



Patriarchal Autocracy: A Comparative Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* and Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*

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Abstract: The plays of Mahesh Dattani and Vijay Tendulkar frequently feature themes of patriarchal autocracy. They critique the societal structures that perpetuate male dominance and control, examining the consequences of such systems on individuals and relationships. The plays offer insights into the complexities of power dynamics and challenge the status quo, urging audiences to reflect on and question established norms. Important elements found in Tendulkar and Dattani's plays include human sorrow, passion, conflict, and an appeal to human sentiment that may instantly connect with a general audience. This paper outlines a comparative study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* and Mahesh Dattani's *Where There's a Will*, in which they expose the hollowness of Indian society by exploring the theme of patriarchal autocracy.

Key Words: Patriarchy, autocracy, relationship, suffering, frustration, dominance, self-realization, gender discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani stand as noteworthy playwrights in the domain of Indian English Drama, infusing their works with the vivid realities and genuine experiences of urban cosmopolitan life and the middle-class milieu. Their plays tackle radical, unconventional, and contemporary issues, fearlessly breaking free from societal taboos. Embracing innovative and experimental themes, they pave the way for a distinctive realism reminiscent of Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. Central to their works is the exploration of the conflict and confrontation between the individual and society. Both playwrights depict man as an intrinsic component of society, highlighting how the subtle or overt influence of the societal framework shapes the dynamics of relationships. In their plays, the protagonists become victims of the harsh conditions that pervade the apparently modern and educated society. The frustration experienced by these individuals finds expression in their rejection of conventional and traditional values, signaling a poignant commentary on the complexities of contemporary life. Patriarchy is an inherent aspect of the fabric of Indian society, intricately woven into its structure. In the familial context, male dominance is paramount, with the man traditionally assuming the role of the family's head. The authority he holds over family members is absolute, leaving little room for freedom, particularly for women. As the family's patriarch, he wields significant power, dictating crucial life decisions such as education, marriage, and property matters. Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani, through their writings, vividly depict the plight of women ensnared in the clutches of patriarchy and subjected to gender bias.

Sakharam Binder stands out as one of Tendulkar's most profoundly naturalistic plays, laying bare a harsh patriarchy. The playwright unveils the masochistic tendencies within the lower middle-class male through the character of Sakharam, the play's protagonist. Fleeing from home due to mistreatment by his father, Sakharam emerges from bitter life experiences as a rugged, defiant, and outspoken individual.

Sakharam rejects the concept of marriage, choosing to remain unmarried throughout his life. However, his actions reveal a contradictory nature as he provides shelter to a vulnerable, abandoned woman in society. Yet, his intentions are not to better her circumstances but to exploit her further to satisfy his own sexual desires. While outwardly presenting himself as a savior of women, inwardly he becomes a receptacle for all the negative aspects of societal attitudes towards relationships between men and women. Despite his criticism of married life, Sakharam engages in a relationship that proves even more detrimental for the woman involved. Having suffered from parental hostility and



neglect, he develops a rebellious disposition. Exploiting the misery of women to fulfill his own needs, he is quick to discard them when they no longer conform to his narrow definition of womanhood. While he professes an understanding of and support for rebellious women, his expectations of his own partner are contradictory. He desires a woman who will serve him tirelessly, respect his wishes, and cater to his desires. Despite portraying himself as a savior of women, suggesting an improved life under his care, his actual character exposes him to be an epicurean—a self-centered pleasure-seeker—rather than a rebel or a saviour.

Similar to Osborne's Jimmy Porter from *Look Back in Anger*, Sakharam seems to embody the anger and frustration prevalent in the modern generation. Through the character of Sakharam, Tendulkar exposes the desire, masochism, envy, and hypocrisy that are typical among middle-class males. In Dattani's play *Where There's a Will*, a comparable theme is explored, with the dramatist concentrating on issues such as gender discrimination and the overpowering influence of patriarchal authority. Dattani characterizes the play as an "exorcism of the patriarchal code".

Similar to Sakharam, Hasmukh Mehta, a resilient and tenacious businessman tycoon in the city, aspires to perpetuate patriarchal authority within his family even beyond his demise, as outlined in his will. Having dutifully followed his father's wishes throughout his own life, he anticipates similar obedience from his son, Ajit, and other family members. According to Hasmukh, Ajit is deemed an "outright loss," with his schemes dismissed as impractical. Additionally, Hasmukh exerts dominance over his daughter-in-law, Preeti. He is suspicious of Preeti whom he thinks "pretty, charming, graceful and sly as a snake." He is unhappy with his wife, Sonal too. The play delves into the hollowness and futility of rigid patriarchal codes, showcasing the political dynamics inherent in patriarchal structures. It not only illustrates the marginalization of women within the family but also the subjugation of other male members. The narrative unfolds the systematic oppression and suppression faced by women in a patriarchal social framework. Hasmukh Mehta wields patriarchal authority over every family member, championing absolute power. In common with many contemporary families, emotional bonds and mutual understanding are lacking, leading to a disregard for diverse perspectives. Hasmukh Mehta assumes the role of an authoritative and flawless leader both at home and in the business sphere, embodying patriarchal principles as he endeavors to assert control over his family.

Dattani ingeniously chooses names that reflect the opposite of their meanings for his characters. Despite Hasmukh meaning a smiling face, he seldom smiles throughout the play. Sonal, meaning gold, is deemed worthless by Hasmukh and compared to mud. Preeti, signifying affection, displays a lack of warmth towards almost every family member. Ajit, meaning unconquerable, falls short of winning Hasmukh's approval. However, Kiran's name is fitting as she emerges as a beacon of hope, contributing efforts that transform a fragmented family into a genuine and cohesive unit. Despite the significant time gap between the works of both playwrights, a consistent theme emerges: the unchanged status of women, persistently marginalized in Indian society. Through their exploration of patriarchal power, both dramatists contend that the actual position of women remains stagnant. Women continue to be bound by domestic chores. In *Sakharam Binder*, an informal husband-wife relationship is established without marriage, yet the woman endures constant humiliation and severe beatings. Despite Sakharam's criticism of his father's brutality, he subjects his own women to harsh treatment. Both *Where There's a Will* and *Sakharam Binder* are centered on women—Kiran Jhaveri and Laxmi, respectively, emerge as the true protagonists. Although the title of *Sakharam Binder* implies Sakharam as the main character, the narrative revolves around the experiences of Laxmi. Vasant Palshikar is quite justified in pointing out:

"Initially, the playwright may have intended to make Sakharam the protagonist. But the play slips from his hand; it becomes the play that focuses on the character of Laxmi, and at this point, she becomes the protagonist of the play."

Laxmi is portrayed in the play's opening scenes as a sensitive, devoted, caring, generous, and tender-hearted person who wins the audience over with her mistreatment at the hands of Sakharam. However, towards the play's conclusion, she unveils a darker side, displaying treacherous behavior. She openly forges a friendship with Fuazdar Shinde, Champa's husband, without perceiving any wrongdoing. Ironically, her moral sensibilities are offended by Champa's involvement with Daud. There is a noticeable evolution in her character as she transforms into a resolute woman, devising and successfully executing a plan to triumph over her rival. Seeing Champa as a competitor in love, she goads Sakharam to commit murder and aids in concealing the crime.

In *Where There's a Will*, Kiran Jhaveri is a well-preserved woman who appears to be in her thirties or forties. Her husband, a habitual drinker, faced job suspension due to his alcohol-related misconduct. Unable to afford whisky, he permits his wife to associate with and be seen by Hasmukh. Hasmukh, impressed by Kiran, admires her not only for her physical allure but also for her sharp intellect, which he envisions to manage his business effectively. Kiran is appointed to bring order to Hasmukh's family and prevent them from leading lives according to their whims. Additionally, Kiran divulges insights into Hasmukh's personality. She expresses pity for his aspiration to control his family posthumously through his will. This desire, she suggests, stems from his father's dominant influence on the



family. Hasmukh had obediently adhered to his father's wishes throughout his life, making him intolerant of any objections from his son, Ajit. He yearns for Ajit's obedience, aiming to have his son's life overshadowed in the same way his own life was overshadowed by his father. The play thus underscores the hollowness and futility of strict adherence to patriarchal codes.

Sonal Mehta emerges as the most tragi-comic character in the play, marked by a lack of self-confidence that allows others to dominate her life. Throughout the narrative, she remains consistently dependent on her sister Minal for guidance in all aspects of her existence, a key factor contributing to her tragic circumstances. Furthermore, Sonal becomes the target of blame from every other participant in the play for various reasons. The entry of Kiran into her life provides a positive change, offering Sonal a newfound friendship. Hasmukh Mehta, however, holds no respect or love for his wife, viewing her more as a loyal dog than an equal partner. Sonal, innocent and unaware of his extramarital affair, remains devoted to her husband, akin to Laxmi's devotion to Sakharam. Her entrance into Sakharam's life is prompted by the torment inflicted by her husband, and she bravely endures mistreatment and humiliation while harboring a determination to die on his lap. In contrast, the once meek, docile, and religious Laxmi undergoes a profound transformation into a fierce woman following the arrival of Champa in the house. Viewing Champa as a rival in love, Laxmi incites Sakharam to commit murder, revealing a remarkable transformation towards the play's conclusion. A parallel transformation occurs in the character of Sonal in *Where There's a Will*. The play concludes with Sonal asserting newfound confidence in Kiran, representing the mistress and wife's mutually developed understanding and trust. Together, they unite to dismantle the oppressive grip of male dominance and lustful intentions. This is where the playwrights diverge in their approaches—Tendulkar delves into the plight of women with a focus on helplessness and the complexity of human nature, while Dattani artistically suggests that women possess the capacity to assess and break free from the unjust shackles of patriarchy.

Dattani also contemplates the predicament of gender roles and the unfortunate plight they impose. Even in contemporary society, women continue to be regarded as 'sex objects' and are subject to physical and psychological 'exploitation.' The restoration of the feminine 'self' remains an unresolved challenge.

Dattani is acknowledged as the advocate for marginalized communities, particularly expressing deep concern for the gendered subaltern. His plays underscore his belief that modern education empowers women to comprehend their rights and responsibilities, allowing them to scrutinize their decisions and actions within the framework of patriarchal society. Consequently, they are now willing to challenge unjust patriarchal authority if necessary, advocating for their rights and equality. Notably, characters like Kiran and Preeti in his plays serve as examples of astute, materialistic, scheming, and clever women. However, Dattani's works also illustrate that despite advancements in education, the plight of women has not significantly improved. It suggests that the root cause of the current situation lies in male pride or ego, and the solution lies in providing education and employment opportunities to overcome these issues.

However, the play also portrays that despite education and economic empowerment, the overall well-being of women in our society has not witnessed significant enhancement. The conversation between Kiran and Sonal makes this clear. Sonal does not have the same access to education as Kiran, who is employed and has a good education. Consequently, Sonal perceives Kiran as a fortunate woman. This is how Kiran falsifies Sonal's notion by narrating her unhappy past.

In *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar delves into the suffering and senseless squandering of women's lives by portraying the multi-dimensional aspects of womanhood. Laxmi, initially a religious and traditional woman, transforms into a malicious figure. In contrast, Champa exudes boldness and frankness. Tendulkar, through the diverse psychological profiles of Laxmi and Champa, inadvertently distances himself from being labeled a feminist. He emerges not as a feminist or a socialist but as a realist, whose keen observations enable him to uncover the true status of women in society. By illustrating the contrasting conditions of Laxmi and Champa, Tendulkar subtly implies that women themselves bear significant responsibility for their distressing circumstances. While Champa extends sympathy to Laxmi, Laxmi, in turn, becomes cunning and contributes to Champa's tragic demise. In this narrative, it is the actions of both women, rather than the male character Sakharam, that become the source of women's suffering.

In this context, Tendulkar asserts that genuine societal awareness does not stem from movements like feminism, humanism, or socialism but rather from self-realization. According to him, women must first recognize their roles in society and cultivate a profound respect for their gender. It is crucial for them to assert their significance in a man's life, making it clear that they are partners, not subservient or inferior. Tendulkar emphasizes a path of resourceful action, akin to the transformative actions demonstrated by Kiran and Sonal in the play's conclusion. The merging of Kiran and Sonal symbolises an attempt to stop sexual colonialism since they are a collective power that emerged out of a past of exploitation and suffering. With their collective voice, they are opposing Hasmukh's patriarchal 'will' and declaring women's independence.

Another significant aspect common to both playwrights is their subversion of patriarchal assertions in the climaxes of their respective plays. In *Sakharam Binder*, the play concludes with Sakharam's pride shattered; the once



autocratic figure becomes a puppet in Laxmi's hands. The submissive and docile Laxmi masterfully manipulates Sakharam, inciting him to commit murder and adeptly managing the aftermath. This reversal of roles undermines the patriarchal tradition and showcases Laxmi's unexpected dominance over the situation. Similarly, in the culmination of *Where There's a Will*, Hasmukh Mehta experiences a collapse as Kiran reveals his true identity, exposing his vulnerabilities. The realization dawns upon him that Kiran merely used him to fulfill her own needs. Both Tendulkar and Dattani employ these climactic moments to mock patriarchal authority, demonstrating that a man's desire to control a woman can backfire, turning him into the victim of his own schemes.

Both playwrights convey a shared conviction that patriarchal autocracy is fundamentally an attempt to establish a false sense of security. They argue that a man's drive for domination stems from an underlying fear of insecurity. Hasmukh Mehta, in *Where There's a Will*, acknowledges that he has become ensnared in his own machinations. Although Kiran was originally given authority by him to gain control over his family after death, she now uses this authority to improve relations within the Mehta household. In essence, both Tendulkar and Dattani diligently work to debunk the notion of patriarchal assertion. *Sakharam Binder* and *Where There's a Will* unfold a journey from self-assertion to self-realization.

2. CONCLUSION:

Thus Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dttani have significant contribution to expose the theme patriarchal autocracy throught these two plays. Their plays collectively provide a nuanced exploration of patriarchal autocracy, shedding light on its impact on individuals, relationships, and societal structures. These playwrights enrich our knowledge of the complexities and consequences of patriarchal authority in Indian contexts by means of their captivating narratives.

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