HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF THE PLAY
FINAL SOLUTION BY MAHESH DATTANI

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Abstract:

Indian English Literature has many dramatists. Of them Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are prominent in our times. The first two, properly speaking are not English Dramatists of India, for they do not write directly in English. One writes in Karnad, the other in Marathi and their works then are translated into English. There are very few dramatists in India writing directly in English. Dattani is one of them, perhaps more important of them in our times. He is the first Indian English playwright to win the “Sahitya Akadami Award” for his “Final Solutions and Other Plays” for the year 1998. He is also a famous director, actor and dancer. Sahitya Akadami Award citation says: “Dattani’s work probes tangles attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender… a brilliant contribution to Indian drama in English.” Religious tension, sexuality and gender issues, the dynamics of personal and moral choices, the focus on human relationships have all ensured him a place among the “most serious contemporary playwrights”. Mahesh Dattani has produced and directed two films. Dattani’s “Mango Soufflé” won ‘The Mostra Lambda Award’ or ‘Best Motion Picture Award’ at the Barcelona Film Festival. It also earned him international critical acclaim. Homosexuality is the theme of the film. It is boldly and shockingly presented. The festival’s director pointed out that it was indeed courageous of Datani to attempt such a film in a country like India where ‘homosexuality’ is still not recognized, and is not even legal. He added, “Your film is beautiful in terms of cinematography. It also has enormous valour.”

Mahesh Dattani’s second film as a director, is different from Soufflé. It has a conventionally acceptable theme. It is based on the life of a classical music singer starring Shabana Azmi. While Souffle is based on Dattani’s play ‘On A Muggy Night In Mumbai’. Raga is an original screenplay written by him.

Dattani began life as an advertising copywriter and subsequently worked with his father in his family business. He formed his theatre group Playpen in 1984 and directed several plays for them ranging from classical Greek to contemporary works. Dattani is a shrewd observer of life. Whether it is a stage play or in the radio play, the characters speak his words. But he maintains also the position of an outsider. He holds up a mirror before life. But his mirror is the critical mirror. He wants to change unreasonable social attitudes to many things, and wants society to be truly humanistic.

Being a theatre personality, he has experience in the art of production and staging of the play in various places. He has learnt from his experiences. That is why one finds a touch of freshness and innovativeness in his treatment of theme, language, scenery, setting, costume etc. This much is obvious to the readers of his plays. The things that are not evident in reading are actor’s physical appearance, vocal expressions, tone of voice, physical gestures and overall performance of a play.

One must remember that drama is a compound art. That is, labour of a number of artists goes into the making of it. There are, for example, actors, costumes, stage, scenery, music, direction and many other things. The dramatist himself is only one of the artists involved in the making of a drama as a performance. He is, let us say, only a scriptwriter. The script could be treated as literature independent of the performance. It could be judged as such, as a work of fiction written in dramatic technique. In this work, we are treating Final Solutions as such.

‘Final Solutions’ is a play in three acts. It deals with a political theme. It is replete with communal tensions. A Hindu-Muslim communal riot is at the centre of the play. It is an evil that bedevils our society. Dattani has dramatically treated the theme probably for the first time. The plot could be recapitulated in the words of M.K.Naik: “Final Solutions is the only political play written by
Dattani so far. Two Muslim boys, Javed and Babban take shelter in the house of Ramnik Gandhi, a Hindu businessman, while communal riot rages outside. During the course of their interaction, Ramnik reveals the past and confesses how his father and grandfather had burnt down the shop of a rival Muslim businessman in a communal riot forty years ago. Ramnik’s mother also remembers the travails of partition and how both Hindus and Muslims suffered then. Babban’s comments at the end is significant: “If we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed”. But Dattani doesn’t end the play on this romantic note. The chorus which has the last word, adds: “A drop of oil cannot merge with an ocean of milk. One reality cannot accept another reality.” Actually this is the unreasonable assumption of both Hindus and Muslims in the play. Dattani seeks to correct it in order to establish humanism of all humans irrespective of their religious denominations. M. K. Naik says further:

“Allied to this is another recurrent theme in Dattani: Familial relationships. Ramnik never ceases to hear the harsh rattling of the skeleton in the family cup-board which has given him an outsize guilt complex. Hardika carries her hatred of her in-laws who persecuted her in the best traditions of the Hindu joint family as a perpetual chip on her wrinkled shoulders; and Smita the daughter of Ramnik knows that her secret love for Babban is a hopeless passion”

There are three clearly discernible movements in the play. Through them Dattani seeks to realize his end. At three levels the action flows. Hardika, the grandmother and Daksha, the young bride are the same person. We see the entire action of the play through her eyes. At the first level, play opens with Daksha sharing her innermost thoughts. She is a girl of fifteen. She writes her thoughts, feelings in a diary in the light of oil lamp. She reads whatever she has already written loudly as if she were talking to herself. Throughout the play, she reads whatever she has already written from her diary. The period is late 1940’s.

India has gained independence and the partition has already taken place. In Act I She has been shown two times sharing her thoughts. In Act II, she does not appear and in act III, she has been shown four times on the stage. At the second level, the actions of the play flow contextually with the movements of the characters. All the dialogues, utterances and the exclamations of the mob stand for the contrary beliefs, mutual hatred, and basic differences between the two communities, paranoia, frantic emotions and passions.

Its function is pivotal in the play. We are readily convinced that the play is meant for staging and not for merely reading. It also provides in-depth study of mob-psychology. According to Dattani mob is a mob. It is entirely a destructive force. Mob is neither Hindu nor Muslim. Mob is just mob.

Significantly, therefore the same actors play the role of both the Hindu and the Muslim mobs. They put on black clothes indicating their mob identity and different stick-masks to show nominal difference. The mob is made of five members. By changing stick-masks, they change into Muslim or Hindu mobs. The same stick-masks are used as weapons. Alaque Padamsee aptly remarks regarding the function of the mob in the play:

“The mob in the play is symbolic of our own hatred and paranoia. The demons of communal hatred are not out on the street… they are lurking inside ourselves.”

The actions of the mob throughout the play present “that inside” of us-the two communities-the characters.

At the third level, Hardika, Aruna, Smita, Ramnik, Javed and Babban interact with one another. This interaction among them brings out many facets of the main conflict of the play. When angry mob of Hindus was chasing Javed and Babban, they took shelter in Ramnik’s house. Here they shared and discussed their thoughts and experiences. Their discussions chiefly revolve round the communal conflicts. In the third act, their conflicting interaction reaches its highest point and leads towards denouement successfully.

Dattani suggests at the outset that there is urgency for the final solutions of the age-old problem of communal riots in India. It is sad indeed that in our age of economical and scientific progress, we have not been able to realize a lasting solution. This problem is under focus. It is viewed in a rational and humanist perspective.

Diction and imagery are quite suitable to the purpose. Style, tone, and language as a whole are simple and clear-headed. Dattani appears in all this a gifted dramatist and knows when to do what in order to be dramatically impressive and effective.

The evils rooted in the communal psyche of Muslims, in the collective psyche of Hindus are brought out in all clarity. Fanaticism, the zeal to convert others, intolerance. These appear to be self-evident evils of Muslim psyche. Irrational taboos, constant fear of contamination, the belief that the believers in foreign faiths are unclean - ‘Mlechcha’. Lack of love or respect for others including the castes within the same hierarchy of Hindus-these and similar evils are the evils of Hindu psyche. Aruna and Hardika represent Hindu evils. Javed represents Muslim evils. He has a community. Hindus have more collectivity. How sharp and truthful is Javed’s remark that Muslims love their brothers whereas Hindus treat their fellow-Hindus as untouchables. ‘Brother-Muslim’ is a meaningful phrase. But has anybody heard of “Brother-Hindu”? The fact is that Hindus have not yet been born as a fraternity. They are just non-Muslims.
But both are equally irrational and inhuman. Politicians want to keep this irrationalism alive for their selfish purposes. We must note here that Javed is not afraid of the police. Because, he says, he had been taken in the police van to start the trouble.

There are similarly the politicians who fan the Hindu hate of Muslims to fire. Through politics, therefore, you cannot hope to realize a solution of the problem. A bridge of healthy understanding is required to be built between two collectivities. But politicians are interested in demolishing all bridges.

All the characters are good in the sense that they are convincing human being, not mere puppets in the hands of the dramatist. They exist almost as independent individuals. Each is unique. He successfully reveals the idiosyncrasies of each of the characters. Hardika, a youthful woman of the partition days, now a shaky old woman, loving Muslim friends, yet with a distance, loving songs of Muslim singers, looks life-like. So does Aruna refusing to change her irrational beliefs and attitudes. Ramnik is an idealist who has committed in the past the sin of burning and usurping the shop of a Muslim.

His greatness lies in his powerful sense of repentance. Javed, too, is an open-minded Muslim youth. Communalists and politicians for the furtherance of their interests have misguided him. But he realizes his own folly and refrains from murdering the poojari. He strongly reacts to the silent Hindu hate. But he changes and chimes in with Bobby’s progressive views at last. Smita and Bobby are the healthiest of humans in this drama. As a daughter, she is obedient and does many things just to please her mother. But when she utters offensive words against Javed and Bobby, Smita at once stops her. She would not permit her mother to insult guests in this manner.

Smita has genuine zest for living. It appears in the incidence of splashing water. Whatever hinders such simple joys of life is evil to her. Communal prejudices are thus an evil. She commands Javed to fill water for god. How could human touch contaminate god’s water! Water has been almost a universally accepted symbol of love.

Bobby, too, is perfectly well balanced. He, too, faces oppressed by irrational religious beliefs. He is perfectly sane. He tries to stop Javed from indulging in communal violence. He is just a humanist, who, like Smita, respects others’ beliefs, but would not approve of anybody's hurting others.

The Devices of Hardika/Daksha and ever-present mobs waking and sleeping by turns have already been dealt with. They help realizing brevity, which is dramatic necessity. In a ‘two-hour’ traffic on the stage, Dattani has eloquently and satisfactorily exposed the folly of communalism, selfishness of politicians, and the message of humanism and rationalism.

End Notes