

ROLE OF MEMORY IN SHAPING CHARACTERS' IDENTITY IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *FINAL SOLUTIONS*

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***Abstract:** While writing of contemporary issues Mahesh Dattani constructs a sense of a shared urban cultural identity, which is upper-middle class, professional, English speaking and a 'cityfied' identity. Memory plays a very important part in the plays. Public memory is time and again juxtaposed with personal memory, and it becomes a means to explain and justify the political acts committed for personal interests. This paper looks at how memory, personal as well public, shapes the identities (social, personal and religious) of characters in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions*. Incidents are important, but*

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only to explain why and how the people populate his plays, acting in ways that they do. The psychological action is of greater relevance than any physical action that takes place in the play. He reveals his characters by placing them in situations where they are forced to analyze themselves in the light of what happened in their lives in the past.

Key words: Mahesh Dattani, *Final Solutions*, *Memory*, *Identity*, *Religion*

INTRODUCTION

A psychological concept, deriving from the works of Erik Erikson that finds place in anthropology, sociology, political science and literature, identity is still highly debated. Essentially comparative in nature, it is the sense of belonging and acceptance that marks the identity of an individual or a group. It is either the sameness or the difference that gives an identity of either belonging or alienation. This is as true of a social group or a culture or a religion as it is true of an individual, religion or faith being one of the important markers of this identity formation. The conception of one's religion is the shared identity of a person with others not only of the same faith, but is also the boundary that sets her/him apart from those of other faiths. And this sense of belonging is given, and not inherent. It is developed over a period of time, starting from birth itself. However, this sense of identity is based on individual's memories and their interpretation later on. This selective retention and recall of memories is what is of interest in identity formation, and consequently how people think and act and share this sense of belongingness or otherness. We see this process of identity formation, change and a questioning of the 'given' identity time and again in Mahesh Dattani's *Final*

Solutions. The fluidity and yet the rigidity of this religious identity, shaped by individual and collective memories, is what is being analyzed in this paper. The paper studies the role of memories, selective retention of some and the recall of a few self-enhancing memories in shaping not only an individual but by extension a community and hence, the culture.

In his plays Mahesh Dattani writes of contemporary issues, all the while constructing a sense of a shared urban cultural identity. It emerges from a study of his plays that this urban identity is upper-middle class, professional, English speaking and a “cityfied” identity. It is urban both because of its treatment of the language as well as depiction of history. Language is of the times, and reflects the current milieu. While this history does not hark back to a common inherited culture, but is more personal and immediate. He believes that his plays are a “true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background” and his “business is holding a mirror up to society” (Dattani 2000).

FINAL SOLUTIONS: THE PLAY

The play, *Final Solutions*, has a recognizable and realistic structure. Written in an easy language to which the readers can relate, Dattani has made imaginative use of space, and treats of not just the physical space but personal and political spaces as well. The positioning of the horseshoe-crescent encircling the stage and sloping towards the audience, that achieves the effect of making the audience one with the mob, is innovative. It is as if the “fourth wall” of the drama gets transformed, and gives rise to the feeling that the mob that features in the play is always present, that the issues just need to be vocalized on stage and even these stragglers will join in. Confined within this crescent is a space suggestive of a room that has but just a

hint of furniture, only the kitchen and the puja room being ‘detailed’. This detailing is symbolic of the importance of these two places in the home, being the symbols of culture and religion that act to either unify or divide people. These are the two physical spaces that have a unique power in bringing together not only the people and creating memories but also of identity formation. Seen as a woman’s space throughout literature, these are the two spaces where the tenets of culture and religion are propagated in a traditional Indian household. However, these two get appropriated and used as tools, as can be seen happening in *Final Solutions*, by different people men and women alike for their own purposes. There is an interesting intermingling of the past and the present in the play. The audience sees that the past is ever present and gives direction to the present, and that memories are what people make of them. This continuation of the past in the present is seen even in the characters in the play. The characters do not change, or are different from any of those in the past; they are just replaced by others who, though they appear different and modern in outlook, remain basically the same and have similar issues to deal with.

Basically, *Final Solutions* is the story of a Gujarati family that consists of four people – grandmother (Daksha/ Hardika), father (Ramnik), mother (Aruna), and daughter (Smita); and their encounter with two muslim boys – Javed and Babban (Bobby), who arrive at their house seeking refuge from a blood-thirsty mob during communal riots. How every character is jolted out of his/her sphere as a result of this meeting is shown in the play. They are forced to question their previously held views, memories of past incidents, and their personal conceptions of faith. Written in the aftermath of the demolition of Babri Masjid, this play essentially explores the ‘communal’. Each character is seen trying to come to terms with his/her

conception of faith and religion, for it forms the very basic characteristic of his/her nature and hence identity, and determines all the actions and reactions to various persons and situations.

MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Memory plays a very important part in the play. Public memory is time and again juxtaposed with personal memory, in that the former becomes a means to explain and justify the latter. Through interplay of recall of memories, the audience sees that the political acts are committed for personal interests. Happenings of the past are contiguous with and impinge upon the incidents of the present night, and vice-versa.

The action of the play is seen as happening through the eyes of Hardika, not as it happens but again as a representation of her memory of it. An interesting element of the play is the presence of Hardika and Daksha, shown to be two different, though at the same time, same characters (Dattani 2000: 165). Because of this 'sameness' of the two characters, the names are used either interchangeably or together in this paper. The play opens with a reading of Daksha's diary. A diary is something that contains personal memories, written from a point of view of being read by an *other* some time in the future. Though this 'other' might be another person, it is more often an evolved self. It has all the self-consciousness of a personal memory becoming public in a future time.

Dattani has interestingly put in two characters to play the grandmother, Daksha - the newly married young girl, who is reading from her diary; and Hardika - the grandmother, who is listening to this diary recitation. The difference between these two is in that while Daksha still holds independent views and is

a sort of a rebel, Hardika has come to accept her husband's point of view concerning her friendship with her Muslim neighbours. However, in spite of being two different characters they are not different, their thoughts, memories and actions are seamlessly interwoven as the following diary entry shows,

And I wrote. A dozen pages before. A dozen pages now. A young girl's childish scribble. An old woman's shaky scrawl. Yes, things have not changed that much. (Dattani 2000:167)

Almost all the characters are haunted by their past. Their actions appear conditioned by their experiences in the past and their personal memories of those experiences. Hardika's present mental state has been conditioned by her personal experiences with Zarine and her family, looked at from her husband's point of view. And her reaction to the arrival of the two strangers, Javed and Babban, is a reflection from her past. She has reasons to hate Muslims because a communal mob had killed her father and she thinks she lost her freedom and has been confined to the house by her husband because of her association with Zarine. Presence of Javed and Bobby is to her dislike because to her they represent all that is bad with their religion. However, her world is shaken and she no longer has a 'memory' to rely upon when her son finally tells her the family secret that Zarine's family was made the scapegoat by her husband to grab their shop, political upheaval used for personal gain. Suddenly her conception of her reality and truth, and past and memories is no longer the 'truth' as it was till that moment. She has no past or "memory" left to depend upon. Yet she clings to that shattered universe tenaciously, "I still am not willing to forget..."(Dattani 2000: 225). It is not the forgetting that is important here, it is rather the selection of prevailing memories and her identification with them. If she forgets, she will no longer be able to know herself. She remembers because

she wants to retain an identity, any identity that is available to her.

Ramnik is also plagued by what happened in the past. Knowing what happened years ago, he is ashamed of his father's and grand-father's act of arson to lay their hands on Zarine's father's shop. Because they were planning to set up a mill as well, it was perhaps more an act of jealousy rather than of communal hatred. Religion merely served to justify the actions later on. Ramnik tries very hard to be non-communal. He time and again laughs sarcastically at his wife Aruna as she goes about her rituals and ceremonies. He feels a need to save the two boys from the wrath of the communal mob in an effort to atone for the mistakes committed by his family in the past. He even offers a job to Javed thinking that it would redeem him of his sense of guilt. But he is no liberal, and it is just a blind that blinds even his own self, and which Javed manages to tear apart. He represents the 'urban, educated, secular' middle-class, which believes that it is non-communal but the truth is somewhat different. Ramnik is in the trap of his own memories of the wrongs done in the past. Every action of his is an effort to come to terms with the happenings of the past. He is always in a state of conflict because of this ever-present war within himself. His sense of identity and belonging to either middle-class or to his religion is at the mercy of the happenings of the past and his memories of the same.

Javed, who used to be a hero to his friends as an adolescent, was rudely shaken by an incident that acted as a catalyst in making him a rabble-rouser. He becomes the person who throws the "first stone", and the one who sets the ball of communal hatred rolling. He witnesses the derogation of his own self and that of his religion. As is shown in an incident in the play, because of his religious identity his mere touch is

enough to contaminate a letter, and by extension a Hindu neighbour. He is shaken and suddenly, he is no longer sure of himself, and his identity. He turns to the only way he knows to fit in and that is to harm the *other* in order to protect his religion and faith. But he finds out his mistake and realizes that people like him are made use of to stir up emotions and fury to make personal gains, and is again shaken to his core. Even though like others Javed is also being constantly troubled by the tenuous nature of his conception of identity and its fluid nature, he is the only one in the play who is proud of his identity and has a sense of reality, and has a clear vision to see the things as they are. He is the only one to see through Ramnik's pseudo-secular facade.

You can offer milk to us. You can have an angry mob outside your house. You can play the civilized host. Because you know you have peace hidden inside your armpit. (Dattani 2000: 192)

And again,

I believe in myself...It's people like you who drive me to a corner and I have to turn to myself and my faith...At least now I am not ignorant of my history and faith...you do something more violent. You provoke!...You hate me because I showed you that you are not as liberal as you think you are. (Dattani 2000: 198)

Despite being shaken and stunned, Javed is the one who has a clear conception of his faith, identity and social milieu. He is the one who is best adjusted in the whole gamut of characters in the play.

Aruna, Ramnik's wife, makes a Hindu counterpart to Javed. Like him she has confidence in her faith. She is a strong believer, takes pride in her religion and inheritance and finds protection therein. She is neither confused nor wavers till her daughter Smita attacks her faith. Daksha/ Hardika had once questioned the blind faith held by her mother in an idol God because that God had failed to protect her father. Smita and Aruna reflect Daksha/Hardika's own situation, though in two separate characters. The former resents the blind idol worship being practiced by the latter, and shatters her own perfect world when she gets the opportunity to vocalize what she has always wanted to in front her mother Aruna. At Smita's telling her the falsity and hollowness of her faith, Aruna does take a stand before crumbling in the face of opposition,

And I will not have it all perish to accommodate someone else's faith. I have enough faith and pride to see that it doesn't happen. I shall uphold what I believe is the truth...because I will not accept that from someone who is not proud of her inheritance. You cannot criticize what you are running away from. You will be prejudiced...I have always taken pride in my religion. I was so happy knowing that I was protected. (Dattani 2000: 210, 211)

Despite this Aruna still has a conception of identity and holds on to it though a little tenuously. Javed acknowledges the similarities between himself and her when he says,

What I told Babban, you told her...you wouldn't listen to her criticism because she was not proud of her-what did you call it?- inheritance. I said religion. Same thing I suppose. We are

not very different. You and me. We both feel pride. (Dattani 2000: 214)

Babban and Smita are the two characters who think they are different, who think that they do not belong and hence are the rebels. Yet as the play progresses, they come across as the ones who are shown to have no conviction and are simply lost. They question but do not have the courage to go against the dictates of their religions. They lack conviction, both in themselves as well as in their respective religions. Babban dislikes being clubbed with Javed for he sees the latter as a communal fanatic. But the fact is that since he lacks faith in his own religion, and tries to hide his identity behind borrowed names like “Bobby”, he does not have a sense of strong identity like Javed.

...I was ashamed of being myself. He wasn't...Like 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. (Dattani 2000: 201)

Smita feels stifled by the rituals that her mother makes her follow, and like Babban wants to be free of it. However, she cannot be honest. The reality is that things are as they were in Daksha's times.

The present is no different from the past, and she cannot escape it. Hardika rightly points it out to her that she is a fool if she thinks that things are any different now from her own times, that she has freedom to say things she likes, choose her own friends or go where ever she wishes.

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...spirit of liberalism ran in our blood. (Dattani 2000: 211)

Though she advocates freedom and liberalism, Smita cannot escape being who she is, caught in the vortex and too weak to fight her way out, as is reflected in her decision to deny her love for Babban. Instead of owning it and fighting for it, she even lacks conviction in her love.

The two characters that began as the strongest, and surest and apparently had a clear idea of who they were, end up as the two who are most unclear about their own identities. The rebels fail to ultimately even stand up for their convictions because ultimately they do not have any.

CONCLUSION

The play is titled *Final Solutions*, suggesting that there is more than one solution to the problem of conflicts (personal and political) based on religion, and having an impact on identity and role of memories. The implication of such a suggestion being that every person has a different solution to offer. But is there any solution in the play, let alone *Solutions* and those too *Final*? The incident of the night has played havoc with the life of each character, but it has failed to provide a solution to the problem. The play ends in an ambiguous and disturbing manner. Only Babban has a solution which is that they all believe and have faith and tolerate. And there are no takers for it! All others have just questions and a sense of loss and defeat. Everyone is shaken by the stirring of memories, same memory and yet different for each character. All of them feel a loss of identity, though each one of them continues to hold on to that earlier identity and pool of memories because there is no other *Solution* yet. As Hardika puts it, "I still am not willing to forget...We do not speak to each other. We move in silence. And I-I remain confined." Her confinement, which

began with the acceptance of what her husband wanted her to believe, continues, as does every other character's.

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