

Circle of Theory and Reception in Barthes's *The Death of an Author* and Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions*

- Priyam Singh

Abstract: Both the prominent texts that form part of the paper, namely, Roland Barthes's *Death of an Author* and playwright Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* have been involved in headline creations in not just their relevant sphere but also their effects on the political 'life' of the nation. This paper is an attempt to study the effects of such writing in contemporary times, Barthes's essay contextualized in Dattani's play and both of these in framework of its genre of writing. A comprehensive endeavour has been made to place 'The Death of an Author' within the body of reception theory and find application of these theorists as Hans R. Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and even Michel Foucault in 'Final Solutions' and post partition notions in India. Unlike many literatures that leave us with open questions, both the texts under consideration bring us plenty of ideas to explore, investigate and trace history and create understanding for a livable future presented in the paper. The reference to this paper and its inquiries is very immediate in these times of increased mirroring of monopolization of ideas and propagation of fixated ideologies and dismantles the homogenized idea of a 'Muslim' who can be Shia, Sunni or Khoja or if studied further even more distinct identities. In all, the paper is an effort to arrive at the need for coexistence and for that, the requirement of not necessarily consonance but even understanding disagreements.

Keywords: Reception Theory, Communalism, Multiplicity of narrator, Roland Barthes, Mahesh Dattani.

The late nineteenth century saw the death of god and post hoc if there has been any literary moment that has created equal momentum, it would not be entirely wrong to say that it is the essay by Roland Barthes published in 1968 titled 'The Death of the Author'. This paper will attempt to trace as well as contest the arguments set out by Barthes while contextualizing it in 'Final Solutions', a play written by Indian playwright Mahesh Dattani. Both the 'texts' have a vibrant afterlife for while the theoretical field is abuzz with scholarly reactions to Barthes, Dattani tries to capture within his timeframe a topic of communalism in India, which can in fact not be contained. As historian Romila Thapar says, "with

partition, communalism permeated everyday life". 'Death of the Author is a call to arms and not a funeral oration', Barthes has himself said and arming oneself with reasonable responses while seceding the only the absolute authority of 'the Author-God' is the motivation with which the paper proceeds. (Burke,Seane.p29)

The play 'Final Solutions' tells the story of a tense cohabiting of a Hindu family with three generations and two Muslim boys under the same roof for one night. Babban and Javed, who have sought shelter there have just escaped from a riot in which the latter was an active participant while a frenzied mob keeps thumping the door asking the Gandhi's to hand the two boys over to them. This mob acts as a constant threat and ensures that the voices of both the Hindus and Muslims do not lapse themselves from speech so that the dialogic conversation continues and thoughts that pre-exist the speech yet buried in the psyche is allowed to come out. Presence of a multiplicity of voices confirms the absence of an author supreme and throughout the play the stylistic use of the mob/chorus supplements the reader who is both inside and external to the text. On the lines of Greek Tragedy plays, the chorus interacts with the family as well as the boys, citing general prejudices with which any Hindu or Muslim reader reads or audience watches. There is a spill over towards the reader and in this case, Dattani most probably has what reception theory critic Wolfgang Iser had in mind, an 'implied reader' who is created out of the textual condition with meaning being produced simultaneously. (Kinoshita,p6). According to some of the performers of the play like Shilpi Marwah and Samina Sheikh of Asmita theatre group the 'performance of the chorus leaves the audience spellbound'. (Pillai,p90) The audience probably see, voiced in the chorus their own instincts. However it isn't necessary that the audience agrees with everything. Once as Dattani himself in the audience, noticed in a scene which happens at the end, a very sharp reaction. One that did not correspond with the playwright's own, in persona of what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss defines as 'horizon of expectations'. (Kinoshita,p6) The scene shows Babban pick up the idol of Krishna as the bell is ringing and Aruna performs the pooja. The Hindu person next to Dattani exclaimed that, 'he was going to break it'(twice), in a very charged voice and in some other location the same scene along with most of the play elicits a very meek Muslim audience. (Pillai,p75) This scene presents two separate imaginations from the audience and in the gap between Babban's consequent reconciling dialogue of the God not being vindictive, the reader of the scene fills with meaning according to his own epistemological dispensation.

Another category of readers which Iser has expostulated is the 'actual reader'. A stock of experiences that form a part of a reader's mind which help him in making a critique makes for an actual reader. Several

performances of this play have been successful in garnering discussions with an interested audience. A number of difficult extractions have been made from the play and while some have been extremely negative responses, there have also been those heartening experiences that have left the playwright feeling worthwhile for giving voice to a group that have often been pushed to the margins. In illustration of this, there has been huge applause for the reply to Hardika's question to Javed and Babban as to why they don't go back to Pakistan. Javed said that he'd rather prefer Dubai. It seems that even post partition there is a threat of discrimination for the same reasons as if once was not enough. And that as a result of this schism, several Pakistans exist within India. To announce it on stage that if India will not be their homeland for failing to keep the plurality it boasts of, they can move to Dubai for they are not fixated on Pakistan is a step that dismantles many stereotypical opinions about Muslims within India. Once Dattani was told for letting a Muslim touch a Hindu statue, his head would be chopped off had he been a Muslim. So there is recognition of what the play depicts, communalism as a feature lies deep within us but the play also shows that despite the tension, the two communities survive the night. A number of other readings have been made by the audience including how money as well as drunken reverie makes lonely souls like Javed give in to the company of riteers and possibly find a sense of unity otherwise withdrawn from them as a Muslim. The audience also realizes that between the partition and now, things have not changed much but there are sundry voids still left to be filled by confronting issues mentioned above.

The single family and the boys here act as representative of the Hindu and Muslim communities respectively for evidently in the realm of Communalism, personal is political. The central concept of 'the death of the author' which is to challenge the omniscient author is made apparent in the play for each of the characters seems to inhabit themselves in what seems to them like the complete truth but is in conversation countered by another. For example, in Act three when Ramnik Gandhi, the Hindu father questions Javed, the participant in the riot as to what he got out of perpetrating such violence, the latter said that it was for a cause. He blames 'people like Ramnik', implicating the whole community for provoking him to turn towards his faith and its cause. As a response Ramnik, full of wrath charges Javed, "How dare you blame your violence on other people?" It is in you! You have violence in your mind. Your life is based on violence. Your faith is based on... (He stops but it is too late.)" Javed instantly replies- "Now say that you don't provoke me". Javed does not accept Ramnik's apology henceforth and reveals the incomplete knowledge of Ramnik even about himself. Javed elucidates to Ramnik, "You hate me because I showed you that you are not as liberal as you

think.”(Dattani,p39-40).Suvir Kaul in the edited collection 'The Partitions of Memory', highlights the importance of fiction in shaping perceptions of this period in history and how each time its stories are made and remade we learn about our changing social and political values.(Didur,p8) The incident described above displaces the confidence of each community in their definitive tales when prodded by the other group who is the reader and vice-versa as both unfold concealed secrets as the play progresses. This shows that the 'text'(Barthes, From Work to text) is being redefined or in fact just created as it is being uttered 'here and now' as one can sense Ramnik barely being able to control his parole.

The stage direction of the playwright is to view the whole story through the eyes of the grandmother Hardika, who is shown as constantly referring back to 1948, forty years in the past. Thus, it can be seen that she is looking at her past historical knowledge and experience to continue to denounce the Muslims. However, there is a missing link of which she is unaware and its wisdom makes her change her opinion at the end. The Khoja (Shia Muslim) friend who had insulted Daksha at her dining table was only reacting to her father's factory outlet being burnt in a communal riot in the 1940's and not because she disliked Daksha for being a Hindu. So, the woman through whose eyes the whole play should be seen existed in an information lack herself for forty years. What is interesting is that the news that Hardika recovered after decades was concealed from her, by her husband, in-laws and then son consecutively so the narrative did not even belong to a different community. On the point of the author being all knowing, Dattani himself counters the view as the impression of directing this play in Matthan,2008, told him. “I really enjoyed this first production because I felt that I had discovered a lot about a play from discussions with actors which I had researched for over a year.”(Pillai,p74)It is also important to know that when Dattani was commissioned to write a play on communal violence by Alyque Padamsee as India was being consumed by its fire in the early nineties, Dattani created the character of Daksha/Hardika because 'he felt that so much of it(communalism) goes back in time'.(Pillai,p47) Clearly, an author born in 1958 could not have inhabited 1948 at any time. So the author as Barthes says of authors does not pre-exist his work but in fact transforms the modern text by the act of writing, inserting a very crucial subject and backdrop of partition in the story. Thus the Author is embedded in a universal text from which his life can be extracted, thus the language becomes all constitutive. Again as Barthes says in the essay, language knows a “subject” not a “person”.

Jill Didur's book, *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory* presents the concept of 'rhetorically sensitive' approach to reading introduced by Gayatri Spivak. Most partition literature according to

Didur is read as 'record' or 'gossip' rather than literary representation of the historical period. By Spivak's new concept an examination of the 'literariness of partition literature makes language part of its content'(Didur,p10). While 'Final Solutions' is not particularly one that belongs to partition, it carries the scar of this period which is obvious in the use of the discriminating pronouns 'we' and 'they' in the conversation between the chorus and Ramnik in the first act. The chorus calls out to Ramnik to 'thwart them. So we may live in peace.' (Dattani,p22) Ramnik doesn't give in to such demands and questions, who this 'we' and 'they' are. The mob replies that 'we' are right to which Ramnik creates a doubt and is declared a traitor by them. Ramnik then accomplishes to retain the vitality of language from fictionalizing because he stands in the way of the mob to protect the boys. Actually, he is suspicious of this notion of the mob and evading the trap of appropriating a discourse laden with ideological implications. Thus, it is language which encompasses literature or any subject within it, an interpellation will not be able to overwhelm it and hold greater sway. This is probably how Barthes 'furnishes the destruction of the Author' implying the non-admittance of his intention.

Michel Foucault in his essay, 'What is an author', identifies that at the breaks of the text where proper noun authors are absent there is a floating presence called the author function. According to him the idea of the Author is not a romantic excess within modernism and is meant for arranging things within cultural studies which act as agents of facilitation than creation. Foucault provides technologies of knowledge, domination and power and in this way then allows as well as limits the emergence of the reader. It is within Hans Jauss's theory of 'social dimension of reading' which means that the reader comes to interpret from the historical and social standpoint. Stanley Fish also has some basic interpretative strategies through which a text can be comprehended. The derived understandings according to Fish will not be too unusual from the training acquired in academic institutions; where a number of options are available but not arbitrary and infinite. However, he clarifies that there is nothing whatsoever imminent in the work itself. (Eagleton,72-74)The reader's position in Barthes theory lies in conflict to all mentioned above. It is important to realize that Barthes who wrote after all these reception theorists except Foucault argued for the freedom of the reader from all cultural diversities. Barthes says that 'the reader is a man without history, biography, psychology, he is someone who holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted.' However, any community or individual reader is situated within inequitable resources

and their subjectivity is bound to surface. Therefore liberation from the body of the author cannot justify the absolute reign of the reader. When there were auditions held in America for 'Final Solutions', a number of people walked out and even its review was good only in places with dense South-Asian population. Sohini Pillai who worked out a thesis on this play in a college abroad intended to begin a performance of this play, only after narrating some history of communalism. So clearly the cultural position of the audience also matters. As Foucault equipped the author with the techniques that influence and dominate, the reader now conversant with the earlier power can assimilate all of these in a single field and work with the whole Foucaultian process as it moves in a circle of theories before a single practice is established and lead to a concretization of meaning. The latter, Jauss's concept is a resultant set up historically within the 'framework of a certain logic creating and transforming the aesthetic canon'. (Kinoshita, p5)

The language in which Final Solutions has been written has attracted immense scrutiny. Time and again Dattani has been asked why he writes in English and his simple answer is, 'I do'. Although millions of Indians still do not know the English language, there are many who do and in fact like Dattani been educated in English-Medium schools and consider it very much an Indian language. So as to reach across to the rest of the Indians various translations have been made in Dogri (Kashmir) as well as the well received one in Hindi by Shahid Anwer. When Anwer was translating the text, the playwright was very anxious because the subject of the play was and continues to be a sensitive one. However he was satisfied because in Hindi or English the versions maybe different but the content and the connection for the Indian audience turned out just as strong. With the portrayal of Hindi-Urdu as hardly different in speech apart from those words used in religious conversations like call for prayers being pooja for Hindus and azaan for Muslims, the subject of flaring communalist sentiment might probably have been identified.

The closure of the play confronts us with the disconcerting fact that we are yet to arrive at any final solutions. It strongly reminds us that "despite the numerous homilies and sermonizings we distribute to each other day in and day out, in actual real terms most of us give little recognition and less regard to the faith and beliefs of the 'other'." (Multani, p73) As explicated by Barthes the codes can be played around with but not completely obliterated. Javed says to Aruna at the end that if she was ready to forgive then he was ready to tolerate. So the most stringent practitioner of their respective faiths are the one who really understand and respect each other's spaces. As Paul Ricouer has said, that when you

notice that you have lost but the other has lost too and the loss is shared, the demon of communal violence can be laid to rest. The text also lays out that there is no one final 'solution' but the possibility of resolving the problem might exist in 'solutions' which is the co-existence of both and more because there plurality of identities persists, no one of which is the same.

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