

Mother-Daughter Conflict in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions*

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Abstract: *Filial relationships in the modern Indian family are at crossroads. The traditional icons of fatherhood, motherhood and filial piety are no longer valued as the prized possessions of Indian heritage and culture. Strained filial relationships are a commonplace in many contemporary Indian families in both rural and urban areas and are increasingly becoming potential sources for triggering conflict and brewing animosity in familial relationships. Mahesh Dattani who has earned considerable reputation for depicting family and social issues in a bold new light addresses this pertinent issue which is confronting the modern urban Indian family in some of his plays. This paper critically examines the mother-daughter hostility in Dattani's Sahitya Akademi award-winning play *Final Solutions* and shows how filial relationships buckle under pressure and tend to get impacted when their ideological differences are brought to the fore due to outside social pressure.*

Key words: *Filial piety, mother-daughter, motherhood, conflict, hostility.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dattani's *Final Solutions* is a very serious and delicate drama on the well-worn subject of communalism. It is first staged in Bangalore in 1993 focusing on the problem of communal disharmony between the Hindus and Muslims in India, especially during the period of the post-partition riot. The play highlights the intolerant attitude and the lack of accommodation between the two communities and unacceptability gives rise to acrimony resulting in terrorism and anarchy. The play itself is a question-mark on this age-old enmity between the two communities wondering if there would ever be a final solution to this endemic problem.

Though the play *Final Solutions* is outwardly focused on Hindu-Muslim communal hatred, the undercurrent theme is even more powerful for it unwinds the ideological differences and hostility amongst the members of Ramnik Gandhi's family with the entry of two young Muslim boys namely Javed and Bobby into the house. Javed and Bobby are chased by an angry fanatic Hindu mob which is on the leash during a curfew period. The unannounced arrival of these two outsiders into Ramnik Gandhi's house triggers panic in the family and gradually exposes the conflict between the mother and the daughter who have divergent views on the philosophy of religion in general and their own religion and culture, in particular.

The family unit comprises four members of different age groups and different generations. Ramnik Gandhi is a businessman, rational in outlook and is liberally disposed towards Muslims. His wife Aruna is a typical traditional Indian wife whose identity is confined to the pleasure of her husband and management of household. In terms of personality, she is a polar opposite of her husband Ramnik Gandhi. She is highly superstitious and exhibits a very strong sense of pride and faith in her religion and 'sanskar' (CP 210). Their only daughter Smita is an educated modern girl, sensible, rational and pragmatic and is more like her father. The eldest member in the family is Ramnik's widowed mother Hardika who spits venom at the very utterance of the word 'Muslim' or 'Islam.' Like her daughter-in-law she too is prejudiced against Muslims and their culture.

Religion as an institution has a tremendous hold on man. In principle, it gives him a sense of purpose and fulfilment in life. It gives him a reason to live and a reason to die. It preaches him to

live, to give, to forgive, to serve, to suffer for worthy causes and to work for peace and unity. In short, religion fosters a sense of moral obligation and higher spiritual consciousness in life. But there is a distinction between religion in theory and religion in practice. Religion in practice can be exploitative. In fact, exploitation by religion is commonplace all over the world, nowadays. India is no exception to this inhuman practice. The underlying philosophy of all religions of the world is humanity and tolerance based on morality. Invariably, all religions advocate the same system of belief. Hence, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with this oldest institution of the world. It is the very errant and self-centred nature of the man that blackens its humane side.

Aruna strongly believes in the supremacy of Hindu religion over all other religions. She is highly intolerant of Muslims because she does not appreciate their religion and culture. She is prejudiced against their ways and manners and despises them for their 'naturally' aggressive and violent character. When Javed and Bobby are allowed into the house by her husband, she strongly opposes their entry and chides her husband, "Why do you bring so much trouble on our heads" (CP 184). She suspects the young men's identity and is apprehensive that "they might have knives" (CP 186). She is very much aware of the harm and personal loss that her mother-in-law Hardika and her family suffered in the hands of Muslims during the partition time. Even though there is no eye witness to the killing of her father-in-law by Muslims, Aruna too, like her mother-in-law Hardika, believes that he was brutally murdered by them in the Hindu-Muslim riot. Hence, she does not want any such mishap to befall on her family. She says, "God knows, I don't want all this violence" (CP 210).

Aruna is a typical traditional woman who distrusts the role of education in a woman's life. She thinks that there are more maladies than advantages if a girl is sent out of the house for education. For her, education has had a corrupting influence over her daughter. When she learns of Smita's prior acquaintance with the Muslim boys at the college where she is studying, Aruna is shell-shocked. Hence, she is least concerned about educating her daughter further. She tells her husband, "Stop her studies! From now on, she can stay at home!" (CP 188). While Aruna is the conservative face of Hinduism, Smita, her daughter, like her father represents the liberal voice.

Smita does not like to adhere to her mother's narrow religious views and customs. The modern education she has received has taught her to be individualistic, rebellious and quite objective and rational in her attitude. Ever since she was a child, Smita has been leading a life of suffocation under the strict conditioning of her mother. Her freedom has been stifled by the religiosity of her mother. She sounds so desperately yearning for freedom when she says, "Maybe we should all run away from home" (CP 219). But, she has willingly sacrificed her individuality for her mother's happiness and satisfaction. By the strength of love and regard for her mother Smita has been able to endure all that she could not get along with. Smita tells her mother, "I love you mummy, that's why I did it. I listened to you and I obeyed you. I tolerated your prejudices only because you are my mother" (CP 213).

In the third act, Smita openly defies and criticizes her mother's conservative attitude and hollow religious orthodoxy when Aruna prevents Javed from touching the bucket with which she regularly fetches drinking water. It is with the same water that she bathes her gods. Hence, Aruna is afraid that the bucket gets defiled and even the water being carried in it gets 'contaminated' (CP 209) just by the touch of a Muslim. Generally, in conservative Hindu homes there has always been a tacit dislike for and disapproval of everything which is associated with Muslims to the extent that everything touched by them later is considered to be contaminated. Here, contamination is less a matter of bodily cleanliness and more an inner pollution that is the consequence of the consumption of forbidden, tabooed foods by Muslims. Aruna's subconscious mind protests at the thought of the eating habits of Muslims, "How can I, I won't even harm a goat or a chicken?" (CP 210).

Home is the first school and mother is the first teacher for a child. It is through her that a child learns and develops an understanding about various aspects concerning life. This is particularly true as regards the mother-daughter relationship. In her article "Mothers and Daughters: A Comparative Critique of Fasting, Feasting and Difficult Daughters" Choubey rightly remarks, "The conditioning begins at home and women are supposed to walk from mother's womb into mother's shoes" (387). Aruna has always taken pride in her religion due to the enlightenment she

received from her mother. She has never resisted or resented her mother when she forced her idiosyncrasies on her in religious matters. She has never felt her mother was stifling her. Moreover, she is so happy and grateful to her mother who had shown her “the path of truth” (CP 211). Now, she expects her daughter Smita also to emulate her. In this way, Aruna, unknowingly seeks to shape Smita after herself, and considers any attempt of her towards expression of individuality as an act of defiance. Aruna is shocked and visibly upset when she realizes that Smita has been helping her in her daily religious rituals only to please her and not out of any religious obligation or faith. Aruna feels perturbed by the fact that her daughter has not inherited any of her qualities. Her daughter’s lackadaisical attitude towards Hindu religion and culture is the result of her gross ignorance of her cultural roots and its invaluable legacy.

On the other hand, Smita, who reposes her faith in personal choice and freedom in life, dismisses her mother’s version of ‘the truth’ (CP 210) as not the only one and that she feels stifled in the house, “Like a rat in a hole” (CP 210). It is all right to have a firm faith in one’s own religion. But this faith should not be rigid to the extent that you become intolerant and start disrespecting other religions. Acharya Mahapragya remarks, “There’s no harm in believing ourselves, but we shouldn’t remain adamant in controlling our thoughts. We should try and explore all facets of truth, which is possible only when we can visualize truth from others’ points of view” (22). This is exactly what Smita tries to put into her mother’s head when Aruna enters into an argument with her about the time-honoured religious values and points out the eternal truth behind them:

ARUNA. . . I shall uphold what I believe is the truth.

SMITA. It is the truth only because you believe in it.

ARUNA. No! I will not accept that. Not from you.

SMITA. Why not?

ARUNA. I will not!

SMITA. You have to face it. You have to admit you are wrong!

ARUNA. You cannot tell me that I am wrong!

SMITA. Why not?

ARUNA. Because . . . because I will not accept that from someone who is not proud of her inheritance. (*Smita sits down, placing the brass pot lightly on her lap.*) You cannot criticize what you are running away from. You will be prejudiced. (CP 211)

The verbal repartee between the mother and the daughter gets personal as it reaches its acme, with Aruna and Smita losing their mental calm and flinging snide comments against each other. When Aruna questions Smita, “Does being a Hindu stifle you?” Smita gives a sharp retort, “No, living with one does” (CP 211).

A mother often regards her children as a part of herself. Out of this natural motherly instinct which is generally triggered by care and concern, she may, sometimes, try to make the children wholly dependent on her for everything and control their lives so that they will always remain safe and secured in life. If her attempts fail, she may be temporarily upset but soon reconciles herself to the given situation. Smita is secular in her view on religion and its purpose, whereas, Aruna is a zealous follower of Hinduism. In spite of their ideological differences, both Aruna and Smita wrap up their prejudices and end the conflict on a reconciliatory note. Smita apologizes to her mother, “I am sorry. I mean it” (CP 212) to which Aruna also positively reacts, “All right. Do what you think is best” (CP 212). Dattani seems to be agreeing with Adler’s view, who opines, “A battle with children is always a losing battle: they can never be beaten or won over to co-operation by fighting” (114).

The modern age is the age of intolerance. There is a question mark over the future of a healthy family. We don’t realize that with changing times, it is necessary to revise the old beliefs, traditions and the value systems. Today, relationships have become distant and families are disintegrating within the country and across the world. The nature of conversations between

parents and children is deteriorating. Each house seems to be burning with restlessness and resentment. In such an atmosphere, it is quite natural that fathers and mothers feel strongly opposed to any sort of rebellion from their sons and daughters. But, Dattani as a playwright and as an individual vouches for individual freedom, as a necessary aspect of life, continually, through his plays. He makes a fervent appeal to the parents to dispense with their 'You have to agree to whatever I say' attitude, be open-minded and allow their children to enjoy personal freedom and give them their due space in both professional and personal life. Otherwise, this rigid attitude of theirs is most likely to threaten the spirit of individualism of their children and create problems.

In the same way, sons and daughters also must realize that their parents are their true well-wishers and deserve respect and love for their age, experience and position in the family. In other words, tolerance is the protective armour for any family. It is only with the development of virtues of tolerance and peaceful co-existence that one can individually and collectively prosper in a family. Family life should be organized in such a manner that no member feels left out or isolated. This is why, in almost all of Dattani's plays, the locale of family takes centre stage and becomes an oft-repeated theme.

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