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## Religious Otherness in Dattani's *Final Solutions*

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### Abstract:

This paper aims at exploring the idea that Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* reflects the postcolonial socio-political scenario which has created spaces to identify the invisible identities of the marginalized religious people of society. Dattani wants to articulate the voice of those whose identities remain unacknowledged under the hegemonic and authoritative voice of the elitists, showing superiority in the name of religion. With the persistent annals of subordination, the marginalized groups were devoid of mental strength of self-affirmation. They were forced to lead the life of subalterns. There have been organized collective efforts to make the representation of the conditions of oppressions and to stir the consciousness about their suppressed self so that they might be inspired to seek spaces in the mainstream of life. In this process, the emphasis is not on political liberation only but also on the emancipation from the psychological impact of oppression. It anticipates the shift of margins and proclaims the emergence of new man who can assert himself against irrational domination of elitists' ideologies. Thus, the play *Final Solutions* establishes that as long as communities are divided in their memory and representation of the events of 1947, they will never be able to forgive each other.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, oppression, hybridity, transformation, marginalization.

Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* explores how colonial modes of thought cultural domination, religious othering, social manipulation by the postcolonial rulers still persist in a society that, even as it prides in its modernity, is still deeply influenced by colonial ways of thinking. In this play, Dattani fuses the past with the present in the central concern of communalism. Partition, in the context of the sub-continent, has a duality in that while it was an

event in history, yet, it causes a psychological divide among cultures and communities and it continues to divide people.

The play *Final Solutions* gives a postcolonial scenario. The division maintained between two religious groups is like that between the colonizer and the colonized. The main features of postcolonialism like hybridity, resistance, transformation, identity crisis and self-realization are found in the play. Characterisation is hybridized as some characters are rigidly orthodox and some are extremely liberal and some are both orthodox and liberal. Most of the characters are able to resist against the injustice.

Like a typical postcolonial writer Dattani wants to reclaim the harmonious 'golden' past in which both Hindus and Muslims lived together in peace and the harmony is also hinted at in the case of friendship between Daksha and Zarine:

Zarine and I talked and laughed for atleast ten minutes before I mentioned the gramophone. I told her my in-laws didn't allow me to play our gramophone. She laughed again and took me upstairs. She asked me what I could like to listen to. Noor Jehan, of course! She seemed pleased with my choice. She wound up the machine and played my favourite song! We both listened and sang along with Noor Jehan. Three voices singing together in perfect unison. (203)

The destruction of the harmony between Hindus and Muslims has been reflected in the destruction of friendship between Daksha and Zarine. In view of Daksha the most traumatic experience she endured during the partition was the destruction of her record collection:

A stone hit our gramophone table, breaking it. Krishna chose to destroy what I loved most. My entire collection of records broken. Lying about like pieces of glass. Shamshad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya. The songs of love that I had learnt to sing with. Those beautiful voices. Cracked ... (167)

This symbolic 'cracking' of her records not only represents the cracking of Daksha's world, but the literal cracking of India during partition. Hardika not only adored these Muslim singers but even aspired to be like them in the future. This substantiates that sense of a syncretic culture where so many diverse strands could merge together on the basis of the shared universal human emotion of love which was also the subject of their songs. However, as the records are cracked by the stones, we also witness the rupture of our syncretic culture which is also responsible for the ongoing politics of estrangement, hatred and conflict that feeds itself through

the resurrection of the painful memories of the past to harden communal hatred within individuals. Hardika herself has become prejudiced by those horrible events that she not only despises the young boys but also she asks Ramnik to shut the door against them so that they may be slaughtered: “How could he let those people into my house? They killed his grand-father.” (179)

Had Hardika known the context of Zarine’s anger, her hateful prejudice towards Muslims could have been prevented. Hari and ‘waghs’ were the ones who had burned Zarine’s father’s shop because they wanted a shop of their own and because they had heard that Zarine’s father was thinking of starting a mill like their own. When Daksha visited Zarine’s home, she was unaware of this fact but Zarine wasn’t, hence Zarine’s cruel treatment of Daksha. Hari had beaten Daksha after going to Zarine’s home, not because she had ‘eaten’ with Muslims, but because he was afraid that she would find out about his actions. Sadly, by the time Hardika learns the truth, it is too late for her to make amends with Zarine. However, Dattani offers the audience a ray of hope with Hardika’s final line: “Do you think... do you think those boys will ever come back?” (226), suggesting that Hardika wishes to apologise for the way she treated Bobby and Javed, her first step towards tolerance. It is here the old legend of Hardika has been reinterpreted in the recent views of democracy and equality. Dattani seems to suggest that economical competition or personal vengeance may be twisted as communal prejudice but whatever may be the reason, human power to love one another is far greater than all kinds of bias instilled in the name of religion, caste, and race.

Her unfeeling, seemingly inhuman prejudice is born out of that binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ generated by divisive fundamentalist discourses and the opposition to the entry of those two boys in the house, also represents symbolically the identification of the Indian Muslims as aliens who belong outside the realm of the ‘real national life’, specifically Pakistan. It is with this sense of alienation, Hardika says “I cannot forget, I just cannot forget” (223). Such estrangement will lead to entrenched ruptures. Hence everyone must realize forgetting the past is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation. In fact, as Dattani shows lack of forgetting transforms the nation into a place of conflicts among various groups which go on baying for the blood of one another.

This is true in the case of India where one can witness a steady rise of the discourse of majoritarian communalism which inevitably developed a sense of fear, humiliation and consequent resentment in the Muslim communities that became all the more acute in the wake of

the violent communal politics that gripped India since the 1980s, culminating in such barbaric deeds as the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the consequent riots, as well as the genocide of 2002 in Gujarat. It is this mentality which is voiced by the Muslim Chorus in *Final Solutions*:

Chorus 1, 2: "They hunt us down!  
They're afraid of us!  
They beat us up!  
We are few,  
But we are strong!  
They beat us up!  
They're afraid of us!  
They hunt us down  
They want to throw us out!(179)

In a postcolonial scenario, the powerless, the marginalized and the subjugated assert themselves and move towards the centre. It is this spirit which makes one religious group resist the other which caused some afflictions earlier. Suppression of religious identities because of fundamentalist activities breeds an opposed fundamentalism that can only drag us into an endless cycle of vitiating violence. This is precisely what happens in Javed who becomes part of a riot-rousing group with its own fundamentalist agenda as a result of that ambience of unbelongingness which a Muslim often has to face and which is exemplified in the text through the episode involving the delivery of a letter. In the final act of *Final Solutions* Bobby tells Ramnik that Javed and he have been friends since childhood. He describes Javed as a child saying, "He loved playing hero with the neighbourhood boys. And he was. A minor incident changed all that." (200) One day, Javed and Bobby were playing cricket with a group of friends. The mailman who was running behind schedule asked Javed to deliver a letter to a Hindu man. When Javed opened the gate to the man's home, the man roughly ordered Javed to leave the letter on the wall. The man then came out of his home and proceeded to wipe everything that Javed had touched with his hands: the letter, the wall and even the gate, 'the mailman noticed this and laughed it off saying: "Take no notice. That man is slightly cracked" (200). However, as Bobby describes it, Javed was not able to ignore this because of the sound he then heard coming from the Hindu man's home:

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 ever 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. (200-01)

The Hindu man increased his poojas to purify the items of his house that Javed 'polluted' with his Muslim touch. In this moment, the sound of the prayer bell reminded Javed that he was different from the Hindu man. Javed realized that he belonged to the minority. A sound that he used to take for granted now constantly reminds him that he is a Muslim, a separate entity from the Hindu majority population. Bobby goes on to say that the day after this incident (which Dattani based on a story he had heard during his research), Javed dropped pieces of meat and bones into the Hindu man's yard. The Hindu man was furious and crying. Bobby states: "I didn't speak to Javed for many days after that, I was frightened of him. For months, wherever we played cricket and heard the bell, we remembered this incident and we avoided looking at Javed. And for Javed he was, in his own eyes, no longer the neighbourhood hero" (201).

Such an incident offers just one glimpse of the kind of prejudice an Indian Muslim has to confront at times which is re-emphasised by Aruna's own reluctance to offer the boys water or milk and the way in which she separates the glasses touched by them as she considers their touch to be as contaminating as the touch of a lizard. It is these actions and gestures that doubly alienate members of minority communities who find respite through the seductive rhetoric of an opposed fundamentalism which virtually drags them into an amoral trance that renders possible the committing of immoral acts, including those terrorist strikes which continue to lacerate our times.

It is the failure of the Hindus to acknowledge non-Hindus as Indians which causes a vicious circle of murderous mood. The minority communities have to exist as completely subservient, subjugated people, almost as the Jews were in Hitler's Germany. This has created a sense of insecurity in the mind of religious minorities, which has been further intensified by such occurrences as the demolition of Babri Masjid or the burning of missionary Graham Staines. Identity crisis is an important phenomenon in the postcolonial era. It is clear that Javed is trying

to preserve a distinctive identity for Muslims and that he does feel this identity to be a risk in the contemporary era. In the first act of the play when Bobby and Javed are confronted by the Hindu Mob/ Chorus, a member of the Mob/ Chorus finds a handkerchief Bobby uses to cover his head during prayer. At the same time the second member of the Mob/ Chorus finds Javed's prayer cap (which unlike the handkerchief is a clear marker of Muslim religious identity). The stage directions read: "Chorus takes the cap and covers Javed's face with it. Javed deliberately wears it on his head with dignity, whereas Bobby has removed his handkerchief" (178). Unlike Bobby who tries to forget his identity, Javed has great pride in his identity as a Muslim man. Javed even admits to having been ready to engage in *Jihad* as he rode the bus to Amargaon to start riots at *Rath Yatra*. He describes it saying: "The time had come', somebody would say. 'This is jehad the holy war! It is written!' 'yes' I would say. 'I am ready. I am prepared! (Pause. Moves away.) On the bus there were dozens of them. And I told them I was prepared. Everyone approved. We were one united. I felt really proud" (205-06).

Even with this immense pride in his identity as a Muslim and despite being taken up by the fervor and passion of a cause, Javed is not a fundamentalist in the play as he is not proud of his identity as a hired hoodlum. At the end of the second act, upon hearing that Javed is looking for a job, Ramnik offers Javed one in his sari shop. Smita angrily interrupts her father and tells him not to give Javed a job. Javed quickly guesses that his sister Tasneem must have told Smita about his profession. He begs her not to talk about his job in Ramnik's presence but Smita ignores him and states that Javed's job is the reason why his father threw him out of his house. Smita then tells her father, "They hire him! They hire such people! ... They bring him and many more to the city to create riots. To ... throw the first stone!" (208) Then the stage directions state, "He starts sobbing and sits down" (229). He even tries to physically hurt himself by pounding his forehead with his fist. He seems to believe in the fact that it is neither wrong to wear cap or anything else to keep one's identity nor to take pride in one's identity but this identity must not be used to destroy the people of other community or their identity.

Transformation, an important element of postcolonialism can be seen in Javed. At the end of the play, the audience knows that Javed has changed. He will not return to his profession as a hired rioter. He may not take a job in Ramnik's shop, but he will not return to the gang. Through the character of Javed, Dattani shows his audience that religious communalism is based on the demons of the past. When one comes to terms with his or her past, one has the potential to

change and to move on with life. In the final scene of the play, Javed stiffens upon hearing Aruna ring a bell while performing her daily morning pooja to Krishna. However, unlike the incident with the poojari, Javed is able to control his emotions and impulses when he hears the bell. Javed is noted not only for his transformation and resistance, but also for his hybrid nature of asserting his religious identity in some places and hiding his identity for the sake of a peaceful society.

Dattani gives a ray of hope in the penultimate scene. As Aruna prepares for her morning prayers, Smita takes Javed and Bobby out to help fill the water for the ceremony, despite the religious beliefs that would bar non-Hindus from touching any object or material required for a prayer ceremony. As the young people step outside the constraint of home and its prejudices they revert to a playful innocence and splash each other with water. After this baptism in a sense, they return to home and hear the sound of the prayer bell which reminds Javed of the insult made by the orthodox Hindu. Bobby walks into the prayer room and picks up the idol of Lord Krishna in his hands. This may be 'profane' to the eyes of religious Hindus but Bobby states that Krishna is not defiled by his touch - he is welcoming: he accepts and is not humiliated. It is through the friendship and bonding of Javed, Smita and Bobby that the hope is realized on stage which also indicates Dattani's hope that it is perhaps through the youth that India can dream of a future of tolerance and forgiveness, unfettered by the shadow lines that keep the people apart. This is emphatically articulated by Bobby who deliberately places the idol of Krishna on his palm, disregarding Aruna's prejudices and states:

He doesn't cringe from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me. And he welcomes it! You can bathe him day and night. You can splash holy water 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! (224-25)

It is this humanistic faith which unites Bobby, Javed and Smita. Together they represent that sense of horizontal comradeship, which is supposed to be the foundation of any nation and which can counter those processes of postcolonial subalternisation generated by vertical hierarchies of power, which give rise to various divisive forces. Through the three young characters the audience is taken to those in-between spaces which in view of Homi Bhabha, will



provide singular or communal identity away from the binaries of communal conflict. Through his young characters Dattani perhaps seeks to foreground the possibility of a new India, not directly scarred by the trauma of partition and its aftermaths, which is willing to move beyond engraved barriers in search of better times. And the location of the young characters, as the harbingers of such change also perhaps indicates the responsibility that the youth must shoulder to move beyond the morass of communal hatred. However, as Derrida has shown in his *Specters of Marx*, "all textual strategies of thematic cohesiveness are disrupted by gaps, silences or spectral figures, banished to the peripheries, which haunt our apparently unified structures." (46) The figure of the dead poojari exercises a similarly "hauntological" (63) presence in the play. Where does his corpse lie in this ethic of tolerance and forgiveness? How will his family members respond to either Javed or that acquaintance of his who committed the murder? Will they be able to forgive or remain entrapped in the same vicious cycle of sterile hatred? This particular textual ghost thus lays bare a series of unquiet debates about public posture and private response, between forgetfulness, and forgiveness, between love and justice.

In the final scene Hardika, after learning from her son how her family members had burned Zarine's father's shop, is able to ask her son:

Hardika: Do you think ... do you think those boys will ever come back?

Ramnik: If you call them, they will come. But then again – if it's too late they may not (226).

Ramnik's reply is characterized by a cautious balance that enunciates at once both the possibility of an inclusive future based on forgiveness, tolerance and compassion as well as the difficulties that lie on the way.

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* argues that the first step for the colonized people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power had devalued the nation's past, had undermined its pre-colonial past as a precivilised limbo or even as a historical void. The postcolonial ideology of Fanon can be grounded on two perspectives of the politics of culture. The first perspective is to reclaim one's own past and the second is to dismantle the colonialist ideology by which that past was devalued. Both these perspectives can be found in Dattani's *Final solutions*. Dismantling the colonialist ideology of separation and 'divide and rule' Dattani wants to get back the glorious tradition with unity among all the religious groups.

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