos of the present age that money and death with dexterity.

Methodology: In this paper, the presenters have adopted the descriptive research method. The text of Mahesh Dattani's play "Where There's a Will" serves as the primary source whereas various books and articles on Dattani and his play "Where There's a Will" by a number of authors serve as the secondary source in the preparation of the paper.

Lack of Ethics and Value-based Education: Dattani's "Where There's a Will"

Mahesh Dattani prepares the audience to accept the outright villainy of the male protagonist Hashmukh Mehta. He was the owner of all mischiefs to make the home as an eyesore. The first two lines of the stage direction portray

"The lavish house of Hashmukh Mehta. There are three spaces..."

The suggestion of the three spaces of the home testifies a broken home and soon it was brought to the fore by the fractured father-son relationship. Hashmukh and his son Ajit was at odds from the beginning of the play as Hashmukh antagonized his son by considering him as dull as ditchwater and his business enterprises as dry as dust. Hashmukh was a hard nut, none can refute his arguments, he divested Ajit's

business ventures, and a disconcerted Ajit could only remain a disturbed onlooker. Thus, the beginning of the play consolidated Hashmukh's one-upmanship nature.

Hashmukh was oblivious to his responsibility as a father, it is obligatory for a biological father to guide his son if situation demands. However, Hashmukh found it opprobrium to be the father of a son. Concisely, Hashmukh was a square peg in a round hole, he was at odds with his wife and turned a blind eye to her needs and found it expedient to maintain an adulterous relationship with an employee of his company. His narcissism rose and he found no way to whittled away from it. Thus, the successful yet treacherous businessperson chiseled his son and wife. Moreover, the peppery businessperson Hashmukh considered his daughter in law as sly as snake. And pulled every strings to create rifts in the family to maintain his overbearing influence in the family. Thus, Hashmukh testifies his megalomaniac nature, as he feared to lose his space to his son. Ajit is not only his son but an outright rival who was potentially strong to subvert his power practices. As he says:

"Hashmukh:...I, Hashmukh Mehta, have every right. It's my phone you are using in my house, and it's my business secrets you are leaking to government officers, and my typists your friend is flirting with.

Ajit: Don't I have any rights at all?

Hashmukh: You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders."

Therefore, Hashmukh's world is not the world one where the father is happy to pass business responsibilities to his son, he is antagonistic towards his son and his use of 'you' as pejorative and 'I' as a man in the thousand and all very powerful testify his one-upmanship nature. It is out of his desire to debilitate his son's presence he said:

"Just turn him into a nice vegetable so he won't be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory, he has been in my way."

Instead of cow towing before his father, Ajit strived to create a private space for himself. As he says:

"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!"

Ajit resisted the flagrant misconduct of his factious father and says-

"I mean that you want to run the show, play *Big Boss* as long as you can. Or as long as you can. Or as long as God permits. And when all of a sudden, you are 'called to a better world', you will still want to play *Big Boss*. And you can do it through me. In short, you want me to be you."

Then his exasperation poured out in such words:

"And what becomes of me? The real me, I mean, if I am you, then where am I?"

From the above statements of the chief characters, it has been clear that the family of Hashmukh Mehta is one of many families who witness fractured relationships among its inmates interspersed with a lack of ethics to remain committed to family relationships.

Mahesh Dattani is an astute writer and his dexterity is easily discernable in the development of the plot. An interesting development occurred when an all-powerful Hashmukh Mehta died while enjoying cigar. Dattani skillfully brought the ghost of Hashmukh Mehta in to the theatrical space as an onlooker. The demise of his corporeal body did not obliterate his encumbrance on the family. Before his death, Hashmukh Mehta engrossed a 'will' that made a rigorous onslaught on the expected inheritors of the family. Hashmukh's execrable 'will' turned the home upside down and made the sufferings of the family members beyond bounds. The lawyer declared that none of the family members would be given legal rights over the property of Hashmukh including their present living room. Before his death Hashmukh created a trust followed by his name and donated his every possession to the trust. The 'will' put the space of the home in ferment and Ajit was asked to present every day in the office from 9 to 6 in the evening and if Ajit fails to follow the stringent routine he will be divested from claiming any legal rights over the Hashmukh's property. Every living being in the home despised his hellish 'will' as expected by Hashmukh's ghost:

"They will hate me more..."

To the utter surprise of Hashmukh's wife, Kiran the mistress-cum-trustee of Hashmukh declared that she is going to stay with the family to guide Ajit. The situation was quite critical; it was a case of sink or swim for the family members. They searched other options for their subsistence. But the critical condition was made easier by Kiran who oiled the wheels and she fraternized with other family members and put her heart before the Mehta family. Kiran was a victim of circumstances, her husband compelled her to hurtle and ended in becoming the mistress of Hashmukh but she rose to situations and beyond the a shadow of doubt, Mehta family was no obtuse and heartily accepted her as a family member. Seeing the family members in happy mood, the ghost of Hashmukh slung his hook and vanished from the theatrical space. Thus, Hashmukh's hellish plot was put in the shade by the family members' achievement of an un-fractured home.

The Inevitable Result: Catastrophe in Hasmukh

Hashmukh was put out of the frying pan into the fire; his corporeal demise testifies his loss of overriding physical influence upon his family members. Hashmukh's special 'will' created a havoc on the family and Hashmukh, the obdurate sinner, gives the devil its due and by transferring the controlling power to a woman changes the entire fabric of Hashmukh's power practices. To the agony of the ghost, the four persons in the house fill the room with laughter, enjoying one another's company and Mehta's revealed the newly developed friendship with Kiran. By no manner of means, the ghost realized that his abominable presence can no longer be validated. As he observes:

"I don't think I can enter this house. It isn't mine...any more. I will rest permanently on the tarmarind tree."

To put fire on the flame, Sonal requested his son to trim the tarmarind tree, the ghost had to move far away from his house as the family gets reveled with ebullient company that was free from his dominance.

Conclusion

From our above discussions, it has been adroitly clear that due to his lack of ethics and sexual transgression, Hasmukh Mehta was hurtled out of the frying pan into the fire. Hashmukh died many times, his corporeal demise was seen when he was enjoying cigar that the best treatment was given by the playwright to a narcissist. While Kiran made a full stop of all types of friction in the Mehta family, his ghost could not stand with a revitalized home free from his hellish dominance.

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