

Research Paper

Social Science



Mahesh Dattani's 'Final Solutions': A Quest For Solutions To The Communal Problems In India

*Mosarraf Hossain

* Fazila Manzil (flat-4/B) Aman apartment, 21/49, kuttitola, Malda-732101

ABSTRACT

India is a country of communal diversity. The existence of such society demands mutual understanding among its religious sects. But more than once the harmonious chord has strained and a series of communal riots has maligned her history –in the recent decades the rot is a bit speedy. Wherein lies the solution to such communal problems? Probably, Mahesh Dattani, the first Indo-English playwright to win the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1998, might have had one in his mind. The present paper is a humble endeavour to analyze Dattani's play 'Final Solutions' (1992) and unearth the touching issue of schism in relationship due to misunderstanding between the two major religious factions- the Hindus and the Muslims.

Keywords : Schism, Assam riot, identity-crisis, prejudice, circuitous hatred, solutions

'Final Solutions' by Mahesh Dattani is a play which frames the time and its burning problems. In this play particularly the issue of communal harmony is raised and what takes the play to a different level is that the playwright tries to cater a solution to the problem by bringing the followers of the two religions on an even keel. Whether it remains a conjecture or whatever, is a different matter altogether, but, no doubt, Dattani tries. In 'The Shadow Lines', Amitav Ghosh failed to reach any solution of the raging problem of the divide between the Hindus and the Muslims, in 'Riot' Shashi Tharoor struck at the root of the problem and in 'Train to Pakistan' Khushwant Singh concludes with a ghastly scene of death where two minds of two different religious sects though got united in love but in reality could not. In the conclusion of this play by Mahesh Dattani, there is a striving for reaching an amicable solution but it is still dubious, rather an expiatory note dominates. Which then the Final Solution is?

In the Note on the Play, the director of this play, Alyque Padamsee is candid in his observations,

"The demons of communal hatred are not out on the streetthey are lurking inside ourselves. The mob in the play is symbolic of our own hatred and paranoia.Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever-locked in combatArabs against Jews, whites against blacks, Hindus against Muslims?"

Later the play was translated by Shahid Anwar into Hindi and directed by Arvind Gaur for Asmita Theatre in 1998. The director, Arvind Gaur, in his note on the play observes,

"'Final Solutions' touches us, and the bitter realities of our lives ...The past begins to determine the outlook of the present and thus the earlier contradictions re-emerge. No concrete solutions are provided in the play to the problem of communalism but it raises questions on secularism and pseudo secularism. It forces us to look at ourselves in relation to the attitudes that persist in the society. Since it is an experiment in time and space and relates to memory, it is a play, which involves a lot of introspection on the part of the characters in the play and thus induces similar introspection in the viewers...The chorus represents the conflicts of the characters. Thus the chorus in a sense is the psycho-physical representation of the characters and also provides the audience with the visual images of the characters' conflicts. There is no stereotyped use of the characterization of the chorus because communalism has no face, it is an attitude and thus it becomes an image of the

characters. The sets and properties used in the play are simple. This has been done to accentuate the internal conflicts and the subtext of the play."

Now, let us take a close look at the play and make our own analysis of the same. The play opens with a Shaw-like elaborate stage direction. He puts masks on the Mob/Chorus to make the frequent change of identity look natural. When the Chorus puts on Hindu-Muslim masks, the schism is hinted at. When the Chorus whisper or shout along with a character, its function is to articulate the inner feelings of that particular character. Ramnik's mother, Hardika, too had a sorrowful past which made her averse to the other religious sect. While trying to migrate from the neighbouring country [Hus-sainabad] to India got ghastly butchered [by whom?]. Her friend, Zarine's father's dry fruits and sweetmeat shop stood burnt [by whom?] and he came to her father-in-law, Wagh, in search of a job. But his entreaty was not complied with. Thus, the underlying tension, resulting in a schism between the two sects continued.

Even this day, when Javed and Bobby ran for shelter into Smita's house, the age-old customs got the better of Aruna, Smita's mother. Ramnik tried to make the two Muslim boys, who happened to be known to Smita, his college-going daughter, feel comfortable in his house, setting the mob's demand to hand the boys over to them, at naught. Even he went to the extent of offering Javed a job in his shop, which Javed declined to accept. The shop, which Ramnik's father took from Zarine's father, could, no doubt, solve Javed's financial uncertainty. But, ages of alienation, feeling of otherness found voice through Javed's spurning the offer:

Javed: I didn't ask you for a job! So you can keep your fucking job!

Bobby [to Ramnik]: It's not true what he says! Please Sir, believe me, he is not.....

Javed [screaming at Bobby]: Stop defending me! Do you think he cares?

Ramnik: I care. Yes! It is you who are indifferent. You don't believe in anything except yourself!

Javed: I believe in myself. Yes! What else have I got to believe in? It's people like you who drive me to a corner and I have to turn to myself and my faith. I have a lot to thank you for! At

castation system not ignorant of my history and faith. In Act III, the conversation between Ramnik and Javed rises to such a crescendo that Javed speaks his heart out in vehemence and inflicts the attack on a community which appears inimical 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! Every time I look at you, my bile rises!

Such communal hatred calls for a close scrutiny of relationship between the two communities referred to, since aeons. History, no doubt, will put forth a sanguinary document of constant friction and animosity between the two communities, resulting in partition! Thus, the seed had been sown since many years, which has simply grown into a tall tree now!

In Act I, Bobby and Javed are seen to be nabbed by the Chorus when they start to leave for Jeevnagar that night when the curfew got clamped at Amargaon following a communal riot. As and when they are found to be Muslims, they are attacked by the Chorus. They run for life and takes shelter in Ramnik Gandhi's residence. The Chorus come baying for the boys' blood and keeps thundering Ramnik's door. When Ramnik comes to their rescue, his wife, Aruna, gets flung to fury as all his prejudices regarding religion get a major blow and Hardika keeps lamenting,

"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."

Thus, the homely ambience gets ruffled. Aruna even fumbles to give them a glass of water to slake their thirst. Aruna flies to that extent that she asks her husband to open the door and hand the boys over to the infuriated mob. Aruna cringes in hatred when Ramnik asks to offer them food as they might have been hungry and exhausted. The Chorus keeps shouting, "Throw them out!" and Hardika chimes in unison, charging Ramnik, "Why did you let them in? Why?" It is Smita who used to know them since long and hence they can stay back.

In fact, the light, the Chorus — all are synchronized in such a way that the play comes alive on the stage. Smita takes a deep breath to say,

"I know who they are....This is Tasneem's brother, Javed and this....is Babban —Bobby—Tasneem's fiancé."

It also becomes clear that Bobby will marry Tasneem shortly. And, it comes out to the open too, that Smita had crush on Bobby for some time. But, the question of religion stopped her from advancing any further. It also emerges from the conversation that Javed is a restless, indecisive person who does not stay with his parents and is jobless. Javed flies to the tangent crying,

"We do love our own blood. Unlike you who treat your own like shit which can't be touched."

Aruna does not lose her temperament but protests calmly,

"Who gave you the right to criticize us. We who have given you protection."¹

An exchange of views follows, which calls for immediate submission from Bobby and Javed, who get shelter at Ramnik's house.

Bobby and Javed get shelter at Smita's house for the night. The reason that kicks off the riot drives Ramnik to think everything anew. He sorts a sundry issues with Bobby and Javed.

The conversation brings out the truth to the open—Javed has been rendered a scapegoat by the fanatics of his own community who have simply used him! But Hardika cannot come to terms with the fact that her son, Ramnik, has offered Javed a job in their shop. She cannot forgive the people of that community, who brutally killed her father. Hardika keeps musing to herself, as seen in Act II:

"That night I couldn't sleep. I listened. I was angry that Ramnik was blinded by his ideals. Why did he offer that boy a job in our shop? What was he doing? How did he know they were innocent? Couldn't he see there was more violence in that boy's eyes than those stone throwers' threats? He wasn't just saving two boys from getting killed. This was something else Ramnik was trying to do."

Smita came to learn the secret of Javed's source of living. He acted as a hired hooligan to earn his livelihood. And for that reason only, his father threw him out of the house. Javed got puce in anger and Bobby tried to pacify him by retorting: "I had won him overI had.....almost won him over."

But even at the end of Act II, no solution to the problem of the great divide between the Hindus and the Muslims is seen to be tabled.

Use of theatrical devices is perfect in Act III where three stage-spaces are used by Bobby and Javed [the floor], the Muslim Chorus [highest level of the ramp] and Daksha[the other side of the stage where the light focuses after skimming past the Hindu and the Muslim Chorus]. The dilemma, the heart-shattering guilt-feelings of Javed, Daksha's reminiscing of the past—all throw considerable light on the relationship between the two communities which stand on precarious crossroads. The Chorus philosophizes:

Chorus I: Should we be swallowed up? Till they cannot recognize us? Should we meld into anonymity so they cannot hound us?A drop of oil cannot merge with an ocean of milk. One reality cannot accept another reality.

Bobby and Javed are conversing and it appears that Javed is in for a change,

Bobby: Nobody will believe that you have changed.

Javed: Have I....changed?

Bobby: Why do you doubt it?

Javed: I cannot think anymore.

But how far the change is towards a positive end, that is far from predicting. Ramnik again offers the job and Javed raises the issue of mutual trust between two communities thus picking up a quarrel afresh. Ramnik, too, calls him 'hired hoodlum', 'riot-rouser'. However, Bobby relates to Ramnik the reason of Javed's turning into a zealot:

"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 letterand opened the gate. Immediately, a voice boomed, 'What do you want?' I can still remember Javed holding out the letter and mumbling something, his usual firmness vanishing in a second, 'Leaving 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....."

Javed, thus, turned into an arch-enemy of a particular community. Then, was it his fault to nurse hatred against this community? When asked about his reaction, on hearing

the prayer-bell after the incident, Bobby too said that he felt equally 'angry' as Javed. After learning the background of Javed's 'hooliganism', Ramnik saw reason and blurted forth, 'And we are to blame.'

Even sensible Ramnik tries to make Aruna see reason:

"There is no magnanimity in not allowing a Muslim boy touch our God or the water with which our God is bathed ."

And, Javed feels remorseful that he did not listen to Bobby when he 'tried so hard to talk him out of it' tried to dissuade him from coming to Amargaon. A solution is catered cleverly, - a 'hired hoodlum' gets back to senses, feels repentant for his wrong-doings, keeps changing into a better leaf gradually.

Smita, whose love-affair with Bobby did not materialize, comes up with numerous queries which clamour for befitting rejoinders. In Act III, Smita charges Aruna, her mother straightaway,

"I can see so clearly how wrong you are. You accuse me of running away from my religion how wrong you are. You accuse me of running away from my religion. Maybe I shouldn't be. What if I did what you do? Praying and fasting and purifying myself all day....."

Aruna feels shocked and asks her daughter whether 'being a Hindu stifles her!' Smita blatantly, rather unabashedly, replies, 'No, living with one does.' Thus, Smita needed opening up her heart and putting forth opinions regarding her mother's prejudices and wrong-beliefs in the name of sanskar.

After taking refuge at Ramnik's residence, when Bobby and Javed are about to leave finally, Bobby breaks all norms by lifting the tiny image of Lord Krishna from the altar in Aruna's pooja-room and declaring in front of all,

"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. He knows His strength! I don't believe in Him but He believes in me. He smiles! He smiles at our trivial pride and our trivial shame.....He feels me. And he welcomes it! I hold 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 touch from His form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world!"

Aruna screams against the sacrilege while Bobby rejoins,

"The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed."

Is it not a call for a final solution to a burning problem? But, the fact is that, it is only a suggestion that needs practice and immediate implementation. Even after the two Muslim boys leave, numerous queries keep floating in the air demanding answers. Ramnik decides not to go to his shop as it assails him till date to accept the fact that,

"It's the same burnt-up shop we bought from them at half its value.' He confesses candidly, 'And we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred."

He doubts whether he will be able to step into the shop once again. He felt a need to expiate now by handing it over to Javed. He seems determined to call Javed and pass it on to him as a legacy he [as a representative of the sect] is supposed to inherit: "When these boys came here, I thought,

I would.....I hoped I would be able to set things right. I-I wanted to tell them that they are not the only ones who have destroyed. I just couldn't .I don't think I have the face to tell anyone. [Pause] So it wasn't that those people hated you. It wasn't false pride or arrogance. [A Noor Jehan song can be heard very faintly]It was anger. [Italics mine]"

His mother, old Hardika, gets a shock of her life to learn the truth [or, shame?]She was unaware of so long. But, her son consoles her, 'You have to live with this shame only for a few years now.' Doesn't it sound as a hollow solace especially when he is assailed by the misgivings whether the boy would 'come even if called to take charge of their shop.' Or, 'it might be too late now.' However, a humane solution is proffered to iron off all points of misunderstanding or confusion the two sects might have between them!

This play is a response to Mahesh Dattani's reaction to the sporadic communal riots, breaking forth here and there, at different times. When asked if he was upset to see the problems—social, political or unconventional, he says,

"They invariably do. Social issues move me and I like to examine an idea from different angles. The plays where the content came first are On a Muggy Night and Final Solutions. As for the latter, I was asked to write a play about communal tensions and I said, 'what can one write about that other than platitudes?' But out of that churning emerged Final Solutions." [From excerpts of a newspaper interview]

Though Shashi Tharoor's 'Twenty-two months in the Life of a Dog: A Farce in Two Acts' does not deal with exactly the same ordeal, it reflects the complexity arising out of Emergency in 1975. Ezekiel's 'Don't Call it Suicide' which was earlier titled Soft and Sad Music is about the plight of sensitive individuals in this harsh world of stark realities.

In The Statesman[dated 25.02.09]in a detailed cover-page report titled 'Lest We Remember' published under the section "Riot Act", while writing about a communal riot at Colonelganj in Lucknow almost 19 years ago,which claimed more than 130 lives, the reporter observes,

"At the time of the riots, Muslims had put up posters that said: 'Hindustan mein rehna hain to Allah-o-Akbar kehna hain[if you want to live in India, you must praise Allah]',remembers-using the term loosely-a leading light of the Hindu community. 'Bharat mein rehna hain to Vande Mataram kehna hain[if you want to live in India, you must say Vande Mataram]'is what the provocative posters pasted by Hindu activists screamed, ripostes his Muslim Doppelganger."

If we take a few Indian English novels at a glance, we are sure to find this issue of communal hatred portrayed, quite faithfully. Amitav Ghosh, in his well-acclaimed novel, 'The Shadow Lines', touched upon a similar sensitive issue of schism between the two religious sects but dared not cater any 'final solution' to the burning problem, resulting into partition.

In a recent bestselling popular fiction, 'The 3 Mistakes of My Life' by Chetan Bhagat, the reference to the hair-raising portrayal of communal riot after the Godhra incident in Gujarat, is horrifying. Omi's uncle, Mama, the leader of a communal party, tries to kill a boy of the opponent sect just by way of revenge of the murder of his own son:

"I want the boy. I want that Muslim boy,' Mama said.

'What?' Ish said.

'Eye for an eye. I'll slaughter him right here. Then I will cry for my son. Get the fucking boy,' Mama said and thumped Ish's chest. Ish struggled to stand straight.

The blow torches lit up the dried grass on the entrance of the bank. A thick lock kept the gate shut and the mob outside."

Such communal riots, however, cannot be pooh-poohed away as we stay in a country which has a history drenched in

the blood of the people of these two religious communities. Chetan Bhagat, too, tries to cater a solution through mutual understanding and amity, as he shows Omi sacrificing his own life while saving Ali, the little cricket talent. At the bottom, we all are friends, having no enmity. It is only the fanatics, the bigots, who kick up horrendous altercations to make firm the schism between the Hindus and the Muslims, which we have already witnessed in Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, where the vetting of the male sex-organ went on, to detect the religious identity of everyone on the train entering Pakistan. If found a non-Muslim, the rioters did not hesitate to hack the innocent victims to death. Hence, a solution was the crying need of the hour, where Mahesh Dattani has boldly stepped in.

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.

Communal attitudes are deeply embedded within the characters and the symbolic interchanging of Hindu and Muslim masks in the Mob/Chorus is extended on to the characters. Ramnik is as much a staunch Hindu as a liberal he professes to be, Javed and Bobby are as much staunch Muslims as helpless protection seekers they appear to be. It only needs an innocuous pretext to spark off the seeds of communal violence and religious hatred which is already located within the individuals. And this characteristic has been handed down by history which is subtly suggested through the narrative's frequent movements back in time. For Dattani, the contemporary nation is one where religious attitudes have been a product of history.

Through the device of the diary two distinct phases of the same character, separated by forty years, is merged, subtly suggesting that the narratives of hatred too have not changed much. Theatrically, visually, this is of immense significance. In a performance of *Final Solutions* the age difference between Daksha and Hardika would appear so stark that the ideology of 'things have not changed that much' would be shockingly pertinent. It is this effect that Dattani wishes to create in his readers/audience and the effect continues throughout the play. The Daksha-Zarine friendship is replicated in Smita-Tasneem; Javed's hatred is the same as that of Zarine's. All the years of independence have not been able to differentiate between Javed's and Zarine's sense of being 'less in number'.

Daksha is Hardika's memory and at the same time her warning to be on guard as history seems to repeat itself. Daksha's life has taught Hardika to suspect. Hardika is over-cautious and apprehensive as she foregrounds the entry of Javed and Bobby even before they have appeared on stage. The two boys remind her of some permanent scars in her-

mind created forty years back:

"It was those two boys running away who frightened me. Those two who were begging for their lives. Tomorrow they will hate us for it. They will hate us for protecting them...All those memories came back when I saw the pride in their eyes! I know their wretched pride! It had destroyed me before and I was afraid it would destroy my family again!"

Memory hence emerges as a central theme in *Final Solutions*. It is through memory that Dattani points to the circuitous course of hatred. The sense of merging of the generations of Hardika and Javed is brilliantly suggested:

Hardika: Your sister deserves it ! Zarine deserves..
(Pause) What did you say your sister's name was?

Javed : Tasneem

Hardika : Oh. I thought it was Zarine. (CP 222)

Indeed Dattani's careful manipulation of memory as an index to questions of identity and power is crucial to his entire oeuvre. As Alyque Padamsee asks:

"Is life a forward journey or do we travel round in a circle, returning to our starting point?"

In her essay on *Final Solutions*, Angelie Multani also poses a set of similar questions:

"What then is the 'final solution'? Is one even possible? Would it be better for us to stop trying to find the final answer, and just try to make our own peace with ourselves and those around us? Is it possible to atone for the past?..."

It is in this context that we need to take a closer look at the title of Dattani's play. The very word 'final' subverts the possibility of a 'solution' since Dattani deliberately sticks to the plural—'solutions', thereby questioning the justification of 'final'. Angelie Multani points out that in this deliberate subversion lies the repetitive nature of communal violence, guilt and hatred—

"The title of Dattani's play on communal violence and tensions in contemporary urban India itself calls to attention the apparent insolubility of this situation....It is indeed, this very search for a final solution, which in many ways perpetuates the cycle of violence and hatred."

The cycle of hatred and as Alyque Padamsee terms it; 'transferred resentments' seem to continue. Ironically, ten or twenty years after the Babri Masjid demolition, the country was subjugated to yet more phases of communal violence: the Godhra carnage, 2002 or the riots in Assam, 2012—making the ironic quality of Dattani's title disturbingly pertinent.

REFERENCES

- WORKS CITED: | 1. Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. India: Penguin, 2000. | 2. Naik, M.K. & Shyamala Narayan. *Indian English Literature 1980-2000: A Critical Survey*. N. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2001. | 3. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 1988. | 4. Bhagat, Chetan. *The 3 mistakes of my life, A Story about Business, Cricket and Religion*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co. 2008, 223-224. | 5. Malgonkar, Manohar. *A Bend in the Ganges*. London: Pan Books Ltd, 1964. 374-378. | 6. Gokhale, Shanta. 'The Dramatists' in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra ed., *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) p 349. | 7. Multani, Angelie. 'Final Solutions?' in Angelie Multani ed., *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007) p 111. | 8. Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari, *Mahesh Dattani* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2005) p 77. | 9. Padamsee, Alyque, 'A Note on the Play *Final Solutions*' in Mahesh Dattani: *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000) p 161. | 10. Multani, Angelie, 'Final Solutions?' in Angelie Multani ed., *Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007) | 11. Padamsee, Alyque, 'A Note on the Play *Final Solutions*' in Mahesh Dattani: *Collected Plays* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000) p 161. |