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Negotiating The Self With Society in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions*

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Abstract:It is often that a crisis situation exposes the hidden psyche of individuals. The paper is an attempt to uncover the complexities that surround the apparent liberal educated middle class in the backdrop of a communal riot situation. Mahesh Dattani weaves the narrative in such a way that the legacy of hatred on communal lines comes to the forefront in the socio-economic political context where the past entwines with the present to shapes an individual's formation of prejudices and false beliefs about a particular community. This is how the process of 'othering' begins at the rudimentary space of the family.

***Index Terms*–communal, other, gender, dramaturgy, guilt**

Introduction

Mahesh Dattani once said in an interview, 'it is all about keeping the rebel in oneself alive and at the same time move in that forced harmony of the mainstream, of which all of us want to be a part of'(Dattani, 1996). Therefore, in his plays he plots his characters amidst a struggle of upholding one's entity and at the same time merges it with the conventions demanded by society. But the conflict that results from such a struggle operates both in the private as well as the public level. It is a forced one, something that leaves in its wake a sense of loss and nothingness, a sense of crime and guilt, a sense of longing and suffering. The discourse of self-fragmentation in Dattani is established in his interest in social rather than personal issues. The self-hood of an unknown citizen is more a matter for sociological analysis than psychological investigation. 'The "I" that becomes "a camera" to expose the problems of self-hood alternates with the focus on the realities of the social nexus' (Brown, 1989).

Women Voices and its Intersections

Final Solutions opens with Daksha,an Indian Hindu girl of fifteen reading out what she has just written in her diary. Daksha alternates into Hardrika in the course of the play although sometimes Daksha and Hardrika are seen on the same level, despite the fact that they are the same person. This daring experimentation in the portrayal of character ranks Dattani among those pioneers of Indian theatre who strove to break the barriers of chronological time in theatrical representation. The playwright freely traverses

between two ages and periods of time. This technical attempt is also suggestive of the theme that Dattani wishes to portray. He deals with tensions and problems leading into a kind of conflict, both in the private as well as in the public sphere, which operate through three generations. Daksha feels her dreams shattered because she cannot become a singer as her in-laws do not like her singing film songs. The repression that the girls have to face after they are married establishes the society that Dattani wishes to delineate Daksha's only confidante is her diary where she can freely pour out her inmost thoughts. It effectively brings out the predicament of a typical Indian married woman -who suffers from a lack of communication. It is only common place a feature in a society, as Suma Chitnis points out that hierarchies within the family 'have been maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief...and above all, by a philosophy of self-denial, and the cultural emphasis on sublimating the ego' (Chitnis,1993).

The Theme of Communal Divide

It is through this little girl that Dattani unfolds yet another important theme of the play-the operation of communal hatred in the country. India's years of struggle for independence appeared 'terrible' because everyone was 'rushing out, screaming, shouting and fighting' (Dattani CP, 2000, p. 166) as Daksha recalls. The Britishers had left, but they had let the 'dogs' loose.Communalism was a legacy of the colonial rule. 'The communal problem is not a religious problem, it has nothing to do with religion', said Nehru in 1936 (Selected Works, 1972-82). As Daksha remembers the day in August 1947, 'windows broke, one by one, 'stones came smashing' (CP, 2000, p. 167), and the innocence that surrounded this music loving, suppressed young bride was slowly transformed into a gruesome experience. 'It [communalism] was not religious difference as such but its exploitation by calculating politicians for the achievement of secular ends which had produced the communal divide', as rightly pointed out by T. N. Madan (2000). Through Daksha was too naive to understand its political implications, she hated to think her father blaming the Muslims for it. Thus, the issues of violence, repression, suspicion and doubt rise in the play from the domestic to the national level. The tug-of-war that is shown to have begun in Daksha's speech between conservatism and liberal values, tradition and modernity,hatred and love. Daksha was heartbroken as her gramophone records of the love-songs were shattered.

Daksha changes to Hardrika forty years later. She writes once again in her diary 'a young girl's childish scribble. An old woman's shaky scrawls. Yes, things have not changed that much' (CP 2000, P.167).She is now embedded with prejudices that were born due to her bitter experience with the Zarine family. What had not changed is the suppression that is still there in the family, even after independence. The question arises--Whose independence was it anyway? What did the common people gain by it? The complication functions on two levels and we are shown how in the domestic level the patriarchal hegemony curbs the desires of the female residing within the family. Daksha's dreams are shattered as her family does not like her singing. Later on, time progresses, yet the situation remain almost the same-the nature of suppression only changes. Aruna, Hadrika's daughter-in- law gets trapped into a self-inflicted prison-house, she lets the time worn conventions and customs chain her from all sides. She remains busy with household

duties, looking after the family, and engaging in rituals and her 'pooja-path'. She represents the typical Hindu woman who takes the conventions into her life blood without question or com- plaint. Bharati Ray poignantly expresses the status of women in India, 'since birth, a female child and a male child are expected to follow different social attitudes and social characteristics. These different social attitudes and characteristics, taught through the process of socialisation, earmark, a male sphere of public life as one of prestige and power, a female sphere of the private domain as one of degradation and confinement'(Ray 1990). Aruna rebukes the 'other' community and all the while maintains a distance because she has been taught to hate 'them'. But the conflict resides in her character as well. Though she is a pious Hindu believing in the sanctity of the rituals where she admits no sacrilegious act, yet she says 'All religion is one. Only the ways to God are many' (CP 2000, p.209). Ramnik laughs out aloud at this statement because he knows they are mere superfluous words and are not said with conviction. Aruna cherishes the 'sanskar' the age-old tradition which she had inherited from the saints 'We must know no other path … I shall uphold what I believe is the truth' (CP 2000, p. 210). The statement propels the audience to ask what she thinks of as the truth. Is it truth because she believes in it? Aruna is, as she says, 'proud' of her inheritance. And it is exactly here that she differs from her daughter, Smita. Dattani traces the mental separation that evoked as a result of the generation gap. Here we meet three Indian Hindu girls belonging to three different generations. Smita, with her newly acquired college going ideas feel that religion is oppressing, she had followed it all the while because she loved her mother. Here we are introduced to yet another kind of oppression. Smita feels stifled in her own house. The occasion of the two Muslim boys entering their house at a crisis period results in an outburst of her repressed spirit: 'I am so glad these two dropped in. We would never have spoken about what makes us so different from each other' (CP 2000,p. 211). The heightened tension discloses yet another aspect of the play. Smita had all the while remained silent and submissive in her house 'like a mouse in a family of rats' (CP 2000, p.218). When Ramnik, her father wants to know the reason, she replies 'Because it would have been a triumph for you-over mummy. (CP 2000, p.213). Inspite of the difference in attitude and thinking, a common chord of female consciousness binds them. This bond is of the 'feminine self'--conscious of the patriarchal control and therefore unites in order to face it.

Smita, too, has her own psychological frustrations. Her hidden love for Bobby is obvious, but she fails to express it, to 'make it happen' (CP 217). She excuses it by saying that it was purely for personal reasons and no other. Dattani highlights the truth through Bobby-- 'Are you trying to make it more convenient for ourselves?' (CP 2000, p. 217). The conventions,the age-old prejudices that she openly defies in her mother is ingrained. Though she thinks she can create her own freedom wherever one may be, Hardrika, her grandmother knows better. She feels Smita is 'foolish' to think she can create her own freedom. The chains of prejudice bind us from all sides all though we remain unconscious of the fact. Hardrika was confined in the house and she lost respect forever in the eyes of her husband because of Zarine and her family. She was beaten and locked up for she said what she felt, went wherever she wanted to go and chose her own friends. The resentment against her family turned into a blind hatred for the entire 'other' community. Thus we find both Smita and Hardrika have hidden desires that remain unfulfilled, both are victims of oppression. For Hadrika, the two interactions with the 'other' community resulted in the same

experience- 'one more memory. We do not speak to each other. We move in silence. And I remain confined' (CP 2000, p.225). But the nature of the two incidents is different, as Daksha's interaction with Zarine began from purely a sense of wonder and bonding and it was music that had brought them together. The bond ended with a sense of anger and distrust for the entire family of Zarine. But after forty years, another such incident occurred in Hardrika's life. It is significant that the playwright now uses Hardrika, a name given by the in-laws of Daksha. She had imbibed the prejudices that runs among the Hindu family against the 'other' community and has acclaimatised herself with the demands of her family. The second incident started with a feeling of hatred which was the product of the first but later transformed into a sense of guilt and shame.

The second incident of the communal riot was a legacy of the British colonial impact and the response of different Indian social classes, strata and groups. It is here that things have not changed. The audience is ushered into the same scene of violence, terror and inhuman atrocities as they had experienced through the words of Daksha, forty years ago. The mob railed at the 'other', chasing Javed and Bobby, their represen- tatives, for 'taking their oath, felling their gods and killing the 'pujari'. Dattani incorpo- rates all the elements that successfully portray the nature of a communal riot. 'A communal riot represents the concentrated essence of this notion when the killing of any stray individual represents an attack upon his 'commu- nity' and defence of the killer's community'(Chandra,1984). But Javed and Bobby are no 'stray individuals', for they, especially Javed, truly represent the sentiments of the 'other' community.

Javed :It must feel good.

Ramnik:What?

Javed :Being the majority (Drinks)

Ramnik :Yes, I never thought about it.

Javed: About feeling good because you are the majority?

Ramnik :No, about being the majority.

Javed: But, sir, it is in your every move. You must know. You can offer milk to us. You can have an angry mob outside your house. You can play the civilised host. Because you know you have peace hidden inside your armpits. (CP 2000, p.192)

What prompts Javed to utter this is his fear of annihilation, as is proclaimed is the words of the chorus 'should we be swallowed up? should we meld into anonymity...can we?' (CP 2000, p. 196). The quest for self-identity comes out of a fear of being obliterated into a non-identity. Javed found his purpose for existence in the effort to establish his own identity as a Muslim and not as a human being. He is ready for the 'jehad' or the holy war. Religious inclinations were for him a 'carnival', a 'joyride' which makes him forget his frustrations ad sense of social deprivation. In *Communalism in Modern India*, Bipan Chandra shows how 'this frustration, a sense of social deprivation and a constant fear of loss of identity and status often created an atmosphere of violence and brutality which when triggered off by a religious issue led to communal riots. The petty bourgeois identity and ego got tied up with the cow or peepal tree protection and music before a mosque, [and the] protection of such supposed rights-- a cow must not be sacrificed, a music procession before a mosque must become silent- -- was seen as a life-and-death question and it came to represent symbolically the preservation or destruction of the petty bourgeois ego' (Chandra, 1984). But

Dattani also shows how a personal experience of intolerance and hatred shoved Javed into joining such a group of fanatics. The whole issue, though, lies in the false consciousness of the people. It is not 'tradition' but a political manipulation by schematic diplomats to achieve their own petty interests. Sumit Sarkar, an eminent historian, compares the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s and that of the Hindu right in India and pointed out chilling similarities (Sarkar 1993). Even the chorus in Dattani's play remark- 'There is heartache. We doubt our leader's intentions. They want our blood to boil. They have succeeded' (CP 2000, p. 188). According to Bipan Chandra, 'communalism was the false consciousness of the historical process because, objectively, no real conflict between the interests of Hindus and Muslims existed' (Chandra, 1984). Therefore the question that automatically haunts the audience is where does the real problem lie? Whose petty interests are fulfilled with the creation of this tension? Dattani, through the play shows this petty self interest being operative on a small scale.

The Dilemma of the Middle Class

Ramnik, from the beginning plays the role of a kindly host, a broad-minded individual who provides shelter to the two Muslims boys who are hunted by a furious mob because of their separate religious identity. He reveals his utmost wish to save them but the audience is puzzled at his 'I need to protect them? (CP 2000, p.182). Later, Hardrika, his mother, too perceives the situation 'He wasn't just saving the two boys from getting killed. This was something else Ramnik was trying to do' (CP 2000, p.191). His offering milk to the two 'outsiders' bears a symbolic significance. He even offers a job to Javed in his shop. But the truth gradually unfolds in the course of the play. Ramnik, too, cannot escape the age-old prejudices which are deep rooted in his mind and his blood. When he hears that Javed is a riot-rouser he shouts, ‘You have violence in your mind. Your life is based on violence. Your faith is based...' (CP 2000, p.198). He stops, but the meaning is hinted out. He slaps Javed when Javed calls Ramnik a provoker. Javed points out that Ramnik hates him for not being what he is, or what he does. He hates Javed because he had showed Ramnik that he was not as liberal as he thinks himself to be. We find that Ramnik himself discloses certain facts in an unmindful state - 'I have given him all the chances that I can possibly give. Isn't that what any liberal minded person should do?' (CP 2000, p. 199) and almost immediately he blurts out, 'That's not the real reason' (CP 2000, p.199). Ramnik was angry with Javed because he had recognised his dark inner self, that side of his personality which lay hidden under the impression of a false representation. Dattani wishes to portray this dialectic that operates in all characters. Characters, in Dattani, therefore, have their hidden fears, consciousness of guilt, both done on their part and inherited from their forefathers; together with the realization that being liberal minded is what is demanded from them. This constant struggle between the desired way of behaviour, which in Freudian terms can be called the super-ego and the prejudice imbedded in their genes, a legacy of their forefathers, or the id, results in a fractured ego which is manifested through arrogant behaviors, slips of tongues as in O'Neillian dramas. In Ramnik's case this is precisely what happens. The sense of guilt and crime committed by his father and grandfather cannot leave him at rest. He is haunted by that sense of betrayal, and so towards the end of the play, we see Ramnik sitting alone in the living room.

Hardrika: Haven't you gone to your shop?

Ramnik:No.

Hardrika: Why? It is late. Your workers will be waiting for you.

Ramnik :I can't go.

Hardrika :Why not?

Ramnik : I just can't enter that shop any more. I can't bear thinking about it.

Hardrika :What?

Ramnik :I didn't have the face to tell anyone. For me there's no escape. (CP 2000, p.225)

A sense of confinement and suffocation pervades the whole atmosphere of the play. Home, in Dattani's play, bears not the traditional concept of a place of rest and shelter. It is on the other hand, a place that suffocates, a haunt that is filled with the heavy breath of tradition and inheritance, the air stifling the people who live there. So Smita wants to escape from home for five minutes every day. 'So we can quickly gulp in some fresh air and go back' (CP 2000, p. 219) and Daksha's memories of home are also those of a prison-house: 'Confined. Never let out of the house. Like a dog that had gone mad' (CP 2000, p.223). Without knowing the real reason, Daksha blames the Zarine family, the 'other', for her misfortunes. 'I lost respect...I was ruined... I hate the way...you eat!' and again 'I cannot forget. I just cannot forget' (CP 2000, p. 223). It is the one act of Bobby that is an attempt to make Hardrika forget --forget that 'past' of her life and make her believe in people and the world. Bobby, in his desperate attempt to prove everyone false and to break the associated prejudice which minces the 'other' community takes up the idol of Krishna in the palm of his hand, 'My flesh is holding him and look Javed. He does not mind. He does not burn me to ashes. He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated!' (CP 2000, p. 224). The action is a reiteration of Smita's previous stance of giving Javed God's vessel to fill, 'to prove that it is not going to fly off into the heavens with your touch, putting an eternal curse on our family' (CP 2000, p. 218). She gives expression to the sub-text that runs like an undercur- rent throughout the play--- 'Wake up! Wake up! It's morning!' (CP 2000, p. 218). Smita and Bobby's speeches remind one of Basavanna in Karnad's *Tale-Danda* when he says ' this entire edifice of caste and creed [in this case, religion] will come tumbling down. Every person will see himself only as a human being... That is inevitable...' (Karnad 1990, p. 39) or as Prakriti, a Chandal girl in Tagore's *Chandalika* (1933) reminds us, 'A religion that insults is a false religion' (Tagore trans. Sykes, 1950) Therefore, the time has come to forget the false consciousness inherited and arise into a light of new awakening, a world of tolerance and humanity because as Arun Shourie, in his introduction to *Indian Controversies* states, 'in each tradition, there is much that is valuable, but also much that is malignant'(Shourie 1993, p. viii). Though Bobby and Smita proclaims the notion of tolerance as 'the strongest fragrance in the world' (CP 2000, p. 225) Hardrika's heart has been shattered at the false pride displayed by Zarine and her family. The realisation occurs only when she hears the true story from Ramnik after so many years.

Hardrika: What are you talking about?

Ramnik: (looks at her with pity) It's their shop. It's the same burnt-up shop we bought from them, at half its value.

(Pause) And we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred. Because we wanted a shop (CP 2000, p. 226).

That the middle class encouraged communal behaviour has been shown by Bipan Chandra. 'Then there were the middle classes whose interests did not require commu- nalism or other similar distortion but which could use them to promote their interests in the short run. Moreover, many of the middle class groups believed they could obtain material resources and social and political power more easily through communalism (Chandra 1984, p.31). This recognition of the selfish motive of the husband and father-in-law helps Hardrika to shake off the prejudices against the 'other' community. She says, 'Do you think those boys will ever come back?' (CP 2000, p.226). Ramnik however fails to provide a conclusive answer. 'They will come', he says, 'But then again - if it's too late-they may not' (CP 2000, p. 226).

Conclusion

The play ends in the crux of a heightened tension which is evoked out of the skeptical view about the 'final solution' provided by the dramatist. The playwright's intention is successfully achieved as the audience is prompted to ask questions. As Erin.B Mee has rightly pointed out, 'Are there any final solutions? Can we shake off our prejudices or they are in our psyche like our genes? Will we ever be free or ever-locked in combat? '(Mee 2000) The title of the play alludes to Hitler's programme of Jewish annihilation which his Nazi regime felt would result in a prosperous Germany. It was a false consciousness on their part, and their belief was proved false after about fifty years. Future history tells things differently. As Partha Chatterjee, an eminent social scientist in *A Possible India* contemplates that there are many factors in common between Nazi Germany and the operation of communal tension in India (Chatterjee, 1997, pp. 228-230). Therefore the apparent optimistic ringtone of the title of Dattani's play remains sardonically ironical and open-ended.

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