

Mahesh Dattani's 'Final Solutions': A Humanistic Play

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani is an Indian English playwright, who made the Indian dramatic voice to be recognized at the global level. As a dramatist he stands to be an advocate of the marginalized people. He has a great love towards humanity. While calling attention of the audience and readers towards the pains, suffering and predicaments of the marginalized individuals he conveys the message of humanism. Dattani's play, *Final Solutions* is an arresting narrative about the communal tension in India. The play begins with the portrayal of resentments and concludes with cleansing of the souls with the message of tolerance which underlines the humanistic values.

Key words: Mahesh Dattani, *Final Solutions*, humanism, communal tension

Mahesh Dattani is an Indian English playwright, who made the Indian dramatic voice to be recognized at the global level. Alyque Padamsee, a veteran in Indian theatrical world, remarks in this regard, "At last we have a playwright who gives sixty Million English speaking Indians an identity. Thank you Mahesh Dattani". (Padamsee, 2000, p. 161) Dattani's characters, settings and language are truly Indian but the emotions and subjects he deals in his plays are global. He deals with the bold, daring and taboo subjects which other writers will prefer to be away from or some other even will not notice them. What distinguishes him from other playwrights is his courage of conviction in depicting innovative themes like portrayal of sex preferences by men and women which were until recently considered to be taboos in our society. (Das 2008 p.X From preface.)

As a dramatist he stands to be an advocate of the marginalized people. He voices the soul and psyche of eunuchs, survivors of the incest, traumatic characters, orphans, HIV affected people and many more. He presents on the stage, hitherto unknown mystic living world of the marginalized. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri comments, 'Dattani maintains the stance of non-judgmental observer, and never intrudes into the plays he writes nor attempt to sermonize.' (Chaudhuri 2005, p.26) However close scrutiny of the plays reveals that Dattani's plays convey the message to audience. His writings in that sense are didactic. Dattani is a pure soul and holds mirror to the society to make it sensible. He has a great love towards humanity. While calling attention of the audience and readers towards the pains, suffering and predicaments of the marginalized individuals he conveys the message of humanism.

Dattani's play, *Final Solutions* was first performed at Guru Nanak Bhavan, Bangalore on 10 July, 1993. (CP 163) The play is an arresting narrative about the communal tension in India. Two Muslim boys, Javed and Bobby thrust themselves into the house of Hindu family of Gandhis amid the curfew – due to the Hindu-Muslim riot. Whole of the dramatic action, that takes place within the house of Gandhis, scrutinizes the history, politics, deep seated biases, scarred psyches, religious tolerance, generation gap, etc. The play begins with the portrayal of resentments and concludes with cleansing of the souls with the message of tolerance which underlines the humanistic values.

Dattani uses 'diary' as the dramatic device in *Final Solutions*. Hardika, the senior most member of the Gandhi family and Ramnik Gandhi's mother, opens her diary after forty years. The diary is the account of her life course from young Daksha to old Hardika (the name she has adopted to match the name of her husband Hari according to the custom in some of the Hindu families). Through the accounts of her diary the readers can easily notice that from the very childhood Hardika had been the victim of Hindu-Muslim resentments and riots. Daksha's diary establishes the history of division- the

sense of ‘us and them’ the link between personal experience and political belief/ social hatred. (Multani 2007, p.111) Infact she was so pure of the soul that she hated to think that her father referred to her Muslim friend’s father while saying, ‘... before leaving , they (Britishers) had let loose the dogs.’ (CP) But inspite of innocence, purity and equal love for all human beings she had the shocking experience at Hussainabad in her childhood. The account of her experience in her diary is terrible:

The windows broke, one by one. My mother and my self, we hid in the pooja room. The stones came smashing into our home. I clung to my mother. My mother clung to the family idol of Lord Krishna. I could see the fire they were carrying, reflected in the broken glass lying around us. I looked at my mother praying, with her eyes tightly shut, clutching the feet of the idol, praying not for us but for the safety of my father, wherever he may be. (CP 167)

At the age of fifteen young Daksha married to Hari Gandhi. She was very fond of music and particularly the songs sung by Noor Jahan, ShamshadBegam and Suraiyya. In the house of her in-laws she had no scope for music. So she developed a close friendship with a Muslim girl, Zarine, who lived in the close vicinity of her house. Zarine’s family had fostered the love for music and often the tunes of the songs, which Hardika loved most, were heard outside their windows. This new friendship brought zest to the life of Hardika. But this joy too was short-lived. Hardika faced a great insult, humiliation and even, at her own home, she lost her freedom to be out for the reason she didn’t know then. She had developed a good bond with Zarine’s family and often would go to her. But at the background the business and religious politics was going on. The events at her back had developed great resentments between two families and innocent Hardika had to suffer and stake her freedom on that account. Yet, the treatment of Zarine’s family to Hardika was more enough to develop the resentments for Muslims in the heart of Hardika:

They started their meal and I sat with them, my hands not touching the table. I couldn’t bear the silence and I asked them what the matter was. They wouldn’t answer. I sat and watched them eat those things! My head started spinning from the smell and I could feel my stomach churning. And I saw Kanta waking in and starting at me, horrified. And I brought out the contents of my stomach, then and there. Zarine stood up and I reached out for her, thinking she would help me. She screamed at me instead. Kanta rushed to me and helped me up and as we staggered out, I could hear Zarin’s voice, ‘are you happy? Are you happy?’ (CP 221)

These and other experiences,Hardika had undergone, were enough for her to develop the prejudices and resentments for the Muslims. She, being innocent and pure, didn’t know the politics working behind her experiences. Yet, when after forty years there was another Hindu-Muslim riot in the city she was cautious but did not lose her natural kindness. She was living in Amargaon with her son Ramnik, daughter-in-law Aruna and granddaughter Smita. Two young Muslims boys Javed and Bobby run into the house of Ramnik Gandhi to save themselves from the furious mob outside. Ramnikalso allows them entry and shelter in his house. Hardika do not like Javed and Bobby’s presence in their house. She neither liketheir expressions nor their words. She even does not understand whatRamnik exactly was trying to prove. Yet she has some concern towards them which marks her humanism. She instructs her son Ramnik, “Ramnik let them sleep here, give them some pillows and bed sheets. Give them whatever they want and tomorrow morning get them out of my house! (CP190)

To a great surprise,Smita knows Javed and Booby. On the concerned enquiry from her father about her knowing those boys, Smita reveals that Javed is brother to her college friend Tasneem and Bobby is Tasneem’sfiancé. In the due course of the action she even

reveals the shocking truth that Javed is a hired hoodlum. Such boys are brought into the cities by the riot creators and they pelt the first stone to begin the riot.

Hardika, Ramnik and Javed carry the burden of their past while Aruna, with her deep seated biases, represents archetypical psyche and Smita and Bobby emerge out to be the carriers of realistic compromise for the change. Gandhi family, on the one hand, and Javed and Bobby on the other, in the dramatic action, represents the Hindu and Muslim worlds at the clash. Both the sides have their arguments and counter –arguments for their actions, beliefs, biases and prejudices.

Javed is a Muslim fanatic whose action is a legal crime. But even his beliefs are rooted in the past experiences of insult and humiliation like Hardika. Bobby explains over Javed's beliefs and their foundation, narrating one of the incident from their childhood.

He loved playing the hero with the neighbourhood boys. And he was.

A minor incident changed all that. There may have been others which Javed didn't talk about. I can't remember how it started. Oh, yes. There was the cricket match. Not much of a match. 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 the 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 started at him as he went back inside. The postman came out of the next house and grinned when he saw this. 'Take no notice,' he said. 'That man is slightly cracked.'

We all heard a prayer bell, ringing continuously. Not loud. But distinct. The neighbour had been praying for quite a while, but none of us had noticed the bell before. We'd heard the bell so often every day of our lives that it didn't mean anything. It was a part of the sounds of the wind and the birds and the tongas. It didn't mean anything. You don't single out such things and hear them, isolated from the rest of the din. But at that moment ... we all heard only the bell.

(Pause. Quietly, in a matter –of –fact manner.) The next day, the neighbour came out screaming on the streets. Yelling at our windows. We peeped out. He was furious, tears running down his face. We couldn't understand a word he was saying. I found out later. Someone had dropped pieces of meat and bones into his backyard... I didn't speak to Javed for many days after that. I was frightened of him. For months, whenever we played cricket and heard the bell, we remembered that incident and we avoided looking at Javed. And for Javed, he was – in his own eyes - no longer the neighbourhood hero. (CP 200-201)

The incident had shattered the psychological world of Javed resulting in the anger and resentment against the Hindus.

Aruna, wife of Ramnik Gandhi fosters the religious prejudices'. She is even unaware that her so called religious purity may be stifling to other unless the mirror was shown to her by her daughter Smita. Aruna's prejudices are more clearly brought out in her action when she collects the glasses of water offered to Javed and Bobby as per the order from Ramnik:

Aruna holds the glasses with her thumbs and index fingers, on the sides which have not been touched by their lips. She takes them away and keeps them separate from the other glasses. (CP 185)

Through all three characters and incidents discussed above, Dattani highlights the approaches and attitudes of people towards other religions. But through Ramnik, Smita and Bobby he visualizes the possible solution to the problem.

Ramnik Gandhi is truly a humanist in his approach. Though he takes much pride in his self-declared liberalism, he holds the responsibilities of injustice done to the Muslims by his forefathers. Ramnik, the father, carries with him the burden of the guilt of his father's black deeds, transferring some of the resentment of his mother, Hardika. (Chaudhuri 2005, p.39) Throughout the play he carries the guilt and tries to recompense when he finds opportunity with Javed. In spite of the debate among Ramnik, Javed and Bobby and even receiving the blames from Javed, Ramnik offers him a job in his saree shop. Ramnik Gandhi, Daksha/Hardika's son is trying to atone for the sins committed by his father and grandfather, and therefore is a conscious 'secularist'. (Multani 2007 p.112) It was his humble attempt to correct the ways of Javed. Ramnik shows a great courage by allowing two Muslim boys into his house who were being chased by the furious mob. He displays his humanity by offering them food and water and even asking them to stay within the house that night, so that they are protected from the mob. Ramnik's approach to Javed seems gratuitous until he reveals the cause of his guilt-consciousness to his mother. (Halder 2008, p. 83)

Smita and Bobby in their own capacity try to be rational and correct the biases and prejudices of other characters. Smita shows Aruna how hollow her beliefs are and Bobby consciously takes efforts to deviate Javed from his deeds. In the house of Gandhis no one sleeps in that night. Biases and prejudices are softened to some extent through understanding one another as well as self-realization. But Bobby takes a final step to convey and confirm the message of humanism.

Aruna moves to the pooja room in early morning light. She rings the prayer bells. Javed is moved by the sound of the prayer bells. Bobby moves towards pooja room. Aruna tries to stop him but he pays no heed to her. Bobby picks up the image of Krishna holding in his palm. Bobby shows it to Javed that the idol does not mind his touch. At once he gives message to Javed and Aruna the God does not discriminate among human beings. The world of Aruna is shattered. She sounds her frustration asking 'Oh! Is there nothing left that is sacred in this world?' (CP 225) Bobby calmly replies her; bringing out Dattani's message of humanism.

'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. (*Puts on his footwear and looks at Hardika.*) And if you are willing to forget, I am willing to tolerate' (CP 225)

This is a play on communal hatred based on age-old suspicion and mistrust. If people became liberal-minded like Ramnik, Bobby and Smita and see reason, the evil of communal hatred will be wiped out from the minds of the people. All religion in the end is one and the same religion- that is faith in God, in whatever from He may be worshipped. Dattani not only suggests but through his characters 'whispers result'. (Das 2008, p.103)

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