

Reflections of Decolonization in Mahesh Dattani's *'Where there's Will': A critical review*

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Abstract:

Present paper is an attempt to study and analyze the play of Mahesh Dattani's *'Where there's Will* taking into consideration the postcolonial approach with special reference to the decolonization theory. As we see that, these days literature written by the postcolonial writers tries to depict many post colonial issues and also bring forth issues related to various aspects of postmodern era. Decolonization is one of the most important aspects of post-colonial theory; hence the researcher has tried to apply decolonization theory to the play written by post-colonial dramatist of Indian soil and Sahitya Academy Award winning dramatist Mahesh Dattani. Dattani has discussed various invisible issues in his plays. His play depicts varied grave problems and issues of the post colonial society of India. India once ruled by the colonial power still bears the impact and influence of colonial writings but the playwright like Mahesh Dattani has tried to give a new identity to the Indian English Theatrical tradition through his plays by dismantling the colonial impact in his writing. He is the real gem of dramatist who has given a new identity to the Indian dramatist. The present paper attempts to study the play of Mahesh Dattani in the light of decolonisation.

Key Words:

Colonial, postcolonial, postmodern era, new identity, Indian English, decolonisation, Theatrical tradition

Introduction:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the prominent playwrights of Indian English Theater. As a playwright, he has left an indelible mark in presenting his views uniquely and innovatively. He uses various dramatic techniques to deal with the multiple issues in his plays. He is one of the modern playwrights in India who has given different shapes and forms to the Indian English theatre. Mahesh Dattani's plays deal with various hidden aspects and invisible issues in society. The plays are speaking pictures through which Dattani tries to reach every individual character of the society. His plays deal and replete with conscious human efforts to live life to the fullest in all aspects.

Bijay Kumar Das rightly states about the plays of Dattani;

“...As a performing artist, Dattani believes in the magic of words. His plays are not meant to be read in the drawing room but staged for the audience. Hence, Dattani emphasises the stage directions. There are lots of stage directions in the course of the play. These elaborate instructions sometimes make the reading of his plays clumsy...” (9)

Dattani's stage plays are speaking pictures of society. In these plays, Dattani has immaculately presented the live characters from the society who continuously communicate with the audience. As a most serious playwright of the modern Indian English theatre, Dattani deals with the most acute issues of society, such as gay – homosexuality, communal hatred, self-identity, gender issues, natural calamities and other invisible issues in society. He is one of the playwrights who has given vent to the voices of the marginalised in his plays.

Erin Mee emphatically puts her views about the plays of Mahesh Dattani;

“...Dattani's work claims a place for marginalised people onstage and by extension in society, and his work challenges notions of what is acceptable in society and what constitutes acceptable subject matter for Indian theatre...” (267)

Dattani, in his plays, has given a brief analysis of the pathos in human life, sufferings of common and marginalised masses, conflict and sentiments in human life. He also deals with the undercurrents of the Indian marginalised society.

Decolonisation is another aspect of Dattani's works. Dattani, with these serious issues in his plays, comes forward to talk about the Indian cultural and traditional aspects of Indian life. His language aptly deals with the common man's everyday language. Dattani, though influenced by the western theatrical style and presentation of his plays, smelled Indian taste and flavour.

Defining Decolonisation, The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation says that it “may involve either non-violence revolution or national liberation wars by the native population”. Further clarifying the meaning of Decolonisation, we can say “Decolonisation refers to the dismantling of the colonial machinery and the departure of the colonizers in grand or gory manner”. Similarly, Decolonisation in language means departure from those principles and phenomenon of language which served the purpose of colonial masters. Decolonisation is a political process which the world experienced in the 20th century. From a historian's perspective, decolonisation was one of the most important political developments of the twentieth century because it turned the world into a stage of history. Decolonisation movement, as it appears, is a global phenomenon and aims at emancipating the people of the colonial countries from the political, economic, social as well as mental bondage developed

due to long colonial rule. The present study is an attempt to study how Indian playwright like Mahesh Dattani subsequently uses English in a decolonized manner in his plays.

The play *Where There's a Will* was first performed by Playpen at Chowdiah Memorial Hall in 1988 in Deccan Herald Theatre. This is the first stage play of Mahesh Dattani. The space is a fine picture of contemporary Indian society. The play is highly thought-provoking and reflective, full of pure entertainment. In this play, Dattani deals with the exorcism of the patriarchal code.

The play is very entertaining and belongs to the genre of black tragedy, very wittily written and presented. This play deals with a few of the characteristics of decolonisation, which can be analysed further.

The play *Where there is a will* is about a Gujrathi business tycoon Hasmukh Shah, a very wise and naughty character, a head of the family and other family members, his wife Sonal, son, Ajit and daughter-in-law Preeti. Hasmukh Mehta is a man who believes in patriarchal social conduct, and hence all his life, he has walked on the footprints his father and forefathers paved. He wishes that his son, too, follows the same traditional path shown by his forefathers as he himself did. He is a man who strictly follows patriarchy and runs the house in the same manner. He never appreciates individual independent thinking and behaviour in the family, including his wife, son and daughter-in-law.

All the members except his son Ajit follow and abide code of conduct and rules laid down by him in the family. As a consequence of this, no one in the family has contended with his bullying behaviour, and the reason is he has a frequent quarrel with his son. Ajit, his son, does not like his father's attitude towards him. Hasmukh's caring wife, Sonal, is always concerned about his health and always tries to maintain the health of her husband. Hasmukh is a cardiac patient, and this is why Sonal is always cautious about the food habits of her

husband, which Hasmukh never appreciates, and he is such an adamant person who never takes this seriously. Preeti, the family's daughter-in-law, shows her obedience in her behaviour, but actually, she is not as she tries to show. She puts the appearance of disguise as a typical Indian daughter-in-law in the family.

As the play progresses, the audience relishes the comic feast provided to them by the dramatist. As the play's plot develops, we see Hasmukh die of a heart attack while he is sleeping in his bed, and his ghost is visible to the audience. His worldly attachment to his house and property is shown in such a manner that even after his death, he is not detached from his avarice and greed from his wealth. The audience could see his existence in the house as a ghost, which creates many comic incidents later on in the play. The spirit of Hasmukh entertains the audience, which makes them feel relaxed and laugh. Meanwhile, as the play moves further, the audience is introduced to a new character, KiranZaveri, a Marketing Executives in Hasmukh's Company and a mistress to him away from home. However, he has a faithful and caring wife.

In this play, Dattani deals with the exorcism of the patriarchal code in society. All the characters in the play show their human characteristics. As we see, Hasmukh Mehta is authoritarian, his wife Sonal is submissive and subservient, and his son Ajit is struggling for his freedom from his father's tyranny and dominance and Preeti, the daughter-in-law of the family, always showing her complaining behaviour towards her father in law. We also see Kiran, mistress of Hasmukh, is also not happy with his temperament towards her.

Even after his death, Hasmukh left his tight clasp on his family through his will. This is a very crucial aspect of the play. A significant and important thing in the play is the 'will' of Hasmukh, in which he leaves his entire wealth in the custody of KiranZaveri to the trust. We also see according to his will, Hasmukh brings home his mistress to his own home to live

with his other family members to teach them the management of his wealth according to his will.

The play puts forth the issue of a father-son relationship, where the father wishes that his son should follow his own footprints as he himself did. We also see how the son denies his father's dominance and loves to live life independently and carefree. The play truly describes the empathetic condition of the Indian middle-class family in which we observe various hidden aspects of the common issues of Indian middle-class families. The play aptly deals with the Indian middle-class family issues where traditional family values clash with prevalent social stereotypes.

Sita Raina, a well-known Delhi-based actress and theatre director who also directed this play, rightly mentions in her note on the play.

“...The play was originally set in a Gujarati family, but since I was not familiar with that milieu, Mahesh agreed to localise it. I have kept the accents neutral and have embellished it with Punjabi and Bengali to reflect those who speak more in their mother tongue...” (CP-451)

The above statement rightly puts the play into the category of how Mahesh Dattani himself is more positive about the process of decolonisation.

Mahesh Dattani has attempted to decolonise English in *Where There's a Will*. In the whole play use of English is flavoured with typical Indian vernacular languages like Hindi and other north Indian languages. The play is replete with instances of decolonisation which can be taken into consideration, such as references to Indian culture, attire, food and allusions to Indian Gods and Goddesses.

Reference to typical Indian cooking dishes and food items throughout the play could be observed.

The words referring to Indian cooking dishes and foods are;

Roti, halwa, papad, pulao, malaikofta, bainganbarta, ghee, paratha, kulchas, atta, paneermakahan, jalebis, burfis, and dahi.

These typical Indian cooking items and dishes are referred to by the dramatist to give more prominence to the typical traditional multi-cultured food items are one of the linguistic techniques used by the dramatist to achieve the effect of decolonisation.

One of the conspicuous aspects of Dattani's literary expression and presentation is that he often refers to the allusions to the names of Gods, places and literary and cultural allusions. These allusions are; Goa, Lord Krishna, Vishnu Temple, Tribhovandas Bhimji etc.

Dattani uses words such as safari-suit, kurta –pyjama to talk about the typical Indian traditional attires.

The Indian festival is also mentioned in the play, like Diwali, the festival of lights and crackers, the most famous and traditional festival in the lives of the Indian masses. Dattani has attempted to decolonise the cultural aspect by referring to the Indian festival Diwali.

Dattani, a clever craftsman and the master of language, carries the flavour of Indian soil in his style and presentation. This could be seen in his idiomatic references.

“..AJIT. Thank you. You are so generous I could kiss your feet..”(CP-458)

This clearly references the Indian culture of kissing one's feet.

“...AJIT. You will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune.

And I will never do that...” (CP-458)

AJIT. (angrily) I meant you thick-skinned buffalo.

These idiomatic expressions are put in typical Indian style by the dramatist.

Dattani takes much care while referring to the common Indian traditional beliefs. He enjoys having played with the language used in his plays. There is mention of the traditional Indian belief of having a son in the family.

In the patriarchal Indian society, it is very much important to have a son, who is considered to be the heir and responsible caretaker of the family and family possessions. It is the traditional Indian belief that the son carries on the family name.

“...HASMUKH. Why does a man marry? So that he can have a woman all to himself? No. There's more to it than that. What? Maybe he needs a faithful companion? No. If that were it, all men would keep dogs. No. No, I think the important reason anyone should marry at all is to get a son. Why is it so important to get a son? Because the son will carry on the family name? (Pause) Why did I marry? Yes, to get a son. So that when I grow old, I can live life again through my son. Why did my father marry? To get me. Why did I marry? To get Ajit...” (CP-475)

In the above Hasmukh's dialogue, he emphatically puts his views about having a son in the family and the duties to be performed by the son. At the same time, Hasmukh is disappointed to have a son like Ajit, who does not fulfil his wishes.

Dattani's clear reference is how in Indian families having a son is the prime concern and importance. As mentioned earlier, Hasmukh Mehta dominantly believes in the tradition of patriarchy.

Dattani also attempts decolonisation through linguistic tools such as code-mixing and code-switching.

PREETI. Who cares whether they know? Just stop making a bloody tamasha of it. (CP-486)

Conclusion:

Dattani shows a remarkable command of expression and presentation of language in his plays. His language suits the purpose of the character's inner strength and psychological behaviour. Dattani uses the language as per the need and role of the character. To conclude, there is an abundant use of decolonisation in this play of Dattani. The play is nicely written and performed on the stage. This stage play is replete with post-colonial aspects and features like decolonisation. Dattani very skillfully achieves decolonisation in his play.

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