



Secularism, majoritarianism and identity constructions in dattani's *Final solutions*

Basudeb Chakrabarti

Associate Professor, Department of English, Jangipur College, Jangipur, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's dramaturgy, as he himself has stated, situates characters in the "fringe-space[s]" of the society that either compel them to endure the traditional modes of existence or make them grope for alternate spaces where they can truly be.¹ Such a preoccupation automatically entails a foregrounding of the politics of marginalization within the periphery of communal differences and gender ideologies. The discourse of religious majoritarianism that imbues *Final Solutions* (1993) is accordingly identified as a regressive trope that not only cleaves the nation-state chiefly into majority Hindus and minority Muslims but also generates an "authoritarian, militaristic and overcentralized" polity that constructs Indianness through a predominantly Hindu identity thereby otherizing the Muslim minority.² The present article analyzes *Final Solutions* against the backdrop of such majoritarian politics of repression and in the process, attempts to decipher the indices of identity construction that can counteract religious bigotry.

Keywords: majoritarianism, secularism, identity

1. Introduction

Central to Mahesh Dattani's theatre is his bid to explore and expose the "discourses of hegemony and power inequalities" – ranging from patriarchy to compulsory heterosexuality – that aim to smoothen and pacify all burgeoning heterogeneities into contentment.³ In *Final Solutions* (1993) Dattani's focus is on the repressive politics of sectarianism which not only couches the religious-cultural identities of the majority Hindus and the minority Muslims in a mutually exclusive order of thought, but also informs religious majoritarianism with an approval to otherize the minority Muslims. The present article attempts to analyze Dattani's *Final Solutions* to explore how he negotiates the hermeneutics of identity construction against the backdrop of a surging majoritarianism which Amartya Sen identifies as a "barbed attack" on the nation's secularism "from activists engaged in the Hindutva movement," particularly since the mid-1980s.⁴

2. Materials and Methods

The article primarily uses Mahesh Dattani's play, *Final Solutions*, as the cite of critical inquiry and in doing so draws upon a plethora of tropes that include performance studies, political science and sociology.

The methodology is interpretative and deductive based both upon the primary text of Dattani and a gamut of secondary references that reinforce the author's perspective.

3. Discussion and Analysis

In April 1991, on the wake of the general election for the national Parliament and some state assemblies, Sadhavi Rithambhara, the "leading firebrand in the Hindu cause," delivered a speech at Hyderabad which has been acknowledged as exemplifying the politics of "constructed revival of Hindu identity" at the expense of an explicit abhorrence of the Muslim culture.⁵ She stated:

If two kilos of sugar are dissolved in a quintal of milk, the milk becomes sweet! But what can be done if our Muslim brother is not behaving like sugar in the milk? Is it our fault if he seems bent upon being a lemon in the milk? He wants the milk to curdle ... I say to him. 'Come to your senses. The value of milk increases after it becomes sour. It becomes cheese. But the world knows the fate of the lemon. It is cut, squeezed dry and then thrown on the garbage heap. Now you have to decide whether you will act like sugar or like a lemon in the milk.

The reference to the 'sugar' dissolved in 'milk' to designate the minority Muslim population is proposed to be an amicable offer of assimilation into the national culture of the Hindu majority but, in actuality, it is a policy of erasure, for to ask the Muslims to recognize themselves in the Hindu nationalist history of India, to expect them to feel their culture confirmed in Hindu symbols, rituals and celebrations is asking them to renounce their cultural identity and to erase their collective memory so that they become indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbours. (Kakar, 2007)

The threat of extinction in the name of assimilation rings clear in Dattani's *Final Solutions* as a member from the Muslim Chorus speaks out:

CHORUS 1: Should we be swallowed up? Till they cannot recognize us? Should we melt into anonymity so they cannot hound us? Lose ourselves in a shapeless mass? Should we? Can we?

The Chorus finishes praying and rises to a slow drumbeat.

CHORUS 1: A drop of oil cannot merge with an ocean of milk. One reality cannot accept another reality. 6

The refusal of the minority Muslims to lose themselves in the 'milk' of Hindu culture results not just in otherization of the Muslims, but also makes them susceptible to persecution as is reflected in the profound anxiety of Dattani's Muslim Chorus 1 – "Does our future lie in their hands? Is there anyone more

unsure more insecure than us? Oh what a curse it is to be less in number!” 6 In the absence of volition of the minority Muslims to participate in the majority culture and life, they are easily branded as dissidents for the “increasingly strident monoculturalism of Hindutva” advocates “one nation, one language, one religion, even as it flaunts the intrinsic plurality of Hinduism”. 7 A majoritarian ideology such as this not only keeps alive the Hindu/Muslim dyad but also legitimizes the denigration of the Muslims by making them coterminous with anti-nationals – a stigmatization that is garnered from a reductive way of reading Indian history:

[T]he dominance of Hindu identity in ‘Indianness’ does not turn on the logic of numbers [alone], but is ‘forced on the Hindus’, it is argued, by ‘failure’ of the Muslims to see themselves as Indians first. This form of argument draws heavily on what is seen as the historical failure of the Muslim rulers in India to identify themselves with others in the country, always seeing Muslims as a separate and preferred group. It is also claimed that Muslim kings systematically destroyed Hindu temples and religious sites whenever they had the chance to do so. Jinnah’s ‘two-nation’ theory, formulated before independence (and historically important in the partition of India), is seen as a continuation of the evident Muslim refusal to identify with other Indians. It is argued that, while the partition of India has provided a ‘homeland’ for the Muslims of the subcontinent, the Muslims left in India are unintegrated and are basically not ‘loyal’ to India. 4

Such is the “strategic doublespeak” at work here – in historicizing Muslim disloyalty – that “the anti-secularism of Hindutva” can easily masquerade as “an authentic ‘Indian’ secularism” to sanction legitimacy for marking the Muslims as “traitors” to the sacrosanct integrity of the nation-state. 7

With Ramnik’s authoritative assertion that peace is “hidden in the armpits of the majority,” Dattani does not usher us merely into the dynamics of identity politics based on the ideology of Hindu nationalism. 6 He draws us further into the Hindutva agenda of heaping the onus of de-stabilizing peace in the nation-state onto the minority Muslims who, in refusing to be homogenized into the monolith of the dominant Hindu culture, automatically become the exclusive reservoirs of all the disruptive forces that counteract Hindu identity. The urgency to swamp the Muslims into anonymity therefore becomes a logical conclusion in the discourse of erasure as is distinct in Rithambhara’s words:

Hindus if you do not awaken, cows will be slaughtered everywhere. In the retreats of our sages you will hear the chants of ‘Allah is Great’. You will be responsible for these catastrophes for history will say Hindus were cowards. Accept the challenge, change the history of our era. 5

Dattani’s exegeses of the religious-cultural standings of the Hindu-Muslim communities accordingly identify an “authoritarian, militaristic and overcentralized” 2 polity that constructs Indianness through a predominantly Hindu identity. Such a discursive formation provides religious majoritarianism with validations for replacing the constitutional “heterodoxy of beings” by an unstratified “orthodoxy of being” devised exclusively in terms of Muslim repression. 5

The ambits of domesticity that inform *Where There’s a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990) and *Bravely*

Fought the Queen (1991) are decidedly rarefied in *Final Solutions* as Dattani explores the strategies of inclusion and exclusion against the ideal of socio-cultural unity that the nation-state holds inviolable through its constitutionally validated ideology of secularism. He is aware that even if secularity advocates cohesion through a deprioritization of religious identities, for the average Indian the most important site for the “establishment of a distinctive identity within a territorial location” has always evolved from religious-cultural denominations. 8 With its tenable roots firmly implanted in the Partition of the nation in 1947, religious consciousness acts not only as a dominant site in identity construction thereby jeopardizing the ideological basis of Indian secularism, but also becomes the basis of sectarianism by becoming a means of divisional politics that cleaves the nation primarily between majority Hindus and minority Muslims. Such a polarization is severely detrimental to peace and harmony as is evident in the several instances of communal riots that beset the nation’s history. The contention is corroborated in Dattani’s own admission that *Final Solutions* stems from the immediate contexts of “Tazia riots in Ahmedabad in the 1980s” 9 though the play moves beyond the ‘Tazia riots’ to the times “when Ram Janmabhoomi was an issue in Parliament” 10 urging Alyque Padamsee to commission him to write a play on the “rise of religious fundamentalism” and the consequences of “Hindu-Muslim divide”. 9

What Dattani wishes to capture by referring to the volatile political and religious-cultural scenario of the 1980s and thereafter is the strategic effacement of what Madan phrases as “ethical secularism” in the auspices of Hindu nationalism. 11 In fact when Dattani was to write *Final Solutions*, the Hindutva movement had secured significant momentum commencing with the demands for “a uniform civil law code” 12 in connection with Shah Bano Case in 1985 and subsequently through “the huge Ekatmata Yajna rallies,” “*rathayatras* to honour Bharatmata and Ganga,” and “Ramrath touring India”. 2 The movement was able to absorb sufficient public and political spheres within its fold to actualize the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. With the erosion of the secular ideology and pluralism, Hindu majoritarianism so completely blurred the “boundaries between communally-constructed history, epic and present day politics” that the precincts of the Hindu community were fast becoming coterminous with that of Indian nationalism. 2 As a natural corollary to the prevalent majoritarianism, the Hindu identity was projected as “righteous and pure” and in order to “achieve this self-definition” a simultaneous contrast with what a Hindu is decidedly not was easily evinced in the Muslim who could therefore be cast “outside the psychogeographical space” inhabited by the Hindu majority. 5 Dattani being conscious about such changing state of affairs in all walks of life, chooses not only to make the ramifications of one’s religious identity the focal centre in *Final Solutions* but also decides to delve deeper to explore the role that religious bigotry plays in the processes of identity construction. Individuality in *Final Solutions* is therefore conceived in terms of the ability to pull oneself beyond the prejudices inherent in religious fundamentalism and thereby to see oneself as sharing a single national identity despite religious-cultural differences. The

play thus seeks final solutions to the frenzied plea uttered by Alyque Padamsee in “A Note on the Play:” “Can we shake off our prejudices or are they in our psyche like our genes? Will we never be free or ever-locked in combat ... Hindus against Muslims?”. 13

The basic premise of *Final Solutions* has been summed up by Dattani himself: “[i]t’s about two Muslim boys running away from a mob and seeking shelter in a Hindu household”. 10 And as the curfew ridden Amargaon – the fall-out of communal violence over a rath yatra – forces Bobby and Javed rush into the household of the Gandhis to save their lives from the Hindu fundamentalists chasing to kill them, Dattani conflates the family to reflect the nation by drawing upon the Hindu majority/Muslim minority dyad – “the home/family/society/nation are firmly Hindu, the two young men, literally and metaphorically the outsiders, the transgressors”. 14 Religious consciousness looms large with the unfolding action as the characters offer rationales to validate their positions:

Daksha [now the grandmother] hates Muslims because her father was killed in a communal riot, and because her overtures of friendship to Zarine, a young Muslim girl, were rejected after other communal riots that razed Zarine’s father’s shop, and which incidentally, was bought by Daksha’s father-in-law. Javed, the young Muslim fundamentalist and member of a ‘gang’ has long nursed a resentment against the world because of the ‘otherness’ and the demonisation of his community and religious identity by the dominant community. Ramnik Gandhi, Daksha/Hardika’s son is trying to atone for the sins committed by his father and grandfather, and therefore is a conscious ‘secularist’. His wife Aruna is an ordinary devout Hindu woman/wife/mother/daughter-in-law, implacably sure of her place in the home, in society, secure in the unquestioning faith and sense of right and wrong. There are also two other characters – Bobby [Babban] and Smita [Ramnik and Aruna’s daughter] who are oppressed by their own senses of history, and seem desperate to escape from its clutches, to leave behind the baggage of social, religious and communal identities that seem to dog them in all their relationships and actions. 14

Interestingly, the only characters who do not adhere to any specific religion exclusively are the Chorus. They are in black undifferentiated costumes and are faceless. There are five Hindu masks and five Muslim masks in the play and the Chorus wear the masks alternately to become Hindu or Muslim depending upon the masks they don. As Hindu majority they speak thus:

CHORUS 1: The procession has passed through these lanes.

Every year,

For forty years!

CHORUS 2, 3: How dare they?

CHORUS 1, 2, 3: For forty years our chariot has moved through their mohallas.

CHORUS 4, 5: Why did they?

Why did they today?

CHORUS 1: How dare they?

CHORUS 2, 3: They broke our rath.

They broke our chariot and felled our Gods!

CHORUS 1, 2, 3: This is our land!

How dare they? 6.

And as Muslim minority they speak in much the same tone:

CHORUS 1: Their chariot fell in our street!

CHORUS 2: Their God now prostrates before us!

CHORUS 3: So they blame it on us?

CHORUS 1: Was the chariot built by us?

CHORUS 2, 3: Blame the builder of those fancy thrones.

CHORUS 4: A manufacturing defect!

CHORUS 5: Doesn’t their God have a warranty? 6

Despite the tonal similarities, however, the choric utterances become markers of the oppositional standings that they adopt with the changing of masks. For instance, the majoritarian emphasis is distinct in the Hindu Chorus’s ‘[t]his is our land’ whereby any act of transgressing the majority culture becomes an index of being anti-national as well validating the strategy of “other-bashing”. 8 Interestingly, in contradistinction to the Hindu Chorus’s ‘our land’ Dattani posits ‘our street’ of the Muslim Chorus demarcating the power denominations at work in spatial terms as well – the vastness of the ‘land’, the nation of Hindu nationalism, constricting the territoriality of the Muslim ‘street’ significantly. That the onus of disharmony between the two communities is largely consequent upon Hindu sectarianism is owned up by Ramnik, who feels like “a criminal” even in his own home, facing Bobby’s account of how everyday living incorporates the socio-cultural tropes that persistently ostracize the Muslim minority.⁶ Further, by dramatizing the transformation of Daksha’s “vocal and terpsichorean mimesis of Noor Jehan” cutting across the Hindu-Muslim divide, into Hardika’s cloistered living steeped in Muslim hate, Dattani’s dramaturgy supplements the otherwise faceless chorus with the specific face of Hardika. 15 Hardika imbibes the spin-off of sectarian politics and helps the dramatist to historicize the subterfuges of majority religious consciousness that, for instance, overwhelms Ramnik’s sense of guilt and shame in the closing sections of the play:

RAMNIK: For me there’s no getting off. No escape.

HARDIKA: 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 it burnt in the name of communal hatred. Because we wanted a shop. 6

The immediate veracity of the hostility between the Hindus and the Muslims in Amargaon may have stemmed from the political fallout of the disrupted rath yatra and the murder of a temple priest, but at the heart of the play “lies the parable of the boy-hero who was forced into a choice” that not only “took away from him the myth of the hero” but also led him into the raw vehemence of the radical version of his faith. 16 “A minor incident changed” Javed, reminisces Bobby as he elaborates:

There was the cricket match. Not much of a match. We were playing cricket on our street with the younger boys. The postman delivered our neighbour’s mail. He dropped one of the letters. He was in a hurry and asked Javed to hand the letter over to the owner. Javed took the letter ... and opened the gate. Immediately a voice boomed, ‘What do you want?’ I can still remember Javed holding out the letter and mumbling something, his usual firmness vanishing in a second. ‘Leave it on the wall,’ the voice ordered. Javed backed away, really frightened. We all watched as the man came out with a cloth

in his hand. He wiped the letter before picking it up, he then wiped the spot on the wall the letter was lying on and he wiped the gate! ... We all heard the prayer bell, ringing continuously. Not loud. But distinct. The neighbour had been praying for quite a while, but none of us 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. (*Pause. Quietly, in a matter-of-fact manner.*) The next day, the neighbour came out screaming on the streets. Yelling at our windows. We peeped out. He was furious, tears running down his face. We couldn't understand a word he was saying. I found out later. Someone had dropped pieces of meat and bones into his backyard ... And for Javed, he was – in his own eyes – no longer the neighbourhood hero. 6

If for Javed the need for an identity urges him to retaliate against the politics of exclusion as he defiles the Hindu neighbour's backyard by throwing pieces of meat catapulting him subsequently to become "a jihad-mercenary, hired to start riots," for Bobby it becomes analogous to self-effacement. 16 Bobby admits that he "was ashamed" of being himself "[l]ike being apologetic. For being who I was. And pretending that I was not a part of my community. For thinking that I could become superior by not belonging ... I chose to be called Bobby". 6 The repugnance of the unnamed 'neighbour' in Bobby's recount thus becomes symptomatic of the swamping politics of otherization perpetrated on the minority Muslims indexing virtually an *en masse* allegiance to a bigoted sense of Hindu culture and religion. And to drive the motif of majoritarian Hindu orthodoxy unmistakably home, Hardika disallows herself to accept the crux of her own realization – "[o]ne has to move with the times" 6 – and remains glued to the perception of the Muslims as the eternal persecutor who "don't want equality". 6 Hence she refuses to negotiate herself to the scars created in her mind forty years back:

It was those two boys running away who frightened me. Those two were begging for their lives. Tomorrow they will hate us for it. They will hate us for protecting them. Asking for help makes them feel they were lower than us. I know! 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! 6

Amidst such presentment of deep distrust and hatred of one community towards the other, Dattani takes us back to the black days of 1948 when there was a similar air of communal hatred as Daksha sits, beginning the process of the recorded lived history: "Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages". 6 The diary establishes the history of communal division evident in her reminiscences of the Independence Day of 1947:

My father had fought for that hour. And he was happy when it came. He said he was happy we were rid of the Britishers. He also said something I did not understand then. He said that before leaving, they had let loose the dogs. I hated to think that he was talking about my friends' fathers ... But that night in Hussainabad in our ancestral house – when I heard them outside – I knew that they were thinking the same of us. 6 The hostile binary of 'us'/'them' – Hindus and Muslims –

tenably initiated during Partition, continues to cast its ominous shadow forty years later as Hardika, standing in a riot rift Amargaon, presents her version of the situation in exactly the same words that Daksha had used earlier: "The dogs have been let loose". 6

Significantly, the semantic reliance upon the collective – 'us' or 'them' – is in itself a marker of identity politics that becomes "consciously salient" only when the religious-cultural self perceives "threat to its integrity". 5 Hence Hardika's shift from the individuality of the self to the collective 'us' can be read as emerging from her need to locate herself within the boundaries of "a grandiose Hindu group" without which she can neither feel righteous and maintain her self-esteem nor project the "bad, the dirty, and the impure to another group, the Muslim," with which her own community is locked in combat. 5

Forty years ago, stones had come crashing down on Daksha's records, shattering her entire collection of Shamshad Begum, Noor Jehan, Suraiya – "Those beautiful voices. Cracked".6 And forty years hence, her son Ramnik attempts to right a few wrongs, by taking in Babban and Javed and protecting them against the fury of the Hindu mob. Dattani's reservation about such fanaticism which prompts the mob to displace its anxieties and fears on the other – a phenomenon that Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri reads in terms of "phobogenesis" 8 – is also simultaneously presented through Javed's critique of the riotous stance: "The first screams are of pleasure. Of sensing an unusual freedom. And then it becomes nightmarish as your world is way below and you are moving away from it...and suddenly you come crushing down, down, and you want to get off. But you can't". 6 Evident in Javed's words is a sense of being trapped, and, to Dattani, the snare is predominantly that of one's "sanskar" or "inheritance" or "religion" 6 the rigidity of which easily brands Daksha as a dissident for "her transgressions are multiple". 15 In bonding with Zariné and in cherishing Noor Jehan "as the embodiment of an aspired culture" she "dances and spins out of the boundaries that discipline and control her communal, gender and sexual identity". 15 She is therefore censured, beaten and even locked-up by her in-laws as her indignation recoils onto her own self, relegating her eventually into the imaginary of the Hindu femalehood: "[Hari] beckoned me to lie beside him on the bed. And I did. And my cheeks went red again. Not with shame but with anger at myself".6

4. Results

The insurmountable edifice of the majoritarian 'sanskar' is, however, progressively interrogated in Smita's polemics that stun her mother, Aruna. In the Gandhi family, Smita has otherwise been an ideal daughter – docile and obedient, "like a rat in a hole" to quote her own words. 6 Yet the fortitude necessary to individuate by breaking free from the burden of 'inheritance' has all along been germane to her. For despite being brought up in a family in which her great-grandfather was a riot victim, a family where "fanaticism of the Hindus" 17 is blatantly conspicuous in Hardika's overt Muslim hatred and Aruna's stifling piousness, Smita is neither circumspect about befriending Tasneem nor unnecessarily restrictive about her fondness for Bobby which, however, didn't go beyond an evening's "conversation that got a little personal". 6 At a

critical juncture in the play, when Aruna presents her insipid version of communal harmony to Javed and Bobby, foregrounding the edicts of Hindu magnanimity and tolerance – “[w]e have nothing against you. It is only that, we have our ways and customs and ... Why, we have friends who are ... All religion is one,” 6 – Smita decides to counteract the smugness of Hindu majoritarianism even at the cost of publicly invalidating the rigid and restrictive practices of her mother. Replacing the muteness of Daksha’s diary with her vociferous diatribe, Smita swamps the action of *Final Solutions* the moment she is accused of dissidence, of not being “proud of her inheritance”:

SMITA: How can you expect me to be proud of something which stifles everything else around it? It stifles me! Yes! Maybe I am prejudiced because I do not belong. But not belonging makes things so clear. I can see so clearly how wrong you are. You accuse me of running away from my religion. Maybe I am ... embarrassed, mummy. Yes. Maybe I shouldn’t be. What if I did what you do? Praying and fasting and ... purifying myself all day. Would you have listened to me if I told you were wrong? You will say yes, because you are certain I wouldn’t say that then. All right, so we both are prejudiced, so what do you want to do? Shall we all go back to sleep?

ARUNA: You said it stifles you?

SMITA: What?

ARUNA: Does being a Hindu stifle you?

SMITA: No, living with one does.6

By exercising her choice in rejecting Aruna’s sense of ‘inheritance,’ the apparently diminutive Smita consolidates her identity by asserting her view of what she thinks is right. And having done so, she can now critique Hindu fundamentalism from the inside:

SMITA: And so you feel threatened?

ARUNA: Threatened? Why should I...

SMITA: Because you know they don’t believe in all the things that you feel are true. Doesn’t that make your belief that much more weak? Do two young boys make you so insecure? Come on, mummy. This is a time for strength! 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. 6

5. Conclusion

The purity of “mind” and “deed” 6 that Smita exemplifies in this disquisition of her culture and religion is ironically in accordance with her mother’s prescription – the only difference being her understanding of purity is markedly at variance with that of her mother’s. Hence the penchant for individuality that radiates from Smita’s insightful utterance – “I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother ... Please don’t burden me any more! I can’t take it!” 6 – translates, for Aruna, into the daughter’s barefaced insubordination of the mother’s authority, an outright rejection of her methods of defining and preserving tradition. Nonetheless, being already insulated from the diktats of blind subservience to ‘inheritance,’ Smita remains steadfast in her conviction that “one can create one’s own freedom wherever one may be” 6 It is in keeping with her version of ‘inheritance’ and freedom that Dattani has the euphoric Bobby

pick up the image of Krishna: “He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated!” 6 And seeing Aruna still uneasy, it is he who delivers the final solution: “if you are willing to forget, I am willing to tolerate” that dismantles the trope of religious majoritarianism to usher in secularism. 6

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