SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKS OF MAHESH DATTANI AND TASLIMA NASRIN

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Abstract:

Two writers with identical concerns or practicing identical genres could be truthfully compared. Dattani is a dramatist and Nasrin is a novelist. That way they are the writers of different genres. But both equally hold up a mirror before life around them. Both alike are not satisfied simply in portraying faithfully what they observe. Each of them is reacting constructively to what he or she sees. There is a strong plea for reforming the situation, for reshaping collective psyche of the people around. Each of them is in a way a writer of problem literature. Both of them are like Ibsen and Shaw drawing attention to a pressing problem of a particular time and place. There is not a powerful aesthetic motive behind their work. They are not primarily interested in creating a thing of beauty. They use literature particularly for the dissemination of their ideas. They do not practise literature for its own sake. They write because they have something definite to say to their people. Both are rebellious, have courage to tell their people that they must become more sensitive to human suffering, and become kind to their brethren. A humanist concern is evident in their work. They write in the spirit of Existentialist Engagement and not simply as the entertainers of their audiences. What they earn in consequence is a wide protest from their countrymen, and not applause. They realize a negative popularity called notoriety. They are well known because they are unpleasant, not because they are pleasing.

Index Terms: Aesthetic motive, human suffering

Dattani is an Indian intellectual. Nasrin is an intellectual from Bangladesh. Both are equally authentic intellectuals. Both courageously exhibit their heartfelt convictions. None of the two appears to be religious in any sense. Both of them are sincere and sensitive humanist. They want to realize a social order in which human life is regarded as sacred and any offence to the dignity of man as a sin. There must be freedom of thought and expression in such an order, and equality of opportunities. All identities except the identity as human beings are immaterial.

But there are also differences between the two. By birth, Dattani is a Hindu, and Nasrin a Muslim, though both of them have equally disowned outdated creeds.

Dattani hails from India, which is a secular state, while Taslima Nasrin is a citizen of Bangladesh, which is a theocratic state. This is a vital difference. In India, nobody is killed or driven abroad in self-exile for writing a book expressing unpleasant views. In Bangladesh, you have to be prepared to be a martyr for a humanist cause if you offend its clergy. While Dattani is honoured with the Sahitya Akademi Award, Taslima Nasrin is hooted out from Bangladesh. That perhaps is the reason why her courage has been appreciated so much abroad and so many awards and honours have been conferred on her.

Dattani writes directly in English, while Nasrin is a Bengali writer. Obviously, Nasrin addresses herself to her people directly. She enters into dialogue with her people and criticizes them in their language. That is how her communication situation is authentic. In case of Dattani, it is not so authentic. He writes in English and naturally looks for the readership abroad like every Indo-Anglican writer. In India only in metropolitan cities, he might occasionally find audience. In no way could his plays be described as popular. Only the students of English literature and the creamy layer intellectuals of metro cities have heard his name. Nasrin appeals to the masses. Dattani appeals to an extremely small and select class of culturally conscious class educated in English. It cannot be said that Dattani speaks to his people in the way Taslima Nasrin does. Dattani observes:
“Assumptions galore that cityfied English-speaking people are all liberal-minded and villagers are communal and bigoted. Worse is when that particular remark is followed by ‘It would make sense in Hindi or Kannada.’ Meaning, ‘We are not bigots, It’s those bloody vernecs who need to think about all this’.”

O.K. Dattani is not wrong. His critics are mistaken about themselves. They need not change their attitudes as much as the villagers need. But what is their number- a few hundred in the whole country. Could they be called the people of India? The fact is that only a writer in the language of the people could be the people’s writer. A writer talking to his own people in their common language could be said to be an authentic literary situation. Dattani’s literary situation is not in this sense authentic.

Dattani is a dramatist and Nasrin is a novelist. Both are artists. But they have become well-known more on account of their bold and unconventional views than on account of the greatness of their arts. As far as the Final Solutions is concerned, it is probably the best of Dattani’s plays and most satisfactory as a drama.

Taslima Nasrin’s ‘Lajja’ is the most well known of his works. But artistically it is not so praiseworthy. Aesthetically, it is not very satisfactory.

It seems that Nasrin and Dattani wrote ‘Lajja’ and ‘Final Solutions’ to deal with the most pressing problem of their countries. There is a strong inner urge in both the writers to reform the situation through the medium of literature. The aftermath of the demolition of Babri Masjid is the subject matter of ‘Lajja’. Nasrin writes of what happened there in Bangladesh, how helpless Hindu minority had to suffer. Dattani exhibits the communal tension that is normally felt during the ‘Rathyatra’ in Ahmedabad and shows how it could be defused. Communal riots in both the works are the backdrop of the action. Therefore, it is apparent that both the texts originate in the topicality of Bangladesh and India.

The minority that suffers is not the same in both works. Muslims are the majority in Bangladesh, whereas Hindus are the majority in India.

The character of each country is also not the same; India is a secular country where people belonging to various castes and creeds are equally the citizens of the country. The case of Bangladesh is different. It was an Islamic state as East Pakistan. For a time after 1971, it was nominally called a secular state owing to euphoria over Bengali independence secured with Indian help from the yoke of West Pakistan. But the euphoria soon subsided and again the new nation of Bangladesh became as Islamic state as bad as Pakistan. Here Muslims are first class citizens and Hindus and the rest are second-class citizens.

The cause of riots is religious fanaticism. Hindu fanatics demolished Babri Majid in India and riots broke out not only in Bangladesh but also in Pakistan. This because Muslims are a closely united community. Wherever they may be, to whichever countries they may belong, they are Muslims first and then everything else. That is their collective psyche. This is revealed in the study of ‘Lajja’.

In ‘Final Solutions’, the cause of communal riots is Muslim fundamentalism. Uneducated youth like Javed become a plaything of politicians. They are encouraged to start riots in India, as the minority is not encouraged in Bangladesh. In India, politicians have an axe to grind. They usually utilize communal fury for political gains in the time of elections. The people like Javed are instigated or induced to start riots, as a sort of Jihad or holy war. Unlike in Bangladesh, the effect of riots is felt only in cities. Villages are rarely affected. The entire Hindu population of the country does not indulge in rioting. Javed and Bobby take shelter in Ramnik’s house. They are not at all acquainted with him, yet he protects them.

Sudhamoy-family has to take shelter in their Muslim friend’s house. It is dangerous to take shelter in any unknown Muslim’s house. Hindus, besides, have to conceal their identity. Maya has to change her Hindu name. Muslims who protect Hindus are severely criticized. Yet, it must be admitted that there are good Muslims who protect their Hindu friends in the times of trouble.

Parul proves to be a true friend of Maya as she gives her shelter in her house. But, except Parul, other members show a strange body language to Maya exhibiting their dislike of Parul’s attitude to Maya.

All this is a contrast to what happens in ‘Final Solutions’. To Ramnik Bobby and Javed are strangers, yet he protects them. Javed, even, abuses and insults Ramnik. But Ramnik tolerates his misbehaviour. Smita is a friend of Tasneem and she proves to be a friend indeed in the hour of her need. When she heard the news that the hostel in which she was living was bombed, she immediately phoned Tasneem’s father and relieved his tension. She is also a friend of Bobby. She positively advocates his cause and takes Aruna, her mother, to task when her behaviour towards the duo appeared to be offensive to her. It cannot be denied that the behaviour of majority towards minority in India is far better than that which prevails in Bangladesh and appears in ‘Lajja’.

Muslim minority in India is never brutalized in normal times. Only during riots, they suffer. Usually what we find is that they themselves provoke violence, and then suffer the backlash of their mischief. Look at the burning of train in Godhra and subsequent
carnage of Muslims! In this play, too, Javed and other young Muslims disturb the Rathyatra and murder the poojari. That is the cause of trouble. In addition, the Muslims are not the passive sufferers. They retaliate with all might. What happens in consequence is a communal conflict in which both the parties equally fight and kill.

As against this, Hindus have been brutalized and humiliated lot in all times. There are no riots here. Only during the times of riots in India, the people of Bangladesh suddenly decide to slaughter passive Hindus to make them homeless and totally dispossessed. There is besides, a frenzy to convert forcibly the Hindus. Nothing of the sort happens in India. In Bangladesh, the problem is not riot. Oppressions and exploitsations of Hindus is normal order of the day. An incident such as Babri Masjid demolition only increases the degree of persecution. But riots or no riots, Hindus have to suffer in day today routine life.

Communal situations in India and Bangladesh are not easily comparable because one is a secular state and the other is declaredly thocratic. Hindu psyche is naturally tolerant in the matters of religion, though not in the matter of caste. Nirmalendu Goon says:

“Someone was saying there have no less than four thousand riots in India. Even then, Muslims in India have not left their country. But the Hindus here have one foot in Bangladesh and the other in India. To put it differently, the Muslims in India are fighting for their cause, while the Hindus in Bangladesh are running away.”

Not only this; the Muslims of Bangladesh are running away to India in quest of better living conditions and employment. There is literally a demographic invasion of India by Bangladesh. The balance in the Indian regions bordering Bangladesh has already been tilting in favour of Muslims. Assam appears to be now, almost a Muslim majority state.

This is true but says Goon further:

“The Muslims in India are in a position to fight, because India is a secular State. Here, power, is in the hands of the fundamentalists. There is no scope to fight in this country.”

Ramnik and his father burnt up the shop of a rival Muslim businessman at the time of partition. They bought the shop at half its value. But Ramnik confesses his sin. He strongly feels the repentance for his wrongdoing. He badly wanted Javed to accept the job so that he might expiate for his sins. There is no evidence of such repentance in any Muslim in ‘Lajja’.

Intercommunal marriages are more frequent in Bangladesh than in India. But the foundation of such marriages usually is not love. Hindu girls want security, and marrying Muslims give them safety and security. But they have to embrace Islam in order to marry. All this is clear from Ratna’s and Maya’s affairs. What is unthinkable in Bangladesh is marriage for love with all freedom of faith and thought to both the parties.

As against this, the situation in India is slightly different. A sense of aversion towards intercommunal marriages is very strong among both Muslims and Hindus. Yet, education has made a lot of difference. The new generation appears to be more generous. Now, more than ever intercommunal marriages are taking place in cities. In ‘Final Solutions’, Smita and Bobby had been attracted to each other. Both confess it fearlessly. Yet, if they do not marry, it is simply because Smita feels that her attraction towards Bobby cannot be called love:

“I am sure that if we wanted to, we could have made it happen, despite all odds.”

You cannot imagine Parveen of ‘Lajja’ speaking like this.

The art of characterization in both the works cannot be called altogether satisfactory. No character in ‘Lajja’ is truly three-dimensional. The characters in ‘Final Solutions’, however, appear to be comparatively more satisfactory. Smita, Ramnik and Hardika reveal more than one single quality. Yet, as the authorial concentration is fixed more on the problem of the play than on the elements of art, Dattani’s characters do not absorb all our attention.

The conclusions of both the works, ‘Lajja’ and ‘Final Solutions’, are strikingly similar and different. They are similar in that both express the spirit of humanism. Bobby takes up the image of God in his hands and says that He loves man. He loves human touch. Nothing is holier than human welfare. Nothing is more valuable than man’s humanity towards a fellow man.

In ‘Lajja’ throughout the novel Sudhamoy and Suranjan try to live their idealism in most uncongenial climate. But ultimately, they break. Suranjan tears to pieces at the climax of the action of the novel the books of humanist writers. The suggestion is, what is valuable for all men cannot be maintained unfortunately in Bangladesh.

That is how the conclusions differ. ‘Final Solutions’ ends in the hope of realizing a final solution. Communal situation is not so bad in India, not so irremediable.
But, can ‘Lajja’, that is shame, ever bring lajja, that is shame, to the majoritism of Bangladesh? Is it possible to realize a socio-political climate in Bangladesh where Hindus can peacefully live where their human rights would be respected, in any foreseeable future? The answer appears to be a round ‘NO’. That is the significance of tearing and burning the books at the end in ‘Lajja’. In other words, while the end of ‘Final Solutions’ is optimistic, that of ‘Lajja’ is clearly pessimistic.

The mouthpiece of Dattani who is a Hindu, is Muslim young man. Nasrin who is a Muslim speaks through the Hindu protagonist. The fact is that both Dattani and Nasrin are humanists who have discarded religious labels. But just to emphasize the humanity of all men, they choose their representatives from the community other than their own. Both the protagonists are staunch humanists.

There is not a single Muslim character in the novel, which could be described as a secularist. However, Debnath tells us of an article of Debesh Roy on Bade Gulam Ali, which he has read. In the midst of his performance, Gulam Ali rose up and danced to the tune of Hari Om Tatsat.

In ‘Final Solutions’, on the other hand none of the characters belonging to majority community could be described as a sectarian character. Even Aruna is just conservative. She would like to be let alone. She cannot be called intolerant. And other Hindu characters of the play are decidedly generous.

If we come out from the works of imagination, ‘Lajja’ and ‘Final Solutions’, and have a look at the recent developments on the Indian subcontinent, we find a hope stirring afresh. The hysteria that led to the demolition of Babri Masjid, hysteria that followed in the wake of the demolition, are a matter of past. On account of worldwide anti-terrorism drive, a good will is generated between India and Pakistan. Shri Advani’s recent visit of Pakistan and reminder to the people of Pakistan of the secularist speech delivered by Mohammad Ali Jinnah in the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, has added to the euphoria.

“Now, if we want to make this great State of Pakistan happy and prosperous we should wholly and solely concentrate on the well-being of the people, and especially of the masses and the poor. If you will work in co-operation, forgetting the past, burying the hatchet, you are bound to succeed. If you change your past and work together in a spirit that every one of you, no matter to what community he belongs, no matter what relations he had with you in the past, no matter what is his colour, caste or creed, is first, second and last a citizen of this State with equal rights, privileges and obligations, there will be no end to the progress you will make.”

“I cannot emphasize it too much. We should begin to work in that spirit and in course of time all these angularities of the majority and minority communities, the Hindu community and the Muslim community- because even as regards Muslims you have Pathans, Punjabis, Shias, Sunnis and so on and among the Hindus you have Brahmins, Vashnavas, Khatris, also Bengalees, Madrasis, and so on-will vanish.”

“Indeed if you ask me this has been the biggest hindrance in the way of India attaining freedom and independence, and but for this we would have been free people long ago. No power can hold another nation, and specially a nation of 400 million souls in subjection; nobody could have conquered you, and even if it had happened, nobody could have continued its hold on you for any length of time but for this. Therefore, we must learn a lesson from this.”

“You are free; you are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed- that has nothing to do with the business of the State.”

“As you know, history shows that in England conditions, some time ago, were much worse than those prevailing in India today. The Roman Catholics and the Protestants persecuted each other. Even now there are some States in existence where there are discriminations made and bars imposed against a particular class. Thank God, we are not starting in those days.”

“We are starting in the days when there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another, no discrimination between one caste or creed and another. We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.”

“The people of England in course of time had to face the realities of the situation and had to discharge the responsibilities and burdens placed upon them by the government of their country and they went through that fire step by step. Today, you might say with justice that Roman Catholics and Protestants do not exist; what exist now is that every man is a citizen, an equal citizen of Great Britain and they are all members of the nation. Now, I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State.”

This must have affected Bangladesh also. Religious conflict is a matter of past, the baneful legacy of medieval times. The sooner it goes, the better. And go it certainly will gradually as the spirit of rationalism and humanism progresses.
End Notes