

**The Politics of Communalism and Violence in Mahesh Dattani's
Final Solutions: A Critical Study**

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Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani is one of the prominent contemporary Indian playwrights who explores social, political, and cultural issues in his dramatic works. His play *Final Solutions* (1993) critically examines the deep-rooted problem of religious communalism and communal violence in India. Set against the backdrop of a communal riot, the play explores the strained relationship between Hindus and Muslims and exposes the prejudices, fears, stereotypes, and historical memories that contribute to religious conflict. Dattani presents communal violence not merely as a clash between two religious communities but as a complex social problem shaped by individual experiences, family relationships, political manipulation, and inherited prejudices. This paper examines the representation of religious communalism and communal violence in *Final Solutions* and analyses how Dattani exposes the destructive consequences of religious prejudice while suggesting the possibility of tolerance, understanding, and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Religious Communalism, communal violence

Mahesh Dattani occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Indian drama in English because of his sustained engagement with the social contradictions and cultural anxieties of postcolonial India. His dramaturgy gives theatrical visibility to experiences that are frequently marginalised, suppressed, or normalised within dominant social structures. Questions of gender discrimination, sexuality, religious intolerance, communal conflict, social exclusion, and familial oppression recur throughout his dramatic corpus. Amar Nath Prasad appropriately places Dattani among writers who “champion the cause of true art free

from any theory, universal in taste and flavour, appealing to all sections of society, never bound to any caste, class and creed” (Prasad 262). This observation illuminates Dattani’s inclusive social vision and his persistent attempt to represent individuals whose experiences challenge conventional structures of identity and belonging.

Dattani’s theatrical imagination is particularly attentive to those who occupy socially vulnerable or marginal positions. Shanta Gokhale Batra observes that his plays concentrate on “the marginalized sections of our society: minorities, women, gays and hijras” and expose “the violence of our private thoughts and the hypocrisy of our public morals” (Batra xiii). This critical observation is particularly relevant to *Final Solutions* because the play demonstrates how apparently private prejudices can acquire a collective and destructive force. Dattani does not present communalism merely as an external political phenomenon; instead, he traces its origins to the psychological structures through which individuals interpret religion, community, memory, and difference.

The playwright himself identifies the relationship between the individual and society as a recurring concern of his dramatic writing: “to me as a playwright, my recurring theme is the individual’s place in their society” (Dattani 2). This statement provides a significant interpretative framework for *Final Solutions*. The characters in the play are simultaneously individuals and representatives of larger social identities. Their actions are shaped by family history, religious affiliations, cultural memory, and social expectations. Consequently, Dattani refuses to reduce communal conflict to a straightforward confrontation between Hindus and Muslims. His dramatic strategy is more psychologically intricate: he examines the processes through which religious identity becomes a source of suspicion and through which suspicion eventually becomes hostility.

In this context, Ram Ahuja’s sociological definition of communalism is useful. Ahuja explains that communalism is an ideology in which “society is divided into religious communities whose interests differ and are, at times, even opposed to each other” (Ahuja 120). The definition is particularly applicable to Dattani’s dramatic representation because the characters gradually begin to perceive religious communities as mutually exclusive groups. The significance of *Final Solutions* lies in its demonstration that such divisions are not inevitable. They are constructed through historical narratives, political manipulation, social conditioning, and inherited prejudice.

II

Mahesh Dattani’s *Final Solutions* begins with the young Daksha, who later becomes the elderly Hardika, writing in her diary in 1948. This technique enables Dattani to juxtapose two different historical moments and demonstrate that communal prejudice does not disappear with the passing of time. Daksha is a young Hindu woman living in a conservative

family shortly after Partition. She is interested in music and develops a close friendship with Zarine, a Muslim girl. Their friendship is important because it represents a possibility of Hindu-Muslim coexistence before communal prejudice destroys their relationship. Daksha's personal freedom, however, is restricted by her patriarchal family. Her friendship with Zarine gradually becomes a source of conflict within her household.

The violence surrounding Partition profoundly affects Daksha. Her father has been killed during communal violence, and the trauma becomes associated in her mind with Muslims as a community. Her personal suffering consequently develops into collective prejudice. One of the important ideas in the play is that a traumatic personal experience can be transformed into a generalised hatred of an entire community. Daksha's later identity as Hardika is therefore psychologically shaped by memories that she has never been able to overcome.

Dattani uses the transition between Daksha and Hardika to demonstrate the continuity of historical memory. The young Daksha is capable of friendship with Zarine, whereas the older Hardika has become suspicious of Muslims. The dramatic juxtaposition reveals how an individual who was once a victim can eventually reproduce the prejudices that harmed her. As one critical reading observes, the play is concerned with "transferred resentments" that move from one generation to another (Padamsee 161).

The contemporary action of the play begins against the background of communal disturbance. A religious procession has become the centre of tension, and rumours circulate that a Hindu religious image has been desecrated. The atmosphere outside the Gandhi household becomes increasingly threatening. A Chorus or Mob appears throughout the play, and Dattani gives the members of this group both Hindu and Muslim masks. The masks are important because the same performers represent opposing religious communities. In this manner, Dattani suggests that communal identities, although presented as absolute by the mob, can be constructed and manipulated.

The Chorus repeatedly uses the language of "us" and "them." Such vocabulary transforms religious difference into social hostility. The Chorus even threatens Ramnik Gandhi when he refuses to surrender Bobby and Javed. At one point, the Hindu Chorus warns him: "You mad man! They'll stab you in the back! They'll rape your daughter. ... Throw them out!" (Dattani 188). The dialogue reveals how communal fear is intensified through rumours and imagined threats. The mob does not merely express hatred; it attempts to persuade ordinary people that the presence of the religious "other" constitutes a danger to family, honour and community.

Alyque Padamsee, who directed the play, provides a significant critical key to understanding the Chorus. He states, "The demons of communal hatred are not out on the

street...they are lurking inside ourselves” (Padamsee 161). The observation suggests that Dattani is less interested in presenting the mob as an external enemy than in exposing the psychological impulses that produce mob behaviour. Padamsee further describes the play as being about “transferred resentments” and “looking for a scapegoat” when individuals feel humiliated or frustrated (161).

The two Muslim youths, Bobby and Javed, enter the Gandhi household seeking protection from the mob. Ramnik Gandhi, who considers himself liberal and secular, allows them to enter. His decision immediately creates tension within the family. Aruna, his orthodox Hindu wife, is uncomfortable with their presence, while Hardika's hostility is connected with her traumatic memories of Zarine and Partition. Smita, however, recognises the boys and reveals that they are connected with her Muslim friend Tasneem. This revelation further complicates the apparently simple opposition between Hindu and Muslim.

Ramnik's liberalism becomes increasingly complicated as the play progresses. He offers Javed food, shelter and even employment in his saree shop. Initially, this appears to be an act of humanitarian generosity. However, Dattani later reveals that Ramnik's family history is deeply implicated in the suffering of Zarine's family. His father and grandfather had benefited from the burning of Zarine's family shop. Ramnik therefore carries a hidden sense of guilt. His apparently liberal behaviour is partly an attempt to confront the moral burden inherited from his family.

This revelation is one of the most important turning points in the drama. Ramnik admits that his family's prosperity is connected with the destruction of the Muslim family. He confesses: “Your husband. My father. And his father. They had it burnt in the name of communal hatred. Because we wanted a shop” (Dattani 244). The confession demonstrates that communal conflict cannot be understood exclusively through the categories of victim and aggressor. Individuals and families may simultaneously inherit privilege, guilt, trauma and prejudice.

Javed's character represents another dimension of communal identity. Unlike Bobby, he has embraced a more aggressive form of religious consciousness. His involvement in communal violence is connected with a personal experience of humiliation. He admits that he participated in the disturbance of the Rath Yatra by throwing a stone at the religious idol. His act is not presented as an isolated expression of evil; rather, Dattani traces it to accumulated resentment and social alienation.

The confrontation between Javed and Ramnik becomes one of the most intense moments in the play. Javed refuses to accept Ramnik's claim to liberalism because he believes that the social structure itself has contributed to his alienation. He declares: “You provoke! You make me throw stones!” His statement suggests that violence is not produced

in isolation. It emerges from a relationship between provocation, humiliation, social inequality and religious identity.

Bobby, in contrast, represents the possibility of moving beyond rigid communal boundaries. His real name is Babban, but he has adopted the name Bobby partly because he feels ashamed of his own identity. He explains: “That’s because I was ashamed of being myself” (Dattani 206). His confession reveals the psychological consequences of minority consciousness. He does not initially reject religion itself; rather, he is ashamed of belonging to a community that society has stereotyped and marginalised.

The climax of the play occurs when Bobby enters the prayer room and picks up the image of Lord Krishna. His action initially appears provocative, but it develops into one of the most important symbolic moments of the drama. Bobby does not destroy the idol. Instead, he holds it respectfully and challenges the idea that physical contact with a sacred object automatically constitutes sacrilege. He argues that human respect is more important than ritual boundaries. In the 2000 edition, he declares that the sacred image can be touched by someone who “believes and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe” (Dattani 242). This act becomes a symbolic rejection of religious fanaticism. Bobby demonstrates that religious faith need not produce hatred. The sacred can become a means of establishing human connection rather than a justification for exclusion. His gesture also challenges Aruna’s rigid understanding of ritual purity.

The final movement of the play returns to Hardika and the burden of memory. Hardika cannot easily release the past. Her statement, “I cannot forget. I just cannot forget” (Dattani 223), reveals the psychological persistence of communal trauma. Her inability to forget is both understandable and dangerous: memory preserves the experience of suffering, but when suffering becomes generalised into hatred, memory can perpetuate violence across generations.

III

The play was first staged in 1993 and is situated against the disturbing background of Hindu-Muslim tensions in contemporary India. Alyque Padamsee’s introductory note offers perhaps the most concise explanation of the psychological dimension of the play: “The demons of communal hatred are not out on the street....they are lurking inside ourselves” (Padamsee 161). This observation radically alters the conventional understanding of communal violence. The primary danger does not reside exclusively in the visible mob; it exists within the individual consciousness from which the mob is constituted. Padamsee further describes the play as one concerned with “transferred resentments” and the human tendency to search for a scapegoat when individuals experience humiliation or frustration (161).

The concept of transferred resentment is particularly significant in relation to Hardika, Javed, and the members of the Chorus. Each carries a grievance that can be transformed into hostility towards another community. The resulting violence is therefore cumulative rather than spontaneous. Dattani suggests that communal hatred is produced through a chain of remembered injuries, distorted histories, and inherited suspicions. The play consequently shifts attention from the question “Who is guilty?” to the more complex question “How is hatred produced and transmitted?”

The Chorus and its masks intensify this argument. Dattani employs the same group of actors to represent both Hindu and Muslim mobs. The masks change, but the performers remain the same. The theatrical device destabilises the supposed permanence of communal difference and exposes religious identity as something that can be socially performed and manipulated. Radha Ramaswamy observes that “Communal stereotyping is discouraged as Bobby recognizes in himself and Aruna a similar pride in their faith” (Ramaswamy xii-xiii).

The importance of this observation extends beyond the individual relationship between Bobby and Aruna. Dattani deliberately prevents the audience from regarding either religious community as internally homogeneous. Bobby and Javed, for example, respond differently to their Muslim identity, just as Aruna, Hardika, Ramnik, and Smita demonstrate different forms of Hindu consciousness. The masks worn by the Chorus therefore become symbolic of the dangerous simplification through which complex individuals are transformed into representatives of supposedly homogeneous communities.

The theatrical masks can also be understood through Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity and the “in-between” space. Bhabha challenges the assumption that cultural identities are fixed, pure, and self-contained. Dattani similarly destabilises rigid communal categories by demonstrating that individual identity is always negotiated. Bobby’s encounter with the Hindu sacred object, Ramnik’s complicated relationship with his family history, and Smita’s friendship with Tasneem all disturb the apparently stable opposition between Hindu and Muslim identities. The play thus opens a space in which cultural difference can be acknowledged without becoming a justification for hostility.

The role of Ramnik is especially significant in this regard. At first, he appears to represent secular rationality. He offers shelter to Bobby and Javed and attempts to distance himself from the communal attitudes of other members of his family. Yet his apparent liberalism is subsequently complicated by the revelation concerning his family’s economic history. His family had benefited from the destruction of Zarine’s family business. Consequently, Ramnik’s secular identity cannot be separated completely from the historical structures that produced his social position.

Dattani thereby refuses to create an uncomplicated distinction between the “liberal” self and the “communal” other. Ramnik’s character demonstrates that social privilege and historical complicity can coexist with liberal ideals. The discovery of his family’s past forces him into a position of ethical self-examination. The play consequently suggests that genuine secularism cannot be confined to verbal declarations; it requires an active confrontation with the prejudices and injustices embedded in one’s own history.

Javed and Bobby similarly complicate the representation of Muslim identity. They are not merely dramatic representatives of a minority community. Their contrasting personalities reveal the internal diversity of Muslim experience. Javed’s anger reflects alienation and accumulated resentment, whereas Bobby gradually moves towards a more reflective understanding of religious identity. Their differences undermine the stereotypical construction of the Muslim as inherently violent or intolerant.

The same strategy operates on the Hindu side. Hardika’s resentment, Aruna’s ritual orthodoxy, Ramnik’s secularism, and Smita’s comparatively open attitude demonstrate that Hindu identity cannot be reduced to a single ideological position. Dattani thus distributes prejudice and self-questioning across communities. The play’s moral complexity emerges from this refusal to construct an innocent group and a guilty group.

The significance of the Krishna idol episode becomes clearer within this framework. Bobby’s physical interaction with the idol unsettles Aruna’s assumption that religious sacredness can be protected only through rigid boundaries. His act creates a moment in which the supposedly inviolable distinction between Hindu and Muslim begins to collapse. The sacred object ceases to function exclusively as a marker of communal ownership and becomes an occasion for reflection on faith, fear, and human dignity.

The title *Final Solutions* further intensifies the play’s interrogation of communal identity. Sohini Pillai notes that the title recalls the Nazi euphemism “Final Solution” for the extermination of European Jews and argues that it ultimately compels spectators to ask, “Are there solutions to religious communalism?” (Pillai 107). The historical resonance of the phrase is deliberately unsettling. The word “final” suggests closure, permanence, and elimination, while the plural “solutions” undermines the possibility of one definitive answer to communal conflict.

The play’s emphasis on self-examination also distinguishes it from a conventional political drama. Dattani does not merely condemn riots, political leaders, or religious extremists. He asks spectators to recognise their own susceptibility to stereotypes. The audience is gradually placed in an uncomfortable position because the characters’ prejudices are not presented as distant abnormalities. They emerge from ordinary family relationships, religious practices, memories, and assumptions.

Dattani's dramatic method recalls the larger tradition of Indian literature concerned with the psychological consequences of communal division. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, and other literary works dealing with Partition and communal conflict similarly demonstrate that political boundaries can enter private lives and transform intimate relationships. Dattani's distinctive contribution lies in converting this historical and psychological problem into an intensely theatrical experience through masks, the Chorus, fragmented memory, and domestic confrontation.

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