

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN MAHESH DATTANI'S FINAL SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary landscape of Indian English drama, Mahesh Dattani stands out for his unflinching exploration of the communal psyche. His seminal play, Final Solutions, provides a critical site for examining how identity is not a static inheritance but a fluid construct shaped by language and cultural narratives. This article investigates the dramatic techniques such as the stylized Chorus and the recurring motif of the diary that Dattani employs to expose the deep-seated prejudices within the Indian middle class. By analyzing the intersection of historical trauma and modern secularism, the paper argues that Dattani's work challenges traditional cultural representations, suggesting that communal "solutions" can only be found by deconstructing the linguistic and psychological walls that define the "Other."

KEYWORDS: *Communalism, Cultural Representation, Identity Politics, Modern Indian Drama, Linguistic Discourse.*

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Introduction

Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (first performed in 1993) occupies an unequivocal position as a landmark text in the canon of Indian English drama. It transcends the mere documentation of communal riots—a recurring trauma in postcolonial India—to probe, with surgical precision, the emotional and psychological landscapes of its characters. Set against the layered backdrop of post-Partition memory and contemporary religious unrest in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the play relocates the conflict from the public sphere of burning streets and sloganeering mobs into the claustrophobic domesticity of the Gandhi household. This spatial shift is critical: Dattani insists that the roots of communalism are not merely political or economic but are nourished in the private recesses of the family, in whispered conversations, inherited silences, and the unexamined prejudices passed down through generations.

Central to the play's enduring impact is its sophisticated exploration of identity—how it is formed, how it is performed, and how it is often violently imposed by the collective upon the individual. Dattani resists any essentialist notion of selfhood. Instead, through the intergenerational conflict between Daksha/Hardika, her son Ramnik, and the two Muslim youths, Javed and Bobby, the play demonstrates that identity is a palimpsest, constantly rewritten by historical memory, social pressure, and linguistic interaction. Through the twin lenses of language and cultural representation, Dattani reveals a disturbing truth: that the “enemy” is rarely a real, flesh-and-blood other, but rather a projection of one's own inherited fears, a specter summoned by the stories we tell ourselves in the privacy of our cultural imagination.

The Theoretical Framework: Identity as Performance and Linguistic Construct

Before turning to the play's dramatic techniques, it is useful to situate Dattani's project within a broader theoretical context. The playwright's understanding of identity aligns closely with constructivist theories, particularly those of Stuart Hall, who argued that cultural identity is not an eternal essence but a “production” which is never complete. Similarly, Judith Butler's concept of performativity—that identity is constituted through the very “expressions” that are said to be its results—illuminates Dattani's characters. The Gandhis are not simply Hindu; they perform Hindutva through their rituals, their spatial segregation of the home, and their language of hospitality that barely conceals suspicion. Conversely, Javed performs the role of the “angry Muslim youth” precisely because society has scripted that role for him. Language, in this framework, is not

a neutral medium of communication but the primary site where identity is contested, reinforced, or subverted. Dattani's dramaturgy-the Chorus's rhythmic chants, the diary's intimate prose, the loaded silences between characters-operates as a laboratory for observing this linguistic construction of the self and the other.

The Language of Exclusion and the Dramaturgy of the Chorus

Dattani's most innovative and unsettling dramatic tool in *Final Solutions* is undoubtedly the Chorus. This is not the classical Greek Chorus, which offered commentary and moral wisdom, nor the Elizabethan Chorus, which provided exposition. Dattani's Chorus is a volatile, shape-shifting entity-a mob in embryo. By having the same actors physically switch between Hindu and Muslim masks, often in full view of the audience, Dattani stages a devastating revelation: the language of hate is universal, interchangeable, and tragically rehearsed. The Chorus demonstrates that the syntax of communal violence-the dehumanizing epithets, the rhythmic call-and-response of slogans, the reduction of complex human beings to genitalia or dietary habits-is independent of any specific theology. It is a cultural technology of exclusion that any community can deploy.

The linguistic texture of the Chorus's speech is crucial. They do not speak as individuals with proper names or biographies. Instead, they speak in fragmented, overlapping, rhythmic phrases: "Burn them. Burn them. Burn their shops. Burn their homes." This linguistic homogeneity mirrors the psychological reality of mob mentality, where personal identity dissolves into a collective "we." More importantly, the Chorus's language is characterized by what linguists call "indexicality"-words and phrases that point to a shared but unspoken enemy. "They are shouting. What are they saying? We can't hear them. But we know. We know what they are saying." This passage is a masterpiece of dramatic irony. The audience understands that the content of the shouting is irrelevant; what matters is the posture of knowing, the assumption of threat. The Chorus thus represents the loss of personal moral agency in the face of cultural frenzy. Dattani forces us to recognize that before any riot begins, there is a linguistic riot-a preparatory discourse that maps the city into sacred and profane zones, into "our" side and "their" side. Through this device, the play argues that cultural representation is always already a form of reduction: to be represented as a "Hindu" or a "Muslim" in the Chorus's language is to be stripped of one's specific humanity and fitted into a prefabricated narrative of grievance.

The Diary as Linguistic Archive: Memory, Trauma, and the Performance of Resentment

If the Chorus represents the public, collective language of

communalism, the character of Daksha (who ages into Hardika) embodies its private, intergenerational transmission. Dattani's use of the diary as a dramatic device is far from decorative; it functions as a linguistic archive of historical trauma, a textual space where the past is not merely remembered but relived. The diary is Hardika's secret self, the repository of a youthful idealism that was systematically crushed by the communal violence of the 1947 Partition. Through her entries, the audience witnesses how identity is shaped not by rational choice but by the "wounds" of history-wounds that are passed down like heirlooms.

The critical scene occurs in Daksha's past, when she attempts to forge a friendship with her Muslim neighbor, Zarine. Their conversation, initially full of girlish warmth and shared secrets about saris and cinema, is interrupted not by any external catastrophe but by the internalization of cultural barriers. Daksha's father and husband do not need to forbid the friendship explicitly; the prohibition is already written into the language of her upbringing. When Daksha later records the friendship's failure, her diary entries shift from hopeful to bitter. In the present, as the elderly Hardika, her language is brittle, defensive, and saturated with what the cultural theorist Svetlana Boym called "restorative nostalgia"-a longing not for a lost past but for the resentment that past has authorized. Hardika says, "Everything is the same... and the same people. But they aren't the same. They are different. And they hate me"-reveals the paranoid structure of communal memory. The empirical reality (that the "same people" are gone, that the neighborhood has changed) is irrelevant. What matters is the emotional truth of the narrative she has maintained for decades. Dattani's genius here is to show that Hardika is not simply a bigot; she is a traumatized woman who has weaponized her own pain. Her identity has become a fortress built from the rubble of her past. The diary, which began as a tool of self-expression, ends as a prison of inherited prejudice.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Bias: Ramnik's Liberal Guilt

Sandwiched between Hardika's entrenched communalism and the youths' raw anger is Ramnik, the liberal, secular businessman who represents the conscience of the Indian middle class. Dattani's treatment of Ramnik is mercilessly nuanced. Ramnik is not a villain; he genuinely wishes to help Javed and Bobby. He offers them shelter, food, and a hearing. Yet his language is riddled with what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha would call "colonial mimicry"-a liberal discourse that, while professing equality, continuously reinscribes difference. Ramnik says the right words, but his body language, his hesitant pauses, and his need to be thanked and recognized as a "good Hindu" betray a deeper insecurity. He represents the

failure of secularism as a merely political solution. For Ramnik, secularism is a set of polite manners, a way of speaking that avoids overt slurs but cannot prevent the underlying suspicion.

The dramatic climax of Ramnik's arc occurs not in a confrontation with Javed but in his confession to his mother, Hardika, that he profited from the destruction of a Muslim businessman's shop during a riot. This confession is a linguistic act of tremendous weight.

"Ramnik: It's the same burntup shop we bought from them at half its value and we burnt it. Your husband. My father. And his father. They had burnt it in the name of communal hatred." (Act III, page 64)

It shatters Ramnik's self-image as an innocent bystander and implicates him directly in the economic machinery of communalism. Dattani suggests that liberal guilt, expressed in well-formed English sentences, is insufficient. The "final solution" to communalism cannot be found in better arguments or more inclusive language alone; it requires an acknowledgment of complicity. Ramnik's final silence-his inability to translate his self-awareness into meaningful action-is the play's most damning commentary on the educated elite.

Representing the 'Other': Javed and Bobby as Deconstructed Stereotypes

The arrival of two Muslim youths, Javed and Bobby, into the ostensibly safe space of the Hindu home acts as the catalytic pressure point for the play's central conflict. Dattani refuses the easy path of noble victimhood. Instead, he uses these characters to deconstruct the very stereotypes that Hindu majoritarianism produces. Javed represents the "angry young Muslim" identity that is forced upon a marginalized youth who has been treated as a criminal by society before ever committing a crime. His trajectory is a text-book case of what the psychologist Frantz Fanon described in *The Wretched of the Earth*: the colonized subject's violence is not a product of innate savagery but a mirror of the violence inflicted upon him. Javed's most devastating line-"They treated me like a criminal before I ever did anything. So I became one"-is not an excuse but a forensic diagnosis. Dattani invites the audience to trace the causal chain: the police raid, the humiliation, the job denial, the constant surveillance. Javed's identity is not chosen; it is hammered into him by the very structures that claim to fear him.

In sharp contrast, Bobby represents a desire for assimilation that is ultimately tragic in its naivety. Bobby's strategy is to erase the markers of difference: he is quiet, deferential, eager to please. The famous and controversial scene where he touches the idol of Lord Krishna in the Gandhi

household's prayer room is the play's most potent symbolic moment.

"Bobby: See! See! I am touching God! Your God! My flesh is holding Him! Look, Javed! And he does not mind! He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated! Look how he rests in my hands! He knows I cannot harm Him but He believes in me. He smiles! He smiles at our trivial pride and our trivial shame. He feels me and welcomes it! I told Him who is sacred to them, but I do not commit sacrilege. [To Aruna] You can bathe Him day and night, you can splash holy waters on Him but you cannot remove my smell with the sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes and tolerates, and respects what other human beings who believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world!" (Act III, pages 62-63)

His dialogue serves as a radical linguistic subversion of cultural taboos.

"Bobby: The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed." (Act III, page 63)

Bobby refuses to participate in the sacred/profane binary that structures Hindu communalist discourse. By reducing the idol to its materiality, he exposes the contingency of all religious symbolism. Yet, the play does not endorse Bobby's position uncritically. His secular rationalism is powerless against Hardika's visceral horror and Smita's suspicion. Bobby's tragedy is that he believes language and gesture can dismantle prejudice; the play suggests that prejudice is often immune to rational argument because it lives in the body, in inherited disgust, in the unthought habits of a lifetime. Bobby's touch is feared not because the idol is sacred but because his hand is Muslim. Dattani thus shows that the representation of the "Other" is never about the Other's actual qualities but about the Self's need for a repository of its own disavowed fears.

The Gandhi Household: A Microcosm of Secular Failure

The domestic space of the Gandhi family is not a neutral backdrop but a third protagonist. Dattani carefully choreographs the movement of characters through this space: the prayer room, the living room, the kitchen, the stairs. Each area is coded with cultural meaning. The prayer room is Hardika's domain, a space of orthodox purity. The living room, where Ramnik attempts to conduct a rational conversation, is a space of compromised modernity. The stairs, where characters frequently pause, represent liminality-the threshold between public and private, past and present, hospitality and hostility. By confining the action to this single household, Dattani makes a structural argument: that the nation

is an extension of the family. If communalism cannot be resolved in the intimacy of the Gandhi living room, it cannot be resolved in the streets or the parliament either. The play's claustrophobia is intentional. There is no escape to a utopian outside. The audience, like the characters, is trapped within the four walls of inherited identity.

Cultural Representation and the Refusal of Catharsis

One of the most striking features of *Final Solutions* is its deliberate refusal of dramatic catharsis. Western tragedy typically offers a resolution-death, recognition, a restoration of order. Dattani offers none. The play ends not with a reconciliation but with an exhausted stalemate. Javed and Bobby leave the Gandhi house, but the audience knows they will return to a city that remains hostile. Hardika retreats further into her diary. Ramnik is left with his guilt but no mechanism for redemption. Smita, the young Hindu woman who initially sympathizes with the youths, is shown to be incapable of sustaining her empathy in the face of her grandmother's emotional blackmail. This anti-cathartic structure is a political statement. Dattani refuses to sell the audience a comforting lie. The "final solution" of the title is a bitter irony: there is no final solution, only ongoing, unfinished, uncomfortable work. The play concludes that a genuine resolution would require not a political decree or a riot control measure, but a personal, agonizing refusal to be defined by the prejudices of the past. It would require, in other words, a different language-one that has not yet been written.

Conclusion: Language as the Site of Possibility and Imprisonment

Final Solutions does not offer a simplistic or comfortable resolution to the problem of communalism. Instead, it suggests that the path forward lies in a fundamental shift in our cultural representation of the "Other"-a shift that must begin with an honest examination of how we use language. Throughout the play, Dattani exposes the multiple registers of communal discourse: the Chorus's mob rhetoric, the diary's resentful intimacy, Ramnik's liberal clichés, Javed's accusatory directness, and Bobby's rationalist subversions. None of these registers, in isolation, provides a way out. Each is a wall as much as a window.

Yet, the very existence of the play as a theatrical event offers a glimmer of hope. Theatre, for Dattani, is a space where language can be performed, distanced, and examined. The audience is invited to hear the Chorus's slogans and recognize their own internalized prejudices. They are invited to hear Hardika's diary and understand how trauma can curdle into hatred. They are invited to hear Javed's fury and see its legitimacy. By exposing the way language is used to reinforce identity barriers, Dattani

invites the audience to recognize the shared human vulnerability beneath the religious masks. The play's final, quiet suggestion is that a "final solution" is not a political decree or a piece of legislation, but a personal, repeated, and always incomplete refusal to let the past dictate the terms of the present. It is the choice to hear the other's story, not as a threat, but as a mirror.

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