Chapter - 4

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The function of drama in my opinion is not merely to reflect the mal-functions of society, but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. It is ugly but funny.¹

Mahesh Dattani’s plays reflect the wry faces of the Indian family. Relationships in the contemporary stressed changing urban scenario of the Indian milieu form the central theme of his plays. His plays largely concern themselves with the deep rooted issues of the traditional society and the compulsions of the present world. Dattani sets his plays within the dynamics of the pre-existing structure of the urban Indian family. The conventional Indian (joint) family and
its long cherished traditional values appear crumbling in his plays. The pressures arising from the conflicting loyalties between tradition and modernity, authority and self respect, social responsibility and self interest generate an unending struggle for individuals. The overt and covert forms of oppressions inherent in the patriarchal social structures along with the social veneration of authority and the aggressions of the modern life-style find an ugly but appropriate and at times funny reflection in his plays. The urban Indian family, in Dattani's plays, becomes the microcosm to reflect upon the most tangible dynamic reality of the middle class Indian society. His characters reveal the strangulations and sufferings resulting from the oppressive patriarchal structures of the society.

Dattani's plays follow a recognisable pattern. His characters are made to probe the nature of the joint family structure, they inherit, and then convert the very setting into the site of the consequent conflict. As a consequence of the friction caused by newer realities piling on the older, 'acceptable' realities, his plots and subplots often work to destroy the very edifice in which they situate themselves and demolish the given stereotypes that shape the structures. To achieve this Dattani makes use of the available stage space. He reveals the abstract family structures in concrete terms by splitting up the stage into multilevel, multidimensional spaces. His characters move and speak in these spaces with voices that echo and reverberate. Their actions sometimes amalgamate and sometimes distort the narrative structures. The issues he discusses are often veiled or masked but these are nonetheless issues deep-rooted in a definite space and time and within a stimulating societal context. Dattani acknowledges:
I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background.²

He encourages the audience/readers to explore the facts camouflaged behind facades that need to be penetrated. Although most of his plays are constructed around social issues Dattani detests from conveying any specific message. He maintains the stance of a non-judgmental observer. Instead of intruding into the plays he writes or attempting to sermonise he employs the very difficult art and craft of humour.

The internal dynamics of a seemingly happy affluent and close knit Gujarati family are revealed in Dattani’s first performed play Where There’s a Will (1988). The playwright describes the play as “the exorcism of the patriarchal code.”³ It deals with the lives of an upper middle-class family, exploring with both humour and tragedy the compromises, sacrifices, and falseness that lie beneath the cloak of duty, family loyalty, and the personal identity. Dattani has, in a sense, chronicled the follies and prejudices of Indian society as reflected within the microcosm of the family unit. The play is set within the confines of four rooms. Each room is created with specific details. Dattani focuses on family relationships through dramatic representation and the variations in the signification allotted to different spaces.

The plot appears to be simple. As the action begins to unfold the relationships between the four main characters, belonging to a joint family, appear painfully twisted owing to the intricate design of Hasmukh Mehta’s will. Hasmukh Mehta is an affluent business man. He does not trust his wife, son and daughter-in-law
with his inheritance. Before his death he has formed a trust headed by his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri, to manage his entire property until his son turns forty-five years of age. He has also attached very stringent conditions for his family members if they wish to inherit the property. According to the terms of Hasmukh Mehta's will, Ajit cannot inherit his father's money and property until he turns forty-five. At the same time he is also under compulsion to attend office everyday from 9 to 6 and follow the instructions of Kiran Jhaveri. The will also mandated that Mr. Mehta's mistress must move into and live with his family, for twenty-two years, till the trust is dissolved. Dattani strikes at the very foundation of the ideal Indian family and its presumed stereotypical character types – the faithful wife, the obedient son, the dutiful and docile daughter-in-law and the sly mistress. Instead, he portrays the wife, Sonal, the son Ajit, the daughter-in-law Preeti and the mistress Kiran without their masks, revealing their real motives and thereby their wry and funny faces. Dattani uses comedy to expose these bitter truths of contemporary life. The humour of the play is, unmistakably, layered in black comedy that becomes Dattani's main tool to expose the real motives of the characters. In an interview he says:

Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe. ...I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium.4

Where There's a Will is thus a play where traditional family values clash and with unexpected twists completely subvert the existing stereotypes. The story revolves around a supposedly 'self-made' industrialist, Hasmukh Mehta. He is a
patriarch and the supreme malcontent with archetypal problems of familial precedents. His listless wife Sonal and their colourless conjugal life exemplify a ridicule of forced relationship, devoid of attachment and love. They seem to drag along due to compulsions of marriage. Hasmukh regrets:

when I was twenty-one, the greatest tragedy of my life took place. I got married. The following year Ajit was born. Tragedy after tragedy.  

His spendthrift son Ajit and a scheming and conniving daughter-in-law Preeti are the other two members of the family. But the satirical element in the story acquires its completeness through the sudden revelation of the clandestine relationship between Hasmukh Mehta and his mistress, Kiran Jhaveri. All the four characters contradict their names. Hasmukh is a dour-faced man who seems unable to smile; Sonal hardly shines; Ajit is a failure in the eyes of his father; and Preeti is as unaffectionate as Hasmukh is sour. And yet they are a family, yoked together with no choice but to function as a unit under the patriarchal order.

Husmukh is unhappy and dissatisfied with the way his life has been spent. He regrets his inability to control and dictate the life of his son as his father had controlled and dictated his life. He questions himself very introspectively:

Why did I marry? Yes, to get a son. So that when I grow old, I can live life again through my son. . . . Why am I unhappy? Because I don’t have a son. Who is Ajit? Isn’t he my son? No. He’s just a boy who
spends my money and lives in my house. A son should make me happy. Like I made my father... happy. . . . He has not a single quality I look for in a son! He has made my entire life worthless . . . It won't be long before everything I worked for and achieved will be destroyed! (WTW:475).

He calls his own son a 'nincompoop'. It is this frustration and failure to pass on the patriarchal hierarchy to his son, Ajit, that his dead soul cannot rest in peace. He reappears, after death, as the ghost of an autocratic old patriarch. He has willed his property to his mistress with certain stern conditions so that when his son follows those conditions to acquire the property he will ultimately become a replica of his father. He lingers along and hangs around in the house, as a ghost, to see and enjoy the suffering of his family members.

Ajit is also an unhappy man. The psychological rivalry between the father and the son is evident throughout the play. They distrust each other and can hardly get along. In fact the play starts with their difference of opinion. Ajit complains to his friend on the phone:

AJIT: I don't think he has ever listened to me in his entire life. . . . And after all I am his son . . .

HASMUKH: What makes it worse is knowing that I actually prayed to get him. Oh God! I regret it all. Please let him drop
down dead. No, no. What a terrible thing to say about one's own son. I take it back. Dear God don't let him drop dead. Just turn him into a nice vegetable so that he won't be in my way. Ever since he entered my factory he has been in my way (WTW:455).

Elsewhere Hasmukh says:

I should have prayed for a daughter. I want you to be me! What's wrong with being me?

(WTW:460).

The rivalry between the father and son reaches another extreme when Hasmukh curses Ajit:

You should get a son like yourself. He will finish you off much faster than you have finished me (WTW:463).

Another reason for the hostility between father and son is the constant disagreement between Hasmukh and Sonal. Hasmukh complains that his son had not been adequately raised by his wife:

I gave him a strong forceful name, Ajit. It means 'the victorious'. A powerful name like that should be bellowed out... It didn't take her long to change the victorious into (mimics Sonal) 'Aju' (WTW:497).

Ajit is often found sandwiched between his arguing parents. Sonal, it seems,
always escapes to the kitchen assuming to be preparing something or the other for Ajit. When Hasmukh instructs his wife not to make ‘parathas’ she says she is preparing them for their son, Ajit. They start arguing whether Ajit wants ‘Parathas’ or not without asking him. Ajit supports his mother and asks her to make ‘parathas’ even though he did not want to eat. Ajit’s contempt for his father becomes evident when he tells Hasmukh:

No! I don’t want them! Yes, I lied! Because

I would rather lie than agree with you!

(WTW:469).

He gets up and leaves the house without eating the ‘paratha’. Ajit is also caught between his pregnant wife and his widowed mother. He shows a sense of duty and responsibility towards both the women and does not argue with any of them as he would argue with his father. Preeti, his wife calls him a “silly oaf” (WTW:482) but he does not retaliate. He remains silent even when his mother, Sonal, complains:

Oh my migraine has started again... First

it was your father who gave it to me and

now it is your wife! (WTW:483).

On the other hand there is hardly much to choose between the marital relationship of the two couples; Hasmukh, Sonal and Ajit, Preeti. The colourless relationships between the two couples that comprise the family portray two singularly unexciting generations of couples, sexually insipid and loveless. Throughout the play they remain in a typically materialistic and money-oriented upper middle-class milieu. This is revealed through the play on the word sonal,
which means gold, when Hasmukh says:

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. As good as mud. Ditto our sex life.

Mud (WTW:473).

Even Sonal does not think much of her husband. She depends on her sister Minal
to prop up her self-esteem. We come to know what she thinks of her husband
when she says:

He thinks he is king of all he surveys! And
we are his subjects . . . He can put on all the
airs he wants to, but he doesn't fool me . . .

(WTW:472).

But the pertinent question that the play seeks to explore refers to the identity
of individual men in successive generations of the Indian family. If sons only
replicate and emulate their fathers, the patriarch, then what becomes of their
identity and individuality? Kiran rightly introspects:

Isn't it strange how repetitive life is? My
brothers. They have turned out to be like
their father, going home with bottles of rum
wrapped up in newspapers. Beating up their
wives (WTW:508).

Even Hasmukh Mehta's ghost sounds sarcastic when he learns that his wife and

132
mistress consider him to be a weak man with false strength. It hurts his masculine whims when Kiran tells Sonal:

Hasnukh didn’t really want a mistress. He wanted a father. He saw in me a woman who would father him! (WTW:510).

Hasmukh is pained to learn that he has only replaced his father as the head of the house, that he does not have an identity of his own:

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?
(WTW:511).

These are some of the vital questions that the play raises and points towards the economic and social compulsions that force generations to replicate the earlier generations in thought and deed. Ajit has learned to stand up to his father. But when he learns that his father’s will restricts him from inheriting the property he compromises. He reluctantly follows all the instructions of Kiran Jhaveri. He is fully aware that:

Everything she tells me to do is exactly what he [Hasmukh Mehta] would have wanted me to do. We are all living out a dead man’s dream! Quite a price to pay for a few crores of rupees to tide us by in our old age.
(WTW: 501).
Women in the family learn to adapt to the belligerence of the Petrarch. Sonal uses her son as a shield against her husband. Her entire attention is centered on her son, Ajit. Hasmukh thinks that Sonal has raised Ajit as his rival. She is proud of her son while her husband thinks he is a disaster. Similarly, Preeti is not happy with her husband’s attitude. She blames Ajit for her condition:

I hate you for it! Oh! I curse you! Look what you have done to your wife and child! Made them Paupers! All because you answered back your father! (WTW:502).

She is a cunning woman who changes her father in law’s pills to hasten his death. She surrenders to the wishes of her in-laws, when Husmukh is alive. Immediately after his death, on learning that the family does not inherit his wealth, her conduct changes. She argues with both her husband and mother-in-law. In her outburst she reveals:

He was a slave driver, your father! ... He succeeded with your mother. But I didn’t let him do that to me. How did I manage? Simple. I gave in, ... I thought, why not humour him for a few days? After he’s gone we can have all the freedom to do what we want, and also all the money (WTW: 501-02).
Immediately outside the family unit stands Kiran, Hasmukh's mistress. She comes on stage only after the patriarch dies and his will places her at the centre of the action. In a way, she replaces Hasmukh. She becomes the head of the family and all the members are forced to follow her directives. She is smart, astute, manipulative and worldly wise. She has a rare combination of both masculine and feminine attributes. Her character signifies all the qualities that Dattani firmly considers as positive and necessary for a woman. Like most women who play gendered roles, Kiran is a victim too, but she rejects to accept her victimised condition. She becomes part of Hasmukh's life with her eyes wide open, and aware of the benefits that she will derive from the relationship. She reveals to Sonal:

We are not very different, Preeti and I . . . .

It's just a question of circumstances. I got my money one way. She is trying to get hers by another (WTW:506).

The harsh reality of modern compulsions and the economic status as the defining force for relationships becomes evident when she bluntly tells Ajit:

I got a husband, my husband got his booze, and your father got . . . well, you know (WTW:491).

The play is neatly divided into two parts. The first part comprises the period when Hasmukh Mehta is alive and sees the world as a patriarch. He is the centre
of power and controls his surrounding. Dattani's witty humour is at its best in the first part, revealing itself in the barbed curses that Hasmukh spits at everybody in general. The second part consists of the period after Hasmukh's death. He becomes a ghost and sees the world upside down. He becomes a silent spectator because here his own perception of himself and the world that he has left behind is radically disturbed. The comedy runs riot at times, rebounding with the subversive repositioning of the stereotype. The play also hints at the matriarchal and patriarchal social structures. The special kind of bonding that takes place between Sonal and Kiran is lacking in their relationship with Hasmukh. With new power centres in place, the entire view of the world, as it were, is turned on its head. It is best illustrated physically in the play through the ghost of Hasmukh hanging upside down on the tamarind tree. The play thus looks at the Indian middle class morality and then goes on to parody it. Hasmukh's reality is taken apart by the two women who know him best. The dysfunctional patriarchal family becomes a unit under female leadership. His strategy to control the family through economics has failed miserably but Kiran's endeavour to understand the family members have evolved a rare bonding.

Another play that prominently discusses the theme of dysfunctional (joint) Indian family is *Bravely Fought the Queen*. In an interview with Ranu Uniyal, Dattani reveals that:

*Bravely Fought the Queen* was triggered off by the poem we learnt in school, 'Khoob ladi mardani woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi'
and what I had witnessed at somebody's house, was some form of battle between the woman and her husband. . . . And then I immediately got this setting of a woman fighting a losing battle and the title just came to me and is reflective of Laxmi Bai's fight against the British and it was a losing battle but she never gave up. 6

The play thus presents the struggles of women in the Indian family set up and their resolve and strategy to fight all odds through aggression, deception, fantasy, deceit and the like, knowing fully well that they are fighting a losing battle.

The play depicts the story of an Indian family living in the suburbs of Bangalore. The storyline revolves around meticulous character sketches highlighting the issues of domestic violence, deceit, longing and fantasy. The men and women married to each other rarely jell in Dattani's plays. They live together as a family, under the same roof with unfulfilled desires and mute compromises. In fact they emerge more as individuals exploring their personal space symbolised by various levels of stage indicating the theatrical resonance of individual space.

Jiten and Nitin are two brothers married to two sisters Dolly and Alka. They live in two identical parts of a big house. The Trivedi house which appears as a single unit to the outside world is split into two identical parts occupied by the two couples residing in it. But this horizontal division of the house does not stop its residents from interfering into each other's life. The mirror reflection of the
house is also evident in the equally unhappy married life of the two couples. There is also a vertical split in the house. On the upper level lives Baa, the sick mother. She is bedridden, suffering from paralysis. Both families take turns to look after Baa who is supposedly moved from one part of the house to another every month. Though unable to move physically, she carries the audience along back and forth with the shift in time through her memory.

Her memory is full of violence, contempt for her husband and self pity. Her reminiscences hint her romantic proclivity and her uninteresting marriage. Her relationship and compromising involvement with her husband become evident when she moans and complains:

He is dark! Dark! And I am so fair! My children will be dark, like him! (Smiles.)
Two sons! I have given you two sons! The younger one is beautiful, like my father! He has my blood! Don't kiss him! You will leave tobacco on his cheek. Don't spit! Oh, the whole house smells of you! I have married such a villager?

Baa fights a losing battle with her husband. She revolts against her husband argues with him and ultimately ignores him. Her children Jiten and Nitin unknowingly bear the brunt of the incompatible marriage. Their childhood reminiscences haunt them throughout their life. Jiten takes after his father and replicates him in all aspects. He mistreats his wife, Dolly, abuses her and
physically assaults her like his father would beat up his mother. Baa does not want her children to be like their father. She cannot stop the influence of her husband on her elder son Jiten. She screams: “Wait, where are you taking my Jitu. Jitu, wait! Wait!” (BFQ:288). The memory of her struggles with her husband and her sense of partial victory leaves her disturbed for life. Even in her old age the memories of her unsuitable marriage do not blur. She unconsciously grumbles in Alka’s presence:

**BAA:** Jitu is just like his father. Just like him.

**ALKa:** And you wanted to make sure Nitin would be different (BFQ: 284).

But she very consciously and cautiously shields her younger son Nitin. The upbringing of the two brothers is so different that Jiten and Nitin hardly share any similarity except their parents. Alka, in an inebriate moment, even asks Baa:

Your sons are so different from one another.

. . . Do they have different fathers (BFQ:254).

Dattani sprinkles subtle hints in the play that point towards the complexes and behavioral traits of Jiten and Nitin. Jiten grows up to become an arrogant and violent individual. He despises his mother for her preferences towards his younger sibling, Nitin. He feels that Baa will leave the entire property to Nitin as he is her
favourite child. His hatred towards his mother is perceptible when he blames his mother for his violence towards his wife and daughter.

**JITEN:** I didn’t mean to . . . you know I didn’t. It was Baa! Blame her but not me! . . .

(Sobbing) No! No. *(Points to Baa's room.)*

She made me do it! She did it! *(BFQ:312)*.

He crushes the old bagger woman with his car and kills her. Jiten does not respect women. He is lecherous. He sends Sridhar to fetch him a whore mainly to abuse a woman and not out of physical desire. He assaults, argues and fights with his wife. He deprives Dolly of motherhood by hitting her in the seventh month of pregnancy. He even instructs his brother Nitin to throw his wife, Alka, out of the house. The inner politics of the Indian joint family and the undercurrents of tension are depicted with conviction in this play. On the other hand, the upbringing of Nitin as ‘momma’s boy’ makes him meek and submissive. He looks for a father figure in other men and is instantly attracted towards the auto rickshaw driver, “with strong black arm” *(BFQ:281)* like his father’s. When Jiten and Nitin talk about selling the property while Baa is alive:

**NITIN:** I thought she would leave the house to me. I have always been her favourite.

**JITEN:** I know. It never made a difference to me.
NITIN: It was difficult for me. I had to live up to her expectations (BFQ: 289).

The inner traits of Jiten and Nitin are the result of the struggles of Baa and her husband, who could not bond well in marriage. The friction in their relationship moulds the life of their children. She confounds the violence of her husband with equal aggression:

BAA: This is my house! My house! . . . Don’t shout! Who are you to shout at me? . . . You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See your father!

(BFQ: 278).

Baa continues to fight an unending battle, first against her husband and later against her children, Jiten and Nitin. Like the unyielding queen of Jhansi she does not surrender even in the end and intends to leave the property to her grand daughter, Daksha:

. . . the fall-out of patriarchy taints the women in this play too. Baa, the physically and emotionally abused woman, is reactionally led to reject the son who resembles his father and posses the one who
looks like herself and to alienate him from his father.\(^8\)

Baa and her husband share a relationship of violence, aggression and retaliation.

While Baa retaliates and endeavours to control her violent husband through equal aggression Lalitha and Sridhar seem to surrender and yet deceive. Lalitha appears to be a docile, innocent, supportive wife of a hardworking and committed husband. Both employ self deception to veil their real desires. Lalitha pretends to be an occupied and busy house-wife and tries a little bit of everything to fill the inner void:

**LALITHA:** Oh, I keep myself occupied. I do a bit of writing. Freelance. I write an occasional woman’s column for the *Times*. Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation. And, oh yes, I grow bonsai plants – I’ve been growing them for years. I do a bit of creative writing as well. You know, poetry and stuff like that. Nothing great but \ldots\ (BFQ: 243).

It is amply clear that she lives her life in bits and pieces. Her yearning for an enriching completeness, as mother and housewife, is delayed due to economic compulsions. The couple is forced to restrain their desires and set priorities. Their relationship portrays the modern compulsions and compromises of the upwardly
mobile middle class in India. They are a nuclear family as against the Tiwaris who live in a joint family. Lalitha’s passion for growing bonsai and Sridhar’s encouragement is an apt semiotic referent to their situation. Just as a sapling should be planted in shallow water and its growth needs to be clipped and stunted, for a perfect bonsai, similarly they have clipped their desires and stunted their natural yearning to have a child. It is evident in Lalitha’s reply to Alka about children: “Not yet. We are saving for a flat of our own” (BFQ:243). The shallowness of their existence is again perceptible when Sridhar is forced to compromise in his profession out of economic compulsions. Even when he does not agree with the weird ideas of his boss, Jiten, regarding the campaign, he cannot afford to quit his job. When Jiten threatens to sack him Sridhar pleads “Hey, no! Wait! We are saving to buy a flat” (BFQ:280).

Both Lalitha and Sridhar deceive each other in their relationship. They are the hypocrites who feign to be loyal to each other. Lalitha does not openly express her desire to have a drink. She picks up the hard drink that Alka had made for herself and then pretends she took it by mistake. Her curiosity to know about Dolly’s clandestine relationship with Kanhaiya and her interest in the extramarital relationship points towards her own desires. Instead of returning home with her waiting husband, she lingers on near the kitchen of the Trivedis to have a glimpse off Dolly’s teenage lover. Her own desire for the clandestine relationship is expressed symbolically when she immediately starts watering the drying bonsai with natural rain water instead of going home with Sridhar. Even Sridhar, the seemingly loyal and committed husband, deceives his wife by indulging in physical relationship with the ‘whore’, on the back seat of the car.
Similarly, Dolly uses fantasy to escape the reality of her incongruous relationship with her husband, Jiten. Both Jiten and Dolly try to erase the soreness of their unhappy marriage through temporal extramarital relationship. Jiten uses the couch in his office for physical pleasure with a whore while Dolly fantasises about a teenage servant, Kanhaiya, entering into her house through the kitchen. She narrates her fantasies to Alka and Lalitha in the first part of the play entitled ‘Women’:

**DOLLY:** He asks whether he can make me some tea. And I say, ‘Come in.’ . . . The thumri plays. And it ends. Another one plays. I forget when that ends and a new one begins! All I’m aware of are two powerful black arms around me and the beautiful sound of the heartbeat of a warm gentle soul (BFQ:262).

Fantasy as a means to evade the sordid reality of uneventful life is also prominently perceptible when Dolly puts on a mud mask and pretends to get ready for an imaginary outing with her husband. She is fully aware that the outing has been called off but she does not acknowledge the painful reality. When the play opens Dolly is wearing a mud mask. She is listening to the thumri of Naina Devi, a singer known for her revolt against the patriarchal social norms. The mud mask symbolises her desire to conceal her real face, desires and fantasies. She is afraid that the mud mask may crack. In spite of her caution and patience she
cannot stop the mask from cracking. Symbolically these cracks reveal her real self, her desires and fantasies to Alka and Lalitha. But as these desires are revealed only to the claustrophobic female world she can still fight her losing battle against her lecherous husband with a brave face.

Alka and Nitin, on the other hand suffer due to their inner guilt. Nitin has gay preferences and cannot provide conjugal satisfaction to his wife. He is, at the most, indifferent towards Alka. He shows neither love nor hatred towards her. Alka tries to evade this reality with alcohol. Throughout the play she is in an inebriate state. She is aware of Nitin’s indifference towards her but cannot revolt against her husband as she has no other shelter. It seems that she has accepted her fate and resolved to compromise with the reality of her marriage. Her own sense of guilt springs from the incident in which her brother Praful had burnt her hair for sitting behind a boy on his motorbike while returning home from school. The incident has a lifelong impact on her psyche and she cannot even fantasise like her sister Dolly. When Lalitha and Dolly ask Alka to go to the Kitchen she staggers:

ALKA: No-o! I can’t! (Sits on the sofa, crying.) Praful, your sister is good. She’s good (BFQ:263).

Thus when we examine the relationship between the married couples in the play we realise that they are coupled together like the “[t]win houses. Right in the middle of nowhere”(BFQ:238). Just as the twin house shares similar attributes and a mirror reflection similarly all the couples in the play share similar attributes and reflections. But as a mirror reflects a reality and a perception, here also the
patriarchal, masculine world reflects a social reality and the feminine world only its perception. The dependence of married women in the Indian family structure becomes obvious when Alka and Dolly seem to live on the wish and mercy of their husbands who can keep or throw them out of the house at will.

**DOLLY:** You can't throw me out because I'm leaving of my own free will. Doesn't that hurt you?

**JITEN:** It doesn't mean a bloody thing.

**DOLLY:** It doesn't mean a bloody thing! Why can't I say it?

**JITEN:** Say it if you want to.

**DOLLY:** You know I can't! You know very well I can't walk out on you! You know it, so why should I pretend you don't?

**JITEN:** Why pretend you can leave?

**DOLLY:** You win. Again (BFQ:309).

The masculine world, depicted by 'Men' in the play, knows its desires and can fulfill them but women in the play are trapped in the house and remain at the mercy of men. They always get ready but go nowhere. The men, in the play, actualise their hidden desires. Jiten can call a prostitute to his office but his wife
can only fantasise about Kanhaiya. She can only play Radha to an imaginary Kanhaiya who exists only in her imagination. Nitin can have relationship with other men but Alka can only compromise her situation and learn to live in the house without Nitin’s care, affection and love. Lalitha is also dependent on her husband and cannot move without him. She is forced to wait in the Trivedi house until Sridhar can come and fetch her.

The house and office are suggestive settings that allow readers to peep into the different realms of the feminine and the masculine world. The play constantly moves away from the external settings into an internalised reality of the feminine and the masculine worlds through individual characters. The women remain at home much of the time, where they look after the men's ageing mother, Baa. Much of the play's tension comes from the interaction between the enclosed female world of the first act and the male world of business in the second act. The fact that both men and women are living lives based on fantasy is cruelly exposed when the characters confront each other in Act III, and the realities of their lives emerge. The homosexuality of one of the brothers, the crippled daughter of the other, Nitin and Alka’s contrived marriage, Baa's continued presence, and the motif of inheriting the property after Baa’s death – are the facts concealed in the uneasy world which the characters inhabit.

The three parts of the play ‘The Women’, ‘The Men’ and ‘Free for All!’ depict different types of space on the physical as well as psychological level. On the physical level we find an upper class house with expensive décor. The psychological level is suggested by the badly maintained house.
The women in the play come together in the first act with the curtain rising on a mud-masked Dolly. She prepares for a social outing with her husband Jiten. Dolly is unexpectedly visited by Lalitha. She has come to plan a costume ball with her, to help promote an ad campaign being worked on by Jiten, his brother Nitin and Lalitha's husband Shridhar. Baa, Dolly's paralysed mother-in-law, is introduced to the audience with an obtrusive bell-chime, which soon becomes the hallmark of her character. The audience/readers also learn about Dolly's daughter, Daksha. She studies dance among other things, in a nameless school in Ooty. Dolly's sister Alka, who is also Nitin's wife, lives next door. Her perky presence is felt as she heads straight to the bar as though working up an appetite. As the play progresses, Dolly, dressed in a formal sari, finds herself facing the disappointment of a cancelled outing. The callousness of an unsympathetic husband, the sniggering of a half-drunk sister and the told-you-so face of an enthusiastic visitor disturbs her. Something stirs within her and a poised Dolly decides to make the most of a willing audience in Lalitha and picks a quarrel with a still-drinking Alka. Alka retaliates by questioning the equation of Dolly's marriage and threatens to expose her vulnerabilities. Relishing the utter credulity of a wide-eyed Lalitha, the sisters then expressively narrate the story of Dolly's cook, Kanhaiya, and his teen-age desire for Dolly. A somewhat bewildered Lalitha reorients the discussion to the costume ball, when unexpectedly and unjustifiably the women poke fun at a Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's classic entitled Jhansi Ki Rani. In a too-literal translation, Lalitha recites:
We’d heard her praises sung so often

So bravely fought the Rani of Jhansi

So bravely fought the manly queen . . . (BFQ:296).

thereby underscoring the title of the play. All the female characters in the play
fight their losing battles, like the manly queen, Jhansi ki Rani.

The second act takes place at Jiten and Nitin's advertising agency. Jiten is
seen arguing with his mild-mannered brother Nitin, while Shridhar, a subordinate
in the firm, tries to discuss a campaign. The headstrong Jiten snubs and belittles
Shridhar and in a crafty move even asks him to get a whore for the boss. A
frustrated Shridhar reluctantly obliges. There is not much difference between the
feminine world of Act I and the masculine world of Act II except that the women
exist in their enclosed surroundings guarded by a watchman and have restricted
mobility while the masculine world is unguarded, more free and mobile. Both
Jiten and Nitin use the office for physical gratification, according to their sexual
preferences. After the completion of the second act the brother's go back home,
with Shridhar in tow. This marks the beginning of the final act where all the
characters enact a little more of what they had already established. Jiten appears
more menacing, Nitin more meek, Alka more inebriated, Dolly more cynical, Baa
more obtrusive, Lalitha more bewildered and Shridhar most helpless. Bit by bit,
the reader/audience learns the awkward details about each member of the family.
That Baa was a victim of spousal abuse but failed to teach her son otherwise. That
Jiten too abused his wife and was once enraged enough to beat a pregnant Dolly
in the seventh month of her term. That Dolly's dancing daughter Daksha was born physically challenged and attended a special school. That Kanhaiya was merely a fantasy. That Nitin was gay.

At times it seems disconcerting to see an abundance of dysfunctional attributes in the same family. Even to a cosmopolitan Indian reader/viewer the fact that a character was gay, or that a woman fantasised about a younger man coveting her, or that another indulged in heavy drinking can surely be shocking or awe-inspiring when it happens simultaneously in the same family. No character in the entire play seems normal or devoid of escapist tendencies. They all reveal haunting images of personal discontent and forced or compromised relationships. Moreover, what hurts the most is the fact that Dattani chooses to portray and explain the deteriorating relationships within the family as an institution in a plain and unassuming manner.

Even in this play the absent patriarch is the cause of feud within the family. Jiten and Nitin's father is only referred to in the play. Neither his wife nor his children like him. Similarly, Dolly and Alka's brother, Prafful, also never comes on stage. Alka and Nitin blame him for their condition. The play becomes a plea for the acceptance of Indian values that are shifting. It depicts a world where tradition and contemporary clash, confuse and create a new social landscape. Dattani writes with a pungency that is skillfully disguised, employing language that resorts to clarity and sharpness, one that pushes the limits of the spoken word and the pregnant silences in between.
Dance Like a Man also portrays a similar theme where a seemingly autocratic and authoritative father, Amritlal, conspires with his own daughter-in-law, Ratna, to ascertain that his son, Jairaj, follows his legacy and does not deviate into the feminine trait of dancing. Jairaj wants to adopt dancing as a vocation. Amritlal wants his son to adopt a manly vocation in stead. He does not mind if Jairaj practices dance as a hobby but to consider dance as a profession and a means of livelihood disturbs Amritlal. Thus the play also discusses the plight of individuals who yearn to follow their passion as their profession but the traditional patriarchal notions about certain professions prove to be the greatest hindrance. Dattani, himself a trained Bharatanatyam dancer, confesses:

I wrote the play when I was learning Bharatanatyam in my mid twenties. . . . a play about a young man wanting to be a dancer, growing up in a world that believes dance is for women. . . .

Amritlal is influenced by the social perception of his times and considers dance as a stigma, at least for the masculine gender. He regards dance to be a disgraceful feminine vocation earlier practiced by prostitutes. The conflict between the father and son reaches such a level where Jairaj decides to leave his father’s house. He along with his wife Ratna moves to her uncle’s house. But within two days Jairaj decides to return to his father’s house. He is grieved by the reality that dance cannot provide sustainable livelihood in the materialistic society. Jairaj is also shocked by the indecent demands of Ratna’s uncle. He
continues to follow his passion for dance with the monetary support of his father.

Amritlal strikes a deal with Ratna. He agrees to promote her passion for dance if she would help him to retreat Jairaj from dancing. But his father's efforts only hinder Jairaj's progress and he develops a sense of depression and lack of self confidence. He becomes a habitual drunkard and his relations with his wife, Ratna, are also soured. They live together with a sense of regret as none of them is able to realise their dream of becoming famous and successful dancers. Though there are constant fights, allegations and counter allegations but they never ever talk about separating from each other.

Dattani's plays portray the dysfunctional Indian joint family with a definite three tier structure. His (joint) families generally comprise three generations. The first generation represents the orthodox and rigid views. The second generation follows their predecessors with a feeling of guilt and regret. The third generation revolts but ultimately falls in line and compromises with the situation. The conflicts amid the ideas and ideals of the three generations never cross the limit of acceptability, in the Indian family context. The characters representing the three generations are simultaneously at war with themselves and the changing social reality. The conflict within the family never leads to the disintegration of the family. The family members cling to each other and learn to live with each other.

The first generation that represents the rigid orthodox views largely remains invisible or is only referred to in absentia. The men representing the first generation largely remain invisible, passive or off stage but they control and influence the thought and action of their succeeding generations. Jiten and Nitin's
father in *Bravely Fought the Queen* never comes on stage similarly even Praful remains off stage, Bharati’s father in *Tara* and Hari’s father in *Final Solutions* control their children, even in absentia. Their invisibility probably suggests the overpowering and omnipresent patriarchal influence. Similarly, women of the first generation represented by Baa in *Bravely Fought the Queen* and Daksha/ Hardika (also called Baa) in *Final Solutions* are rendered immobile. In *Bravely Fought the Queen* Baa remains off stage. She is paralysed and bed ridden. In *Final Solutions* Baa is symbolically caged in the house. She pleads to be let out:

**DAKSHA:** *(banging on the door).* I promise! I won’t do it again!

**HARDIKA:** Confined. Never let out of the house. Like a dog that had gone mad!

**DAKSHA:** *(Hysterically).* Let me out! *(FS: 223).*

In Dattani’s plays the invisible patriarchs, represented by the father, control the next generation through their views and strict rearing. The matriarchs are caged in the rigid social structure. They experience the strangulation and the inability to move out of the patriarchal code or ‘Laxmanrekha’ in the Indian mythological sense. The men representing the second generation of the three tier family structure replicate their fathers. Jiten in *Bravely Fought the Queen* replicates his father. Hasmukh in *Where there’s a Will* and Hari in *Final Solutions* become a replica of their fathers. Hardika narrates an incident in *Final Solutions*:
That is when for the first time when Hari became angry with me. I had never expected him to. He shouted so loudly, he sounded just like Wagh (FS:216).

The succeeding generation rebels and opposes the rigid and conventional attitude of their predecessors. But with the passage of time they too learn to live with the reality and fall in line with the patriarchal tradition. Ajit in *Where There's a Will*, Ramnik in *Final Solutions* and Jairaj in *Dance Like a Man*, for example, do not want to become like their fathers but the circumstances and their endeavours to fight/rebel against patriarchal structures trap them and merge their identity with that of their ancestors, eroding their individuality.

Even while portraying women in the Indian family structure Dattani portrays the Indian women. His women characters are always a part of the family. They do not rebel in the western sense slamming the door and walking out of the house into the darkness of the night, like Ibsen’s Nora. They comply with their roles within the family, though at times with resentment and reluctance, like Alka and Dolly in *Bravely Fought the Queen*. Women are also the guardians of values, like Aruna in *Final Solutions*. Women in Dattani’s plays always attempt to avoid conflict and do not hesitate even to forge a compromise when the situation demands. They do not crave for individuality though they desire an identity, within the family, in accordance with their role as sister, mother, daughter, wife etc. Even Kiran, who is a lesbian, in the play, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* craves for interpersonal relationship and relates to other men. Her sexual
preferences may be different but she consoles Kamal like a caring and sympathetic friend. She is not the abandoned woman perceptible in Western literature, who as a lesbian would not relate to other men. Instead she appears to be a sisterly figure in the Indian family context, who always has an active role to play in family matters at times of crucial conflicts or situations.

The women in Dattani’s plays choose to repair the bonds in marriage rather than discard it. The pain and trauma in marriage does not isolate them. They are a part of the family in which husband is just one of the relationships, crucial but not the only and final relationship. Dolly supports Alka in *Bravely Fought the Queen* just as Minal supports Sonal in *Where there’s a Will*. In spite of their differences the husband and wife live together in Dattani’s plays. The women in his plays adapt to their roles in the family. Dattani’s plays use family as a unit and the action of the play, even the conflict and climax involve the entire family, and are not centered on any individual, woman or man as a complete unit. The individuals depend on each other and share both the blame and fame, though at times with reluctance as Uma and her husband in *Seven Steps around Fire* and Ratna and Jairaj in *Dance like a Man*.

It is primarily for this that Dattani’s plays do not end in a tragedy. In fact his plays that depict the conflicts in marriage do not have an ending. Marriage in the Indian culture is believed to continue for seven lives. It is not a temporary union but a permanent bond. Though the Indian joint family structure may be crumbling, in his plays, but Dattani’s plays do not further disintegrate the institution of marriage or family. His plays only map the individual spaces that
continuously form new constellations of bright stars in the darkness of the night.

Dattani is a dramatist who has his grounding in the Indian culture. He does not blindly adhere to the construction of India and Indian as they have been traditionally defined in modern novel and theatre. He even cautions other playwrights when he says:

Our culture is so rich with tradition, and that's a great advantage and a great disadvantage as well, because . . . we're living in the present and there are so many challenges facing us – you just have to cross the road and you have an issue, . . . I think it is very important for our country to spawn new playwrights . . . who reflect honestly and purely our lives, because . . . that is our contribution to the world.¹⁰
NOTES


5 Mahesh Dattani, Where There’s a Will in Collected Plays (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p.464. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as WTW in parentheses.


7 Mahesh Dattani, Bravely Fought the Queen in Collected Plays (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000), p.288. All subsequent citations from this play are from this edition and henceforth referred to as BFQ in parentheses.
