

Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions: an Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT: India is a country of cultural and traditional diversities. Such society has established and institutionalized the ways of living to justify power and authority which some enjoyed over the rest. The existence in such diverse society demands understanding among the people to rejoice the diversities around them, particularly the variances in religion. The conflicts arising out of these diversities have found unique resonance and which have assumed special significance in post-independence Indian theatre. Such path breaking play from contemporary Indian theatre is *Final Solutions* (1992) by Mahesh Dattani (1958) which is a critically acclaimed and thought provoking play which brings out important and representative features of the fragmented modern Indian life and poses varied questions of communal disharmony.

The ways in which the modern Indian plays are studied have undergone a considerable change. The paper here aims not only to critique but also to explore the deeper insights of the thematic concerns of the play and to put a range of evaluation and interpretation on the basis of empirical evidences. It analyzes the textual narrative of the play which has a considerable significance and important role in highlighting the issue of communalism. It attempts to discover the inappropriate and inhuman behavioral patterns in the society based on conventional stereotyping and established prejudices. Also, communalism has always been one of the major concerns for India. The nation struggles to resolve this social issue, so by analyzing this play, the paper will try to surface out the playwright's perspective about the socio-historical context linked to culture and politics. Thus, the paper aims to spawn a literary analytical study of the play *Final Solutions* by Mahesh Dattani.

Keywords: Society, diversities, Indian context, communalism and contemporary culture

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I. INTRODUCTION

Drama is such an art form which is inherently social. And it is a genre which thrives on social themes. It deals with problems of present day society and attempts to create a futuristic society, which is governed by the then existing processes. The dramatists have aimed to present ways of the mundane world in many ways. They enlightened the audience through entertainment. They tried to bring about peace of mind and contentment to those afflicted by the ills of the world and its numerous problems. Drama comes in direct contact with the audience and its study is partially literary and partially sociological.

Since the early twentieth century, theatre has been one of the most powerful mediums for commenting on social and political issues in different parts of the world. Some prominent examples include German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) written in response to the rise in Nazis in Germany and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1952) an analogy for McCarthyism in America. Acclaimed playwright August Wilson's collection of ten plays addresses the different degrees of racism that America's African American population has experienced in past hundred years. In 2009 Rajiv Joseph wrote a play *Bengal Tiger* at the Baghdad Zoo, commented on the devastating situation taking place in Iraq because of American occupation. Similar plays have been written across the world.

India also has long history of socio-political dramatic theatre. Theatre before the independence of India, even though it brought the Indian theatre in direct contact with the western theatre, was primarily a weapon to protest against the British reign. Some well known examples of Indian political theatre include the traditional theatre forms of Tamasha in Maharashtra, Bhavai in Gujarat as well as the street theatre companies such as Jana Natya Manch in Delhi. Before independence the Parsi theatre and the others were not only a mode of entertainment but also were reaching people and addressing their issues. And of course it was one of the main elements in changing the social and political ailments of independent India. Broadly speaking a number of playwrights have given a new turn in writing plays with social and political relevance. Prominent dramatists in the post independence Indian theatre such as Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Rakesh Mohan, Mahesh Dattani and many others have used themes related to the contemporary social scenario to bring about the need to renovate the present social structure and to generate a renewed and better social system. They present complex issues of the contemporary society to address important social ills and prejudices. The plays have prompted vital conversations that can be used to combat social problems. The theatre in a way liberates by giving voice to the

suppressed classes of the society. The issues of communalism, casteism, racism, crime, inequality and many other such issues are very often addressed in the staged narratives.

Out of the above notable playwrights, Mahesh Dattani is considered to be one of the most comprehensive dramatists in the modern Indian theatre. He was born (1958) in the city of Bangalore, though his parents originally belonged to Porbander in Gujarat. They had migrated to Bombay for business purpose and eventually settled in Bangalore where he found an opportunity of watching Gujarati and Kannada plays in the company of his parents and sisters. Dattani took his education from Baldwin High School and St. Joseph College of Arts and Sciences, Bangalore. The use of regional language was strictly prohibited in his school.

Dattani has a very strong passion for theatrical art. He longs to present multicoloured Indian life and sensibility. It is because of this he had set his eyes on the art of play writing and stage performance. Otherwise he wanted to spend a normal life, helping to run his father's business. He has an urge to evolve theatrical tradition competent enough to capture the spirit of soil. During his college days in early 1980s he joined Bangalore Little Theatre and participated in workshops, acting and directing plays. He did his post graduation in Marketing and Advertisement Management. So, his academic career has no direct connection with his career as a dramatist. He started his own theatre group named Play Pen in 1984. His plays are performed at his studios and he encourages novice artists to participate in dramatic activities. Dattani has also been teaching drama course at the Summer Program of Portland State University.

Dattani has an unconventional approach to theatre. He looks at the theatre to manifest the causes of the unprivileged sections of our society. His plays externalize the problems and attempts to draw out the feelings of suppressed in a very authentic and realistic manner. His plays are originally written in English. He has written a good number of dramas which are diverse in themes, techniques and devices. He has greatly expanded new horizons in Indian Drama by not only focusing on the themes of conflict between tradition and modernity, communal tensions, identity crisis and inequality but also touching up radical themes ranging gay, child abuse, transgender, HIV positives and physically challenged. Being a multifaced literary and dramatic figure, Mahesh Dattani has given a new height and dimension to Indian English Drama by writing more than a dozen plays. The American playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have influenced him on the matter of stagecraft and other techniques and devices. But he had a very strong urge and affinity for Indianness. He has made sincere efforts for making stage befitting the Indian milieu. He also uses a good number Gujarati, Kannada and Hindi words in his plays.

Dattani's entire dramatic corpus can be classified into three categories namely Stage Plays, Radio Plays and Screen Plays which is a valuable contribution to the Indian English Theatre. He started his career with his *Where There's a Will* (1988) which dealt with mechanics of middle class Gujarati family. He continued writing plays such as *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) and *Final Solutions* (1992) for which he won the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1998. He even wrote plays such as *Do the Needful* (1997), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998), *Clearing the Rubble* (1998), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *30 Days in September* (2001) and more recent *Brief Candle* (2009) and also many others. Dattani's theatrical genius is characterized by innovation, dynamism and diversity.

Final Solutions

Mahesh Dattani writes about the society and surroundings in which he lives. His creativity is faithful and authentic expression of the first hand experience and knowledge of socio-cultural environment. He holds a mirror to make reality visible to the audience. The play *Final Solutions* critically intervenes the post-independence era which has a communally vitiated socio-political scenario. The main character, Dakhsa also known as Hardika in the play fuses past and present. The theme of communal tension is given historical depth through flashbacks featuring Hardika at the age of fifteen in 1948 and her experience in the aftermath of the partition returns to her memory at different points of the play. The play explores the theme of communalism

The play took Dattani over a year to research and Dattani consulted books such as *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapiers and *Lankesh Patrike*, a Kannada weekly magazine. He also conducted a number of interviews with survivors of communal riots in Gujarat and Karnataka. One of the riots that Dattani researched that particularly caught his attention was the 1985 Rath Yatra riot in Ahmedabad. This would have had become his inspiration for the riot that brings Javed and Bobby to the Gandhi family in *Final Solutions*.

The political climate of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement of the Hindu Right during which the play was written and produced adds a layer of significance to the play. During the early nineties the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) was supporting the demolition of Babri Masjid with religious processions known as Rath Yatras. The context of these Rath Yatras contributes to the play because they are the communal riots which form the background of the play. And in the play it is brought out by the disruption of a Rath Yatra while passing through a Muslim neighbourhood.

Final Solutions was written and performed in 1993, a period of high tension and violence in urban India. The play grew in specific context as Dattani responded to the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. Dattani's social consciousness led him to address the contemporary social issue of religious communalism to advocate communal harmony. He tries to convey that there are no solutions to this problem except for that of acceptance and empathy for each other.

Final Solutions opens with the image of five masked individuals dressed in black. Dattani has named them as Mob/Chorus. Each member has two masks one is of Hindu and other of Muslim. They remain on the top of a large crescent shaped ramp for most of the time in the play. Below the ramp is the home of Gandhis, a middle class family, in present day, Amargaon, Gujarat. The Gandhi family comprises of the elderly survivor of the partition of India and Pakistan, Hardika, who was earlier known as Daksha, her son Ramnik, her daughter in law, Aruna and her grand-daughter Smita. On another level of the stage is Daksha's room in 1948. Thus the play is into three spaces one, the mob, two, the Gandhi family and three, the memory of Daksha. At various points of time these three separate worlds interact and overlap with each other.

The action of the play is set in motion by the recent destruction of the chariot and images of Hindu deities of a Rath Yatra while travelling through a Muslim neighbourhood of the city. Riots had broken out in Amargaon and so curfew has been imposed in the city. The local Hindu and Muslim communities, represented by the Mob/Chorus are blaming each other for the riots. The communal violence between these groups brings back Hardika's memories of partition and her life as a new bride in 1948. Her memories are expressed through the character of Daksha who is shown reading from her diary. The Gandhi family is safe within their home and although Smita is worried about the safety of her Muslim friend, Tasneem.

The family is having a peaceful evening but it is disrupted when Bobby and Javed two young Muslim men arrive at their doorstep begging to take them inside. The Mob/Chorus with Hindu masks are after Bobby and Javed and are threatening to kill them. Despite the objection of his mother Ramnik opens the door of his house to protect the two. An interaction occurs between the Gandhis and Bobby and Javed throughout the course of the night.

Hardika still has resentment against Muslims due to the events that had happened in her life following the partition and thus she protests against Bobby and Javed's presence in her home. Through the character of Daksha the audience is slowly able to know the two factors that are the source of Hardika's animosity. The first was the murder of her father in hometown, Hussainabad, which became a part of Pakistan during the partition. The second reason was that the physical and mental abuse she had to endure when her husband Hari and her in laws found out about her friendship with her Muslim neighbour, Zarine. Her son Ramnik is a secular Hindu and much more hospitable to the boy. But Ramnik's kindness is partly driven by the guilt he feels over running the business his father established by cheating Zarine's family after partition. Ramnik's wife Aruna is a deeply devout woman who feels extremely uncomfortable with Muslims sitting in her home and drinking water from the same glasses. She believes that their touching is polluting.

Smita, Ramnik's daughter is also very uncomfortable with Bobby and Javed's presence but for other reasons. Prior to the action of the play, Smita and Bobby had a brief romantic love affair with each other which they later decided not to pursue. Now Bobby is engaged to Javed's sister and Smita's friend Tasneem. Smita also struggles with her relationship with her mother, who she describes "stifling" her with religious rituals. Bobby whose real name is Babban is also a secular Muslim who tries to hide religious identity. Javed on the other hand is a Muslim Youth with a strong sense of identity. After becoming a victim of religious prejudice during his childhood, Javed had started working as a hired hoodlum, who is paid to start riots. He even reveals that he was the one who disrupted the Rath Yatra. Bobby has been trying to persuade Javed to give up his profession.

The struggle of these six characters to spend one night under the same roof creates a tense situation. The play reaches its end in the early hours of the morning when Bobby enters the prayer room and picks up the idol of Krishna to Aruna's great distress. Bobby proclaims that he is touching god and nothing is happening to him. Upon seeing Aruna's horror he tells Aruna that if there is understanding and faith in each other nothing can be destroyed. He then turns to Hardika and claims that if she is willing to forget everything, he is willing to tolerate everything done to him on communal basis. Bobby and Javed leave. Ramnik tells Hardika that her husband and her father in law had destroyed her friend Zarine's family business. Hearing this Hardika realizes the real reason for why her in laws forbidden her to keep friendship with Zarine was not because Zarine was a Muslim but they were trying to hide their crime. Crushed Hardika asks Ramnik about why had not he told this to her before. Ramnik replies that he did not wanted her mother to live with guilt. The play ends with the image of Javed and Bobby standing among the Mob/Chorus.

Analysis

Final Solutions is situated with a long history as it deals with religious communalism, which is also one of the very important national concerns which have problematized the peace of nation for over a century.

While India is well known for its rich history of theatre unfortunately the country is also known for its history of religious rigidity. The religious conflicts and its consequence such as hatred, animosity and anger are often referred to be as religious communalism. The religious communalism results due to the ideological differences between the members of different religions and in fact it emerges out of the political manipulation of social issues. The emphasis put on community would eventually lead to the political institutions that dominate such as vote-bank politics and India is a very clear example of such politics. The real problem underlies with the stereotyping, punishing and blaming the whole community for the deliberate mistakes and anti-social activities by some of them.

Ever since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, a communal tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities in India has been pervasive. Despite India's secular government and religious pluralism and tolerance there have been a number of violent communal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, which are often products of politically motivated events. Not only the Hindus and Muslims were the victims of religious violence in India but in 1984 India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for her ordering the Indian Army to attack the Golden Temple in Amritsar to capture Sikh terrorists taking refuge there. As a result thousands of Sikhs were murdered throughout India. In 2008 Christians living in Orissa were the targets of religious communalism instigated by Hindu nationalists. Approximately fourteen hundred homes were attacked, twenty five were killed and thirteen thousand were forced to flee to refugee camps. In the past thirty tens of thousands of Indians have been attacked, raped and murdered in the name of religion. Thus India has a long history of communal violence and *Final Solutions* is a kind plea for the end of the communal violence, with one of the worst examples that is Ayodhya dispute.

Communalism like casteism involves stereotyping and prejudice which results into animosity, anger and hatred because of their cultural and religious variance. The past incidents and events like the partition in 1947, Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and Godhra incident in 2002 have created a huge gap between the Hindus and Muslims. The being in majority or minority also determines the thought process. There is always a consciousness about the religious difference among the people and they use terms 'we' and 'they' for themselves and for other community respectively. The same can be understood if we carefully speculate the action throughout the play *Final Solutions*.

Dattani puts masks on the Mob/Chorus to make frequent change of identity to look natural. When the characters articulate inner feelings the chorus whisper or shout along. The plays opens when there has been curfew in the city because of the disturbance in the Rath Yatra resulting in communal violence. The play starts itself with a curfew in the city because of the communal conflicts. The central character Hardika had sorrowful past which had made herself averse to the religious sect of Muslims. Zarine's father came to her father in law in search of job but his entreaty was not accepted. This created a tension between those two families and it continued through Hardika. And same experiences might have been of number of families which multiplied the tension between each other resulting into split and hatred between the two sects. This can be observed from the lines:

"Hardika : How could he let these people into my house? They killed his grandfather. They will hate us for protecting them. Asking for help makes them feel they are lower than us. I know! They don't want equality. They want to be superior."(Act I, page 24)

Hardika cannot forgive the people of that community who brutally killed her father even if the murderers did not have any relations with the boys who had come to their house to protect themselves. In most of the cases the matter of dispute is very simple but due to involvement of some anti-social elements it takes shape of communal riots which creates a huge difference in the psyche of endurers. There are spiritual losses. People not only lose their people and material but also their souls. The experiences change their perspectives and same was true for the two young Muslim men. Through their experiences their perspectives about the Indian society and for themselves change as Bobby reveals to Ramnik the reason of Javed's turning point from a common Muslim guy to a riot rouser or a hoodlum:

"Bobby: A minor incident changed all that. We were playing cricket on our street with the younger boys. The postman delivered our neighbour's mail. He dropped one of the letters. He was in a hurry and asked Javed to hand the letter over to the owner. Javed took the letter and opened the gate. Immediately a voice boomed 'what do you want?' I can still remember Javed holding out letter and mumbling something, his usual firmness vanishing in a second. 'Leave it on the wall' the voice ordered. Javed backed away, really frightened. We all watched as the man came out with a cloth in his hand. He wiped the letter before picking it up, he then wiped the spot on the wall the letter was lying on and he wiped the gate! We all heard a prayer-bell, ringing continuously. Not loud. But distinct." (Act III, page 41)

Javed and Bobby felt equally angry about the man's behaviour which created a deep and vast difference. Aruna is a character which responds in most staunch and devout ways. She even risks her own family members. She also forcibly tries to make her daughter to believe the same in what she does. The three

characters Bobby, Ramnik and Smita despite the outer layers of secularism remain acutely aware of the roots of religious identity they all are trying hard to suppress through their own identities.

Javed then confesses about the riots which broke-out because of the disturbance in the Rath Yatra was initiated by him, as he threw stone on the idol of deity in the procession. And in Act III the conversation between Ramnik and Javed speaks his heart out and inflicts the attack on community which appears antagonistic to him:

“Ramnik : Why do you distrust us?

Javed : Do you trust us?

Ramnik : I don't go about throwing stones!

Javed : But you do something more violent. You provoke! You make me throw stones!

Everytime I look at you my bile rises!” (Act III, page 39)

From here too one can find the animosity and hatred of Javed towards the Hindus is not for some particular individual or a group but for the community as whole.

Finally when Bobby and Javed are about to leave, Bobby breaks all norms by lifting the tiny image of Lord Krishna from Aruna's prayer room and declaring in front of all :

“Bobby: See! See! I am touching God! Your God! My flesh is holding Him! Look, Javed! And he does not mind! He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated! Look how he rests in my hands! He knows I cannot harm Him but He believes in me. He smiles! He smiles at our trivial pride and our trivial shame. He feels me and welcomes it! I told Him who is sacred to them, but I do not commit sacrilege. [To Aruna] You can bathe Him day and night, you can splash holy waters on Him but you cannot remove my smell with the sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes and tolerates, and respects what other human being who believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world!” (Act III, pages 62-63)

Aruna screams against the sacrilege while Bobby rejoins:

“Bobby: The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed.”(Act III, page 63)

Through Bobby, Dattani voices out the solution to get rid of such problems in the society. The words of Bobby are enough to explain that it is the society and ones living in it have created such havoc because of some events in their lives. If people genuinely trust each other and accept the diversity amongst them it will be simpler to live than the present situations. Through Bobby Dattani conveys that if the two communities understand and believe in each other then nothing can be destroyed. But probably the only suggestion is that it needs practice and immediate implementation of brotherhood forgetting the past and the stereotyped notions of each other.

When the young men leave Ramnik confesses to her mother Hardika:

“Ramnik: It's the same burnt-up shop we bought from them at half its value and we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred.”(Act III, page 64)

It suggests that the causes of the communal riots are not only due to disbelief, anger, hatred and influence of politicians but it is also related to economy. There are infinite such instances and dialogues in the play that can be analyzed to highlight communal hatred and stereotyping. The playwright through such dialogues attempts to suggest that such type of arrogant remarks must be stopped in the society that spread hatred and bitterness. And through these dialogues Dattani clearly depicts the split between these two big groups of the country. Also as Mossaraf Hossain in his Essay “Mahesh Dattani's 'Final Solutions': A Quest for Communal Problems in India” observes:

“Mahesh Dattani successfully shows a ray of hope by rousing the conscience up from slumber, through curing the ailment of communal hatred, causing momentary rage, culminating into violence. Final solutions by Mahesh Dattani is an answer to a long-pestering issue, without an iota of doubt.”

Thus his primary purpose through this play is to maintain a workable unity and co-operation so that India remains no more a mere laughing stock as a fragmented sub-continent soon after its independence and partition.

II. CONCLUSION

From an in-depth study and analysis of the dramatic text *Final Solutions* one comprehends three things. Firstly, theatre always has directly or indirectly presented the utter truth of life through language which is destined to survive, move and rule man's mind and heart forever. Whether it is social or political issues, creative playwrights have always tried to portray contemporary social conflicts and reality through their plays. Secondly, although it portrays reality, theatre has brought hope, courage, awareness and understanding to man about what he is and what he should do to stand against anything with a vision towards a better future to come and

determination to fight against all the social evils and odds. And finally, theatre is a key educational device which informs and demonstrates the perception of class, religion, caste and ethnicity prevailing in the society by conceptualizing the identities. Its main purpose is to delight with instruction which will be helpful to the society by enlightening the audience and readers especially the youth which will become an important part in the upliftment and betterment of society.

In *Final Solutions* Dattani expresses his humanistic concerns. He deals with the theme of communalism. In this play Dattani applies the religion consciousness and the prejudices towards different religions. He presents communalist attitudes and stereotypes prevalent in the society which influence to have a sensibility of hatred of one community against another. Through the method of reflection of contemporary socio-political issue in the play Dattani tries to explain that if discursive boundaries are ignored in the effort to understand the complexity of communalism, solutions might not be really so far away.

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