



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

MAHESH DATTANI'S FINAL SOLUTIONS: A METAPHOR OF DOUBT ABOUT ESTABLISHED SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS AND INDIVIDUAL BELIEFS

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ABSTRACT

The hiatus between the established situations in ideal sense and their working on the ground level is always instrumental in churning of human thoughts and finding new shades of reality. The social perception and individual beliefs are more based on conjectures and half known facts and it leads to the distortion of reality. The blurring of the truth becomes all the more acute in critical situations like communal tension. Mahesh Dattani, a well known Indian English playwright raises doubts about the accepted social situations and individual stance in his play *Final Solutions* which is based of communal tension between Hindus and Muslims. Instead of highlighting this issue, the emphasis of the present paper is to read the play with broader concerns and it brings out the finer nuances of social institutions and individual behaviour which are generally not discussed in majority of other papers on the play. The paper critically analyzes the working of religion, the dealings within a family, the treatment of womenfolk, the desperation of disgruntled youth and the fragility of humanistic forces. It points out how the play emerges as a metaphor of doubt and indicates that there are multiple levels of meanings which can be approached only by analyzing the set practices and perceptions about social situations and individual behaviour with an inquisitive bent of mind.

Keywords: Doubt, Social perception, Individual belief, Religion, Family

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Mahesh Dattani, a well known Indian English dramatist, touches different aspects of Indian society and raises very crucial social issues through his plays. *Final Solutions* is a very meaningful play which ironically, instead of providing final solutions, raises questions about many established societal perceptions and individual beliefs in a subtle manner. No doubt, the play is concerned with the theme of communal disharmony and its resultant effects on the lives of people but many other issues related to human relationships in a society are also addressed in it. Various accepted

social and individual situations are approached inquisitively to highlight the overbearing intrusion of social norms and regulations into one's personal life. A demand for total conformity with social dictates without a scope for individual space inhibits personal growth and makes human situations stifling and restrictive. In the play, characters raise their voice against very minute and unobserved hypocrisies prevalent in social arena and individual behaviour. The present paper highlights the social aberrations and the individual's myopic vision as portrayed in the play and tries to read them

critically in a new light. In majority of research articles on this play, the emphasis is on the communal angle of the events depicted in it. However, the meanings as come out of its analytical study are deeper and are connected with the mental, emotional and ethical turmoil of the present society. Dattani himself avers in the "Preface" to *Collected Plays*, "I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background" (xv).

Mahesh Dattani is one of a very few recognized Indian playwrights writing in English. Born in 1958 in Bangalore, this versatile and prolific playwright has also worked as director and actor. He is related not only with playwriting but also with the enactment of plays on the stage. He formed his own theatre group namely Playpen in 1984. He is also associated with the teaching of theater courses in different institutes. Dattani writes about a wide range of social issues and his plays are the portrayal of various strata of Indian society. Radha Ramaswamy rightly opines, "His unusual themes, technical experimentation, and above all, brilliant use of a variety of spoken Indian English not heard on the English language stage before . . ." (vii) Dattani won Sahitya Academy Award for his dramatic writings *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998 and he was the first Indian English dramatist to achieve this distinction. He is still very active and is propagating Indian English drama which is still in its nascent stage. His presence on social media sites make him easily available to the scholars and his audience.

Final Solutions (first performance on July 10, 1993) was written in the background of communal tension in India during the activities related to Ayodhya dispute. The play mainly portrays the atmosphere of communal distrust, its causes and repercussions and some indicative way out to save the situation. Suspicion, rumours, violence, petty politics, misadministration, memory pangs and personal vendetta all are depicted as a part of harsh and brutal communal facts of India. Dattani presents the present reality but subtly he relates it with the past memories of India which led her to the partition on the basis of religious divide. Though the plot of the play apparently seems to be

very simple but it involves many strands of sub plots. It makes the play not only deeper in meaning but close to human reality as well. The play is about a situation of communal tension in a fictional Indian town Amargaon where a holy chariot of Hindus was attacked during a religious procession and a *pujari* was also killed. Different characters are portrayed in the background of ensuing commotion between Hindus and Muslims. The present has been related with the past through the character of Hardika, the grandmother and a victim of post 1947 communal riots. She is conveying her feelings and her past through her diary writings as Daksha. Other members of this Hindu family, namely, Ramnik Gandhi, his wife Aruna and his daughter Smita present two different aspects of individual belief systems, conservative and liberal. Other set of characters is two Muslim boys, Babban alias Bobby and Javed, again representing the same difference between hard and soft religious beliefs. Another important part of the play is the chorus, representing mob or public perception and this is to voice the concerns in different ways of Hindus; Muslims; and liberal and secular forces of the society. The story of the play has multiple strands and it brings forth the relationships between Hindus and Muslims, their doubts about one another, their meeting grounds and the emerging broad concerns about the possibility of their mutual co-existence in secular India. Not only this, the play highlights the gap between the established public perception and individual beliefs on one hand and the existing reality about many social situations and institutions on the other. Within the broad contour of dismal communal situation, the play emerges as a metaphor of doubt with innumerable questions without clear-cut answers. However, the artistic beauty of the play is that the hints about the solutions are obliquely referred to in the satirical presentation of the issues. Gatt brings forth the multiple concerns of the play, "Besides the most important issue of communal disharmony, the play raises the questions regarding cultural differences, quest for the liberation of the self from the narrow boundaries, feminist concerns, human opportunism as well as man's attempt to run away from the reality and his preference to live in a masked glory"

(126). These and many other vital societal issues are focused in the play by putting a question mark on established practices.

The play critically analyses the working of the very fundamental social issue of religion which controls the behaviour of individuals vis-à-vis other individuals on one hand and the society on the other. It is one of very powerful mechanisms of social control and graduating an individual in social practices and human relationship. It is also supposed that religion is helpful in providing a sense of right and wrong and a lesson in humility and humanity. The play exposes the gap between this ideal perception about religion and the harsh practical reality. This social institution has become more a dividing force than a unifying one. Small indicative religious practices have become so inevitable that one is not expected to be a follower of a religion without observing them. A doubt is raised about the significance of such miniscule signs of religion becoming a religion itself by Daksha who is not able to differentiate between the idol of Krishna and her doll, "I felt that the idol I had grown up seeing my mother worship was just a painted doll. A doll no different from the ones I used to play with and think it was a real person" (5). Undoubtedly, her question is very difficult to answer but Dattani, satirically, links her genuine doubt with her instant punishment for raising such questions in the form of cracking of music records of Muslim singers by a stone thrown by the mob. This coincidence is enough to point out that fears for raising doubts about religious matter are misplaced. The meager punishment for questioning the significance of the idol of Krishna indicates the art of Dattani in conveying doubt in subtle manner. It also brings forth his ability to voice many issues without saying them. There is another instance in the play where again the accepted belief of getting security by having faith in God is mocked at by Ramnik in conversation with his wife Aruna:

Aruna: Who do you think is protecting this house?

Ramnik: Who do you think is creating all this trouble? (12)

The play hints at that religion instead of working as a binding force has become a disruptive hurdle in the progress of mankind. It has become a constraining

and restrictive social institution denying the basic human considerations.

Religion is more a matter of personal faith and it cannot be violated by the entry into one's premises or the mere touch by a person of other faith. The play questions the conservative and narrow view of religion based on the concept of purity and pollution. It raises doubt about the regressive aspect of religion which cuts one human being from another. Many instances are portrayed in the play where the narrow minded attitude of some people makes the communication between these two communities almost impossible. Rather it has created a negative energy to further disrupt the order and peace of the society. The friendly and helping Javed turns into a pawn in hands of communal forces because of his ill treatment by a Hindu neighbour. A simple instance of delivering him a mail by Javed has been taken as a violation of his religion. The consequent sound of bell for cleaning the effect of a Muslim on a Hindu house has become a bete noir for Javed and he cannot even tolerate its sound. Bobby narrates the change in perception after the instance:

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. (45)

No doubt, at times one's very small gesture has a deep significance on other's life and its effect on one's psyche is not easily discernible by others. Similarly, in past, Daksha (now Hardika) was very comfortable in her friendship with a Muslim girl, Zarine and she even tried to resolve the matter of her family with this Muslim family without the complete knowledge of the facts. Again, the possibility of crossing the wedge between these two edges of Indian society was not materialize and the feelings of mistrust and doubt were reinforced. Daksha believed in only what the enforced situations expected her to perceive, "I hate people with false pride. As if it is their birthright to ask for more than they deserve" (69). Towards the end of

the play, it became clear to her that it was her family who was at fault and not Zarine's family. Dattani, thus, graphically portrays the role of the surrounding ideological myths in creating a trust deficit between different religious communities and hints at the possibility of falsification of one's perception and social beliefs.

The play attempts to present a difference in one's faith in God and one's following a particular religion. The accepted social position that a religion is the only means to approaching God is contested. The play brings forth that the love for humanity is paramount and small religious rituals should be guided by this spirit. Through a very symbolic scene where Bobby takes up the idol of Krishna in his hand, the playwright conveys that reaching out to the people of other religions and mutually respecting their faith is one of the ways of humane and civilized society. Bobby emerges as a mouthpiece of the playwright:

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. (73)

Bobby takes his argument further:

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! (74)

Dattani registers a subtle revolt of Bobby against fundamentalist forces for disregarding human considerations in the name of religion. He is quite clear in his thought that real faith in God will never lead one to communal distrust and violence.

On the other hand, Javed comes out as a representative of disgruntled youth who are on wrong path because of personal belief, societal excesses and ideological brainwash. However, the illusion of working for the cause of a religion is short-lived and the ultimate consequence is prolonged remorse. Javed shares his personal

experience of attacking a Hindu chariot, "there were screams all around, I was screaming too, but no longer with joy as fear came faster and faster, confusing me! . . . I couldn't hear noises anymore. I watched men fighting, distorted faces not making a sound" (54). The inhumanity perpetrated in the name of religion does not lead one to the supposed happiness but rather leaves a permanent scar on the minds of the person involved in such barbaric acts. The working of religion is the main theme of the play and it refers to its various finer aspects. However, the play is rather deeper and questions many other aspects of the daily life of individuals and the working of the society to show a gap between the accepted positions and the reality.

The play brings out the wrangling of another very vital social institution of family which is supposed to provide conditions for individual growth. One is expected to enjoy unrestrictive joy and solace within family and it is supposed to work as a platform where one can say one's ideas without any fetters. The role of parents is to make family environment conducive for unchecked flow of emotions and thoughts. Dattani exposes the fallacy of the idealistic views about family and lays bare conscious and subconscious hypocrisies prevalent in its working. The play portrays family as a forum for authoritative control of parents over their children. Parents themselves believe in the myth that they are working in this way only for the benefit of their children. There is a sharp division between the father, Ramnik and the mother, Aruna over how to provide good upbringing to their daughter, Smita. Ramnik furiously opposes Aruna, "I don't like the way you impose things on Smita" (12). Aruna thinks that she is helping her daughter to learn her 'sanskar' for a better and pious living but in her attempt to overdo, she is alienating her from all these accepted cultural traits of her heritage. Aruna clarifies, "For so many generations we have preserved our sanskar because we believe it is truth! It is the way shown to us by our saints. We must know no other path"(57). Smita retorts and comes out with her frustration, no doubt in a saner and logical voice:

How can you expect me to be proud of something which stifles everything else

around it? It stifles me! . . . I can see so clearly how wrong you are. . . . Praying and fasting and . . . purifying myself all day. Would you have listened to me if I told you you were wrong? (57)

She does stop here and avers her love for her mother but simultaneously shows her disdain for her attitude. She says her thoughts quite clearly:

Don't! Please, Mummy, don't try so hard! You are breaking me. Ever since I was small, you have at me to go to temple, make garlands, listen to you reading from the Gita. I love you, Mummy, that's why I did that. I listened to you and obeyed you. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother. (60)

This shows the subtle ideological conflict and the generation gap among the family members. Dattani effectively highlights the cracks in the working of the family system which is supposed to be a means of strong foundation of the society. In a way, the playwright indicates the stifling conditions of the society which restricts the progress of individuals in becoming human beings with a lot more rationality and humanity.

The play also portrays another angle to analyze the working of a typical Indian family where it works almost autocratically over the life of some of its members. Hardika, the mother of Ramnik Gandhi remembers her past as Daksha. She talks about how the dictates of her mother-in-law was like a God-sent order for her family. Moreover, she does not have any identity of her own and she had always to be careful about the whims and fancies of her husband and in-laws. Again, a family which is supposed to be a repository of comfort and peace works otherwise. The husband-wife relationship in such family is scoffed at through the words of Daksha about her husband Hari:

Once he joins his father, he is going to be brainless and boring. Like Wagh, he will come home, demand his food, criticize it before eating it, answer me in grunts and groans and chew tobacco paan, sit on the big chair in the courtyard with his feet up and stare into space. (41)

Her statement is telling of the position of females as a bride in a family and also tells that there is minimum interaction between husband and wife, that too only at the desire of husband. The female is at the receiving side of the family and she has to readily accept all dictates of other family members.

This raises another issue related to women empowerment as hinted at in the play. There is so much talk about keeping woman on the same pedestal as man but again all these are appearances belie the reality. The above mentioned life situation of Daksha is telling of the position of females in Indian families. Smita, though a liberal minded girl, hesitates to tell her family members that she knows Bobby and Javed. The immediate reaction of her mother is to stop Smita from going to college because she has an acquaintance with these two boys. At other place in the play, her mother accepts that the work of a female is just to look after her house and rear her children. No doubt, there is nothing bad about it but the playwright highlights that the work of a woman in Indian society is not thought beyond these limits. All the talks about providing the level playing field to the womenfolk are subject to the restrictions imposed by the notion of the limited roles of females in the society.

At another level, the play also questions the fragile humanity of the society which can be put at a stake by anti social elements quite easily to have their petty gains. The public perception about the deep divide among different communal forces is rebuffed by showing that they are the part of the same coin. The accepted social position is only for public consumption for paltry political interests. Javed, who is portrayed as a pawn in the hands of masterminds of communal tension, lays bare the actual working of such riots while commenting on the disappearance of faces of Hindu mob that are waiting outside for Javed to come out:

Maybe they aren't being paid overtime. . . . Next time they should have a round of introductions so we don't end up killing each other. At least not unintentionally. Ha! You want me to throw me to the mob? I am a part of it. You have been protecting from people like me. I'm no different from them!

No different, do you hear? I do what they are doing – only on a different street! (50)
Thus there is a large difference in public perception and real circumstances. In another instance, the ancestors of Ramnik posed as a saviour and humane to offer a job to a distraught Muslim family but the situation is otherwise. Hardika, the old lady who is very much against the Muslim becomes repentant when she knows the reality towards the end of the play. Dattani brings forth the point that the established social stance might have many layers of deep realities which one should unearth to have a saner look of the working of the society. He successfully unravels the deep hypocrisies of individuals and the society and comes out with an indication that one should always put doubt on and analyze rationally the accepted and established positions to find out truth of different issues.

Dattani makes use of many subtle symbols with deep meaning to question many set percepts of Indian society which are harming its multicultural and assimilative nature. The over concern for one's security is highlighted by a simple portrayal of lizard on the lid of milk vessel and the consequent reaction of Aruna of thinking of throwing the milk (12). The playwright in a way referring to the psyche of considering any such intrusion as repugnant and puts doubt on Indian virtue of tolerance. In another such metaphoric reference, a communication between the persons of different community becomes almost a nullity the moment surname comes into the open. Tanseem's father does not even bother to hear the voice when he knows that the person to whom he is talking is 'Gandhi', a Hindu (9). Again, the playwright doubts all the talk about peaceful coexistence and brotherhood when even the communication channels are bound to be subject to the constraints of religious affiliations. In another reference 'pride' which might otherwise a positive trait is shown as responsible for communal tension and ill will. Hardika's fear is clear, "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" (11)! The chorus also refers to the pride of other side as instrumental in fanning the communal frenzy.

The play also questions the established notion of progress, security and peace and hints at its multilayered reality getting a meaning based on one's context and thinking. Javed statically comments upon Ramnik's gesture of being a civilized host and on his comfortable position because of his being a member of majority group. He points out, "You can play the civilized host. Because you know you have peace hidden inside your armpit" (35). Again he puts direct charge on Ramnik, "You don't hate me for what I do or who I am. You hate me because I showed you that you are not liberal as you think you are" (43). Dattani hints at many deep recesses of human relationships and individual behaviour which do not come in open because of stereotypical thinking and set behaviour patterns. Smita questions her mother's ideas of 'progress' and 'sanskar' and makes her clear that she is as prejudiced in her thinking as she feels others are. She is not able to understand how two Muslim lads can make one so insecure (56-58). Smita finds an opportunity in the entry of these two Muslim boys to bring to light the hidden feelings of resentment and puts doubt on accepted familial and other activities. She brings forth the fact, "I am so glad these two dropped in. We would never have spoken about what makes us so different from each other. We would have gone on living our lives with our petty similarities" (58).

The play, *Final Solutions* is a very rich play and it raises sincere doubts about the set norms and beliefs of the Indian society. Dattani makes use of a situation of communal tension to highlight a wide gap between the perception and the reality. Various social perceptions and individual beliefs are questioned and challenged on the anvil of rationality and the outer layers of acceptability are dismantled step by step by logically joining the issues. Gatt is right in analyzing the society-human interface, "this gulf existing between what an individual actually is and what he presents himself before the outer world punctures the very dignified survival of man, and thus invites innumerable problems for him" (125). No direct solution seems to come out of the play's portrayal of communal divide and other social situations but Dattani hints at the way to approach the solutions of the seemingly invincible problems of

the society and the human behaviour. The play emerges as a metaphor of doubt about the accepted social and individual situations and the questioning of different issues not only provides an insight into the real tangle of an issues but also different way outs to be followed according to the context of the problem. Dattani through the play suggests that rationality and human concerns are the goalposts which are to be traversed to have a peaceful and progressive society.

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