The Spatial-Temporal Canvas That We Call the Stage: Text and Performance in *Final Solutions*

Sahne Dediğimiz Mekânsal-Zamansal Tuval: *Final Solutions* Adlı Oyunda Metin ve Performans

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ABSTRACT

The article studies the significance and function of stage directions in Mahesh Dattani's *Final Solutions* (1993). The stage directions propel the play-text to transcend into a performative script. Scholars Jisha Menon (2013) and Aparna Dharwadker (2005) commend Dattani's 'innovative' dramaturgy for realistically representing the urban-middle-class home along with the complex social issues pervading this social milieu. This article argues for their assertion and extends their studies by examining the source of Dattani's inventive stagecraft – his stage directions. It argues that Dattani challenges the label of dramatic text through his stage construction and stage directions. These directions add theatricality and render a visual appeal to the written text, which acts as a 'drama' for the students and critics of literature and a 'fabel' or a blueprint for other directors. The ostension of multiple levels of space-time in the text through stage directions reifies the mise-en-scene in the readers' minds and also foregrounds Dattani's reformist method of creating a conflict in his readers/audiences' minds. Using a comparative analysis of the stage directions in the play-text by Dattani and a stage production by the Delhi-based Asmita Theatre under the direction of Arvind Gaur, it foregrounds Dattani's extravagant and complex construction of the stage. It studies his distinct usage of the stage as a 'spatial-temporal' entity and establishes that Dattani's stage directions are quintessential to his reformist agendas.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, Post-Independence Indian Theatre, Indian Stagecraft, Reform, *Final Solutions*

ÖZ

Bu makale, Mahesh Dattani'nin *Final Solutions* (1993) adlı eserinde sahne yönergelerinin anlamını ve işlevini incelemektedir. Sahne yönergeleri, oyun metnini performatif bir senaryoya dönüştürmektedir. Araştırmacılar Jisha Menon (2013) ve Aparna Dharwadker (2005), Dattani'nin 'yenilikçi' dramaturjisinin, kentsel orta sınıf evini ve bu sosyal ortamı etkileyen karmaşık sosyal sorunları gerçekçi bir şekilde temsil etme konusunda övgüye değer olduğunu belirtmişlerdir. Bu makale, bu değerlendirmeyi savunur ve Dattani'nin yaratıcı sahne tasarımı ile sahne yönergelerinin kaynaklarını inceleyerek bu çalışmaları genişletir. Makale, Dattani'nin sahne inşası ve sahne yönergeleri aracılığıyla dramatik metin etiketine meydan okuduğunu savunur. Bu yönergeler, yazılı metne teatral bir nitelik katar ve ona görsel bir çekicilik kazandırır; böylece metin, edebiyat öğrencileri ve eleştirmenler için bir 'drama', diğer yönetmenler içinse bir 'fabel' veya taslak olarak işlev görür. Sahne yönergeleri aracılığıyla metindeki çoklu zaman-mekân düzeylerinin gösterilmesi, okurların zihnindeki mizanseni somutlaştırırken, Dattani'nin okurların/seyircilerin zihninde bir çatışma yaratmaya yönelik yenilikçi yöntemini de ön plana çıkarır. Delhi merkezli Asmita Tiyatrosu'nun Arvind Gaur tarafından yönetilen sahne prodüksiyonu ile Dattani'nin oyun metnindeki sahne yönergelerinin karşılaştırmalı analizi kullanılarak, Dattani'nin sahne tasarımının ne kadar gösterişli ve karmaşık olduğu vurgulanır. Makale, Dattani'nin sahneyi 'mekânsal-zamansal' bir varlık olarak kullanma biçimini inceler ve sahne yönergelerinin onun reformist gündemlerini yansıtmada ne kadar önemli olduğunu ortaya koyar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mahesh Dattani, Bağımsızlık-Sonrası Hint Tiyatrosu, Hint Sahneciliği, Reform, *Final Solutions*.

Introduction

In the Indian dramatic tradition, the stage has been a significant aspect of theatrical performances. From classical Sanskrit theatre, which was governed by one of the most comprehensive compendiums of dramaturgy and performing arts, the *Natyasastra* (c.200 BCE-200 CE), to the modern Indian theatre, influenced by European techniques of stagecraft, the inclusion of the stage as an integral part of the story has been observed in every tradition of Indian drama. Even regional folk theatre forms such as *Jatra*[1] and *Yakshagana*[2] from Bengal and Karnataka, respectively, use a minimalist[3] and precisely designed stage to depict scenes ranging from a palace to a battlefield. In terms of stagecraft, post-independence Indian drama is an amalgamation of all these traditions. However, the most prominent influence on it is that of the European realist theatre. R. K. Yajnik, in his book, *The Indian Theatre* (1933), observes:

> There is a distinct line of continuity from the Gupta golden age […] when Kalidasa wrote plays for the Gupta royal court theatre and the Sanskrit drama reached its zenith, through its decline and ruin after the Mohammedan conquest in the twelfth century and the cultivation of the medieval "Mystery and Morality" popular stage in the villages, where this type of play still lingers down to the most modern performances on the Indian stage. In fact, the Indian theatre of today marks the meeting point of three main streams, viz., the ancient classical drama, the medieval popular stage and the British influence. (p. 19)

Yajnik's assertion, while valid for plays written during the pre-independence era, does not emphasize the overarching presence of European theatre models in the post-independence dramatic tradition. The use of the stage in the post-independence period has largely been a conjugation of Indian stories with the techniques of European stagecraft. Playwrights such as Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) and Vijay Tendulkar departed[4] consciously from the earlier conventions of theatre in terms of form and content. When studied in comparison, the stage directions of the post-independence Indian playwrights appear in conformity with the modern European playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

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[1] *Jatra* (meaning a procession) emerged in the 15th-century Bhakti movement of Krishnaism by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It began as a procession of dance performance by the devotees. Later, from the 19th century onwards, religious fervour was replaced by secular themes.

[2] *Yakshgana* means the songs of the demi-gods. It developed between the 11th and the 13th centuries in Karnataka. It is a combination of traditional dance, drama, and music to present stories from mythology and other cultural legends.

[3] In terms of stage props, this is used to amplify the atmosphere on stage.

[4] See Vasudha Dalmia's *Poetics, Plays, and Performances.* According to Dalmia, the most obvious difference between the drama of the pre-and post-independence eras is the playwrights' departure from allegorical patriotism to the inner worlds of the people.

Mohan Rakesh (2015) for instance, describes in his *Asadh Ka Ek Din* (One Day in the Season of Rain, [1958], 2015) the house of Mallika[5] in his opening stage directions:

> *An ordinary room. The walls are made of wood, but their lower portion is plastered with smooth clay. Hindu swastika symbols are painted here and there in vermilion. The front door opens into a dark entranceway. On either side of the doorway are small niches containing little unlit clay lamps. A door upstage left leads to a second room. When this door is open, only one corner of a simple bed is visible.* (p. 69)

Rakesh's precise stage directions corroborate irrefutably to Ibsen's stage construction, as observed in his *A Doll's House* ([1879], 2018). Ibsen (2018) describes in the opening directions:

> *A room furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly. At the back, a door to the right leads to the entrance-hall, another to the left leads to Helmer's study. Between the doors stands a piano. In the middle of the left-hand wall is a door, and beyond it a window. Near the window are a round table, armchairs and a small sofa. In the right-hand wall, at the farther end, another door; and on the same side, nearer the footlights, a stove, two easy chairs and a rocking-chair; between the stove and the door, a small table. Engravings on the walls; a cabinet with china and other small objects; a small bookcase with well-bound books. The floors are carpeted, and a fire burns in the stove […]* (p. 6)

These stage directions, located almost three-fourths of a century apart, present sharp evidence of the influence of Western realist drama on its Indian counterpart. The stage in the various streams of Indian theatre post-independence has predominantly been proscenium. Experimentations in terms of stagecraft were mostly in terms of the backdrops and sceneries as employed by the various Parsi theatre companies during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, or in terms of the use of modified "rectangular platforms" (in Tanvir, 2016, p. 11) for creating a separate space for ritualistic performances by Habib Tanvir (1923–2008). Conversely, playwrights such as Tendulkar used the proscenium stage to present the psyche and sufferings of individuals in urban-middle-class society on stage. Later, influenced by the Theatre of the Roots movement during the 1970s, the stage was used to present modern renditions of classical Sanskrit plays.

Nevertheless, the same cannot be claimed about the plays written in English, as Radha Ramaswamy notes in her introduction to the 2006 edition of the *Final Solutions*:

> An examination of the early history of this drama [Indian drama in English] reveals that most writers wrote only one or two plays. Asif Currimbhoy, with twenty-five plays, is the exception. T.P. Kailasam and Nissim Ezekiel wrote about half a dozen plays each. Of the 400 odd plays written between the end of the nineteenth century and 1970, almost all are closet plays – that is they have not been produced for the stage. In fact, many

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[5] A central character in the play.

were not even written with performance in mind. (p. xi)

It was only during the 1980s and the 1990s that Indian English playwrights emphasized the stage as the central aspect of theatrical performances. With the emergence of playwrights such as Manjula Padmanabhan (born 1953), Uma Parmeswaran (born 1938), Poile Sengupta (born 1948), Dina Mehta, and Mahesh Dattani, attention was directed towards "Performance" (Schechner, 1973, p. 8). Their plays, especially Dattani's, have been credited by Aparna Dharwadker (2005) as the first playwright to initiate "a new phase in the naturalization of English as a theatre medium in India" (p. 83).

A brief overview of the extant scholarship on Dattani reveals a dearth of attention towards his stagecraft. A tautological pattern emerges, pointing to more scholarly attention toward the thematic reverberations of the latent and deep-rooted issues in the Indian socio-cultural milieu in his plays. One of the most renowned studies on Dattani and specifically on *Final Solutions* is undertaken by Jisha Menon in her *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (2013), in which she studies the generation of traumatic memories through mimesis and political performances that "transform into strident and implacable politics of identity" (p. 3). Another major work on Dattani is Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri's *Mahesh Dattani: An Introduction* (2005), that studies in detail the themes of communal prejudices, ruptured identities, complexities of familial bonds, and generational conflicts. Also significant in this regard are the essays in the collection *Indian Drama in English* (2011) edited by Kaustav Chakraborty. The essays, such as *History Through Modernity: An Analysis of Final Solutions,* by Samipendra Banerjee and *Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions: A Reconsideration,* by Ketaki Datta, examine comprehensively the profound socio-cultural issues that the play presents.

Arguably, the only significant attention to Dattani's stagecraft and his use of the stage as a space projecting multiple time periods is found in Aparna Dharwadker's *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005) and in a chapter titled *Reading the Stage: The Self-Reflexivity of the Texts* in Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri's book. Their analyses do not track beyond the visible functions of the stage directions, viz., to represent the living rooms of modern Indian homes. The article furthers Dharwadker's (2005) assertion that Dattani's dramaturgy presents on stage the "home" as a place of resentment, neurosis, confrontation" and "barely suppressed violence" (p. 277). It explores the subtleties of depths that his stagecraft adds to his plays both at the technical and the thematic level. It traces his

stage directions as the source of his theatrical vision, a process which Richard Schechner (1973) defines as "scening" (p. 13) that involves the manifestation of the play as scenes to the playwrights.

Mahesh Dattani, inspired by his role models such as Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Paul Zindel,[6] chose to write for the stage to present a realistic picture of urban Indian society. He has carved a distinct niche for himself among the contemporary generation of Indian English playwrights by virtue of what Aparna Dharwadker (2005) calls "inventive dramaturgy" (p. 277). Dattani's utilization of the "stage" as a space that "either represents several domestic spaces simultaneously or several spaces among which home is central" (2005, p. 277) has established him as the emancipator of Indian English drama from overt literariness. He has also been the director for all his plays and has infused stage directions in a manner that, when read in the context of the story, appear as complements to the dialogues and conversations between the characters. Dattani's stage direction is a crucial link between the various layers of the plot and the events and incidents[7] that propel the story forward. Evaluating the significance of his stagecraft in *Final Solutions*, the article studies Dattani's stage directions as an integral part of his reformist agendas. His stage directions provide ample evidence of his seriousness as a director who implants an accurate picture of the scene in his readers. The article, for this purpose, attempts to present a contrast between Dattani's stage direction and the stage directions used in a different (Asmita Theatre's 2020) production of *Final Solutions* by Arvind Gaur. The contrast does not intend to prove one director's vision better than the other; instead, it only emphasizes Dattani's intricate and profoundly creative imagination that helps him imagine a stage while writing the play.

Dattani calls the stage a 'spatial-temporal' canvas that can hold the audience's sense of space and time for a specific duration. The audience has to surrender their beliefs of space-time and is required to absorb the story's timeline, which is made possible through the use of the stage and the actors. Thus, the stage becomes a powerful entity that brings alive a story through actions and makes drama one of the most sophisticated forms of storytelling. Besides the gripping stories, themes, and subjects of his plays, it is his use of the stage as a tool to present the latent yet pervading social issues that has placed Dattani distinctly among Indian English playwrights and made him a pioneer of reformist Indian playwrighting. To study Dattani's stagecraft, it is

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[6] See Utpal K Banerjee in Conversation with Mahesh Dattani. Indian Literature, 2004, Vol 48, no. 5. pp. 161-167.
[7] Dattani distinguishes events from incidents by stating that events are planned happenstances in a play while incidents are impulsive, coincidental and arising from the character.

quintessential primarily to study his stage construction and use of the space through precise directions.

Dattani's Stage: Constructing A Space Beyond Time

John McRae (2016) writes in his introduction to *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) that "Mahesh Dattani is always adventurous in his ways of using the theatrical space at his disposal: multiple levels, breaking the bounds of the proscenium, wondrously inventive use of lighting to give height, breadth and depth…." (p. 60). Dattani's stage construction involves multiple sections and levels. Both in *Final Solutions* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai,* his stage is divided into separate areas and levels that perform diverse functions, ranging from suspending characters in a "shoonya," nothingness (Dattani, 2005, p. 64); to confronting their inner thoughts as in *Muggy Night*; and to reflect the perspectives and positions of the characters within the story as in *Final Solutions.* Dattani (2005), in his stage description for *Muggy Night,* notes:

> *The stage is divided into three acting areas. The first is a small flat, beautifully done in 'ethnic chic' fashion… The windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city with its glittering lights…*
>
> *The second area, a completely non-realistic set comprising three levels, is black and expansive. Characters in this area are immediately suspended in a 'shoonya' where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts.*
>
> *Below this is Kamlesh's bedroom. The bedroom is realistic, but hidden behind a gauze wall, giving it some mystery and secrecy.* (p. 64)

This division of stage, while appearing complex and profound in the description, becomes challenging for other directors to reconstruct. The contrast to Dattani's ingenuity is reflected in the minimalist use of the stage by other directors in their productions of the plays. Arvind Gaur, for instance, in his production of *Final Solutions*, keeps the furniture minimal to allow space for his mob/chorus, who are far greater in number than what is prescribed by Dattani. Another remarkable example of Dattani's expansive stage construction can be found in his play *Dance Like a Man* (1989). Dattani (2005) again uses the stage as a space transcending chronological constraints and establishes the contrast between past and present, the old and the modern, through his directions:

> *A dimly-lit room in an old-fashioned house in the heart of the city… a huge arched doorway. There is a rather modern-looking rear panel behind the entrance with a telephone and a modern painting on it…* (p. 448)

As fascinating as the description appears, it becomes immensely challenging for a director to create a stage with similar magnitudes of diversity. Mithran Devanesen (2005), another director who has

directed *Dance Like a Man,* notes in his introduction to the play:

The challenge to both my actors and myself as director was not just to bring the issues the play raises to the fore but also to bridge Dattani's verbal ingenuity with a strong visual element.

> I used a minimalistic approach to set design, which gave me the freedom to choreograph movement and composition with broad strokes, sometimes sculptural in quality and often fluid like a dancer in full flow… (p. 445)

What is evident from the above examples is that Dattani's stage has its signature traits that other directors seldom emulate. The primary reason for this stark contrast in stage construction is the playwright's grand vision when writing the play. His text becomes performative in the elaborate stage directions that help the reader create a vivid image of the stage in their minds.

A salient characteristic of Dattani's stage construction is that his stage is expansive and diverse, involves a high degree of fluidity in time, and can present the contrast between present and past on a single set. Hence, the stage in Dattani's plays evolves as an entity with its own distinct characteristics. However, how it complements the story and what its role is in the accomplishment of Dattani's reformist aspirations is a question that we shall explore in the following section.

Staging Reform: Social Issues in *Final Solutions*

Dattani's fourth play, *Final Solutions,* was banned from the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival in 1992 due to the communal riots, which was then performed in 1993 (in Ramaswamy, 2005, p. viii). The plot revolves around the central character, Ramnik Gandhi, and his family, which includes his mother, Daksha/Hardika, his wife, Aruna, and his daughter Smita. It presents contrasting perspectives on religious faith and communal disharmony from three generations of the family. The play can also be read as a commentary on the thought process of people who are self-proclaimed liberals. Dattani tests Ramnik's liberal mindset by introducing Bobby, another central character who deliberately renounces his religious identity, and Javed, Bobby's binary opposite, who was brainwashed into extremism. Both of them are from a different religion and have been chased by a blood-thirsty mob but refuse to accept Ramnik as their savior. Maintaining the uniformity of his stage construction from his earlier plays, Dattani, in *Final Solutions* as well, uses multiple areas and levels for different characters. The play opens with a comprehensive description of the first appearance of the stage, as Dattani (2005) notes:

> *The stage is dominated by a horse-shoe or crescent-shaped ramp, with the end sloping to the stage level. Most of the actions of the Mob/Chorus take place on the ramp… Within the confines of the ramp is a structure suggesting the house of the Gandhis with just wooden blocks for furniture. However, upstage, perhaps on an elevation, is a detailed kitchen and a puja room. On another level is a room with a roll-top desk and an oil lamp converted to an electric one, suggesting that the period is the late 1940s.* (p. 3)

Dattani presents a vivid distinction between the past and the present perspectives on the stage by dividing the stage into different levels. The detailed stage direction also establishes the different periods on a single stage, from the 1940s to "after forty years" (Dattani, 2005, p. 6). The vivid directions describing the construction of the horse-shoe or crescent-shaped ramp levelling down to the platform, where Ramnik's family is positioned, allow him to establish the dominant presence of the mob/chorus in the play. Dattani goes further by adding levels to his stage and notes that there is a kitchen and Puja room on an elevated level symbolising the purity and reverence associated with these places in a Hindu household. Also, the position of Daksha/Hardika's room on another elevated level with an oil lamp suggests both – the retrospective view of the past and the higher position that older adults hold in Indian families.

The story begins with Daksha's reading of the events around the independence from her diary:

> DAKSHA (*reads from her diary*) "Dear Diary, today is the first time I have dared to put my thoughts on your pages. (*Thinks for a while.*) Today? ... *(Picks up a pen and scribbles).* 31 March 1948. (Reads out.) 31 March 1948. (Dattani, 2005, p. 4)

The stage directions in this fragment, "reads from the diary, thinks for a while", though appearing trivial, perform two essential functions: a. they make the character come alive for the reader, and b. they help the actor to make it realistic and believable. This process of highlighting the intricacies of human nature is what Vasudha Dalmia has called the individuation of characters in her book *Poetics, Plays and Performances* (2006). Dattani, through such trivial yet significant directions, presents a natural person on stage instead of contrived characters. The significance of these trivial stage directions is affirmed by Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri (2005), who says that "[I]t is in a performance that the text reveals its meanings and intentions through skilful acting in an environment designed with the appropriate measure of visual drama" (p. 108). By placing strategically these small stage directions, Dattani provides infinite spaces for infinite actors to enact the same scene in different environments and with varying degrees of skill. Gaur's production provides further evidence emphasizing the significance of stage directions as the blueprint for

future renditions. The actress playing Hardika in Gaur's production indeed "reads from the diary" and "thinks for a while," however, she performs these actions as if talking to the audience and thus makes the directions and the text, in Chaudhuri's terms, become "self-reflexive" (Chaudhuri, 2005, p. 106).

Figure a. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* Hardika breaks the fourth wall while reading from the diary. (Timestamp, 08:17) ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

The play (text) proceeds with Daksha placing the diary near her feet and Hardika (old Daksha) picking it up. Dattani writes in the stage direction that Daksha leaving her diary, rises up, and a slow drumbeat is heard while she stands behind Hardika with her back to the audience (Dattani, 2005, p. 6). Through this small act of placing and picking up the diary, Dattani represents a passage of forty years and the transition of time. The same transition in Arvind Gaur's production is depicted through the costumes and makeup of the characters (Hardika wearing a white sari and a white wig to denote her old age).

Figure b. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* A still representing the transition from Daksha (in yellow sari) to Hardika (in white sari). (Timestamp, 08:18) ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

Dattani, in his stage directions, emphasises specifically the actions of the mob/chorus. While writing the play, he very neatly delineates the appearance of the mob/chorus on stage and their transition from chorus to the mob and vice-versa. He notes:

> *The Mob/Chorus comprises five men and ten masks on sticks. The masks are strewn all over the ramp. The player 'wears' a mask by holding the stick in front of him… There are five Hindu masks and five Muslim masks. The Mob/Chorus become the chorus when they 'wear' either the Hindu or the Muslim masks… The players of the Mob/Chorus do not belong to any religion and ideally should wear black.* (Dattani, 2005, p. 3)

Contrastingly, Arvind Gaur, in his production, presents the mob by increasing the number of players in the mob/chorus (approximately twenty). There are no multiple elevated levels for different characters and groups. The image below from the YouTube channel of his theatre group, Asmita Theatre, highlights the difference between Gaur and Dattani's direction**.**

Figure c. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* A still depicting the mob. (Timestamp, 21:09). ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

Significantly, the chronological distance between Dattani's writing and Gaur's production of the play is almost three decades, and Dattani did not have the technological advantage that Gaur had[8] in 2020[9]. Nevertheless, both Dattani's text and Gaur's production successfully establish the domineering presence of the mob/chorus on the stage. The only significant difference is that Dattani uses only five players on an elevated stage with masks "strewn all over the ramp" (Dattani, 2005, p. 3) to establish an idea of the mob. In contrast, Gaur, given the austerity of his stage, brings in a real mob to perform the mob sequences. Arvind Gaur's production does not rely on masks and black costumes but makes all the players wear white shirts and black trousers. Dattani's emphasis on the mob/chorus' use of masks to change identities from Hindu to Muslim and vice-versa highlights the faceless mob mentality in both communities, and the readers/audiences are questioned about their opinions on the mob from their respective communities. Also, Dattani mentions in his stage directions that the mob/chorus, once behind the masks, becomes more frenetic, and their actions are accompanied by a slow drumbeat that grows louder once they go behind the mask. The transition of the chorus into a mob is also highlighted through Dattani's directions. He presents a crowd in which, even if there is a counterpoint, it fades due to their aggressive actions, and their "questions become statements" (Dattani, 2005, p. 7):

> CHORUS 1: *(pounding with his stick)*. Send … them … back.
>
> Pause
>
> CHORUS 4: *(questioning)*. Send them back?
>
> CHORUS 2: *(pounding with his stick)*. Drive … them … out.
>
> Pause.
>
> CHORUS 5: *(questioning)*. Drive them out?
>
> CHORUS 3: Kill the sons of swine!
>
> *"They repeat their lines till they overlap. CHORUS 4 and 5 get more aggressive till their questions become statements. By the end of it, they are an unruly mob crying out for blood* […]". (Dattani, 2005, p. 7)

Aldous Huxley, in his appendix to *The Devils of Loudon* (1922), calls this fanaticism "crowd-delirium" and deems it "immediately more dangerous to social order […] to reasonableness and mutual tolerance […] than either drink or debauchery" (p. 364). Dattani achieves the effect of delirium through the lucid directions along with the intense dialogues. His representation of a mob

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[8] 'This is not to suggest that Gaur's directorial vision is dependent on technology. On the contrary, he keeps the stage furniture minimum and allows the actors to drive the story forward.
[9] Asmita Theatre's YouTube channel states the year of uploading this performance as 2020.

and its actions presents, in Eugenio Barba's (2010) words, "a recognisable space…transformed by the forces of performance" (p. 45). For the readers/audience, this transformation occurs in both the physical space (the stage) and the reader's mind, making them aware of their perceptions of the mob and questioning them. Stage directions from the playwright become more crucial in scenes where the mob becomes vengeful and bloodthirsty. For instance, in Act II, when the mob heckles Bobby and Javed and then chases and beats them, the chilling atmosphere is not evoked by the dialogues and argument between Bobby, Javed, and the mob, instead it is Dattani's stage direction that creates a sense of horror and fear, giving goosebumps to the reader:

> CHORUS 2: Look what he has! *(Fishes out a prayer cap from Javed).*
>
> *Chorus 1 takes the cap and covers Javed's face with it. Javed deliberately wears it on his head with dignity, whereas Bobby has removed his handkerchief. The Mob/Chorus picks up the Hindu masks on a slow drumbeat* […]
>
> CHORUS ALL: You pray to a God you do not know! You pray to a nothing. You do not know his form. And you seek to destroy our gods! Drive them out! […]
>
> *The Chorus give chase and some of their blows strike the two men who cry out in* […] *The young men come to the door – it could either be a real door or a barebone representation of it – of the Gandhis. They shout and pound at the door, crying out, 'Help us! Save us! For God's sake, somebody save us!'*
>
> *Ramnik and Aruna come to the door but do not open it. A spot on Hardika and Daksha as they both cover their ears while the two men continue with their appeals. Smita enters too. Ramnik finally opens the door and the two men enter and quickly shut the door behind them* […]. (Dattani, 2005, p. 19)

The exact sequence in Gaur's production is presented by the mob holding the two men by their arms and collars, and when it is established that they are Muslims (when one of the mob players' finds a skull cap in Javed's pocket), they run around the empty half of the stage enacting a chase. Javed and Bobby are chased by the mob, who simultaneously chant religious slogans.

Figure d. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* The mob chases Bobby and Javed. (Timestamp; 22:32). ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

The contrast here is not between how the scenes are presented but between the realism of Gaur and Dattani's precise language in his stage directions. The "disgusting vice of herd-intoxication – of downward self-transcendence into sub-humanity by the process of getting together in a mob" (Huxley, 1922, p. 365) is presented in Gaur's production through a herd of people who do not see the human in others. Gaur's mob is a contrivance of reality, representing the mobs and their chants during recent times. At the same time, Dattani's mob is the result of the playwright's imagination, which also acts as a model for manoeuvring this scene for future renditions. His stage direction for the above-displayed chaos, besides being accurately written, also leaves intermittent voids for the actors and future productions. Chaudhuri (2005) notes:

> Once out of the playwright's hands, the text of the play will immediately acquire a life of its own. Interpreted by the director, enacted (and again interpreted) by the actor before a live audience, the dynamics of the theatre is, needless to say, resonantly polyphonic, with each voice adding its own reverberations to the play-in-performance. (p. 108)

The polyphonic resonance in the case of Dattani's play is an epiphenomenon of his stage directions that allow both the actor and the director to read, interpret, and perform the sequence according to their skill and style.

Interestingly, the comments that Dattani makes as stage directions also appear as companion pieces to the following action. A significant example is noticed in the first act in Dattani's text when Smita is preparing Lord Krishna's idol to put it to sleep, the chorus "whispers", "… we are neither idol makers nor idol breakers" (Dattani, 2005, p. 13). The stage direction also brings out the intended irony when Aruna asks Smita to be pure in her mind and deeds. At the same time, in the following sequence, Dattani makes Daksha fling the "pallav" (veil), a symbol of pure conduct in Hindu culture, off. The same event in Arvind Gaur's production is shown by emphasizing the words "be pure" (Dattani, 2005, p. 13) while Daksha flings her veil in the other part of the stage. Another example of the direction complementing the story and the reformist agendas is found towards the end of the first act when the mob demands Ramnik to throw out Bobby and Javed so they can kill them. Dattani (2005) writes:

> *Spotlight on Ramnik. The Hindu Chorus strikes more stylized positions on top of the*

ramp and speaks from within their masks.

RAMNIK: What harm have they done to you?

CHORUS 1: Set an example.

CHORUS ALL: Stop them.

CHORUS 1: Before they do harm.

CHORUS ALL: Tame them. …

CHORUS ALL: Thwart them. So we may live in peace.

RAMNIK. We? …

CHORUS ALL. Do you doubt us? Your own people? …

The lights change and the Chorus becomes a Mob again. (p. 22)

Huxley (1922) calls incidents such as the above "the final symptom of herd-intoxication," which, unsurprisingly, demand "maniacal violence" (p. 366). The mob's call to Ramnik to throw the two boys out is intensified by the stage directions before and after the conversation, which adds to the heated atmosphere. Arvind Gaur very effectively portrays this scene through an imaginary door which the chorus keeps beating consistently while Ramnik keeps them from breaking it by pushing his back against the door.

Figure e. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* Ramnik defends Bobby and Javed from the mob by standing against an imaginary door. (Timestamp, 24:18). ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

Another significant instance of Dattani's stage direction complementing the dialogues is noted towards the end of the second act when Smita reveals that Javed is one of them, hired to "…create riots. To… throw the first stone!" (Dattani, 2005, p. 39). However, the gravity of this

revelation is amplified by Bobby's acceptance of defeat, followed by Dattani's detailed direction:

> BOBBY *(to Smita)*: I had won him over. I had … almost won him over.
>
> *Smita is horrified at this truth. She cannot speak. She rushes out. Javed knocks down the glass of milk and in frustration pounds his forehead with his fist. Ramnik advances towards Javed. Bobby steps in front of Javed protectively.* (Dattani, 2005, p. 39)

The stage direction adds to the already tense situation between Ramnik and Javed, but Dattani also uses it to expose Ramnik's self-proclaimed liberal mindset. He offers a job to Javed in an act of condescending sympathy. Still, when Javed rejects the offer, and Smita reveals the truth, Ramnik fails his liberal values and advances aggressively towards him.

Any discussion on *Final Solutions* would remain incomplete without studying, arguably, the most iconic scene in the play. Towards the end of Act III, when Bobby and Javed are about to leave, Dattani, for one last time in the play, gives the readers goosebumps. He makes Bobby's character act whimsically and creates an incident[10] that leaves a profound impact on the readers/audience. He writes:

> HARDIKA: You can't understand how I feel.
>
> RAMNIK: I can. They are not to blame.
>
> HARDIKA: I cannot forget. I just cannot forget.
>
> *There is an ominous silence. Bobby and Javed look visibly defeated.*
>
> *Aruna enters, hair wet and loose, looking fresh after a bath. She brings in a puja* [for worshipping] *tray. She moves to the puja room,* […] *Bobby and Javed turn away from her and move towards the door. Aruna rings the prayer bell, shattering the silence.*
>
> *Javed stops. He stiffens. Bobby realizes what is happening to him. He stares in the direction of the bell, which is being rung to wake up the God.* (Dattani, 2005, p. 72)

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[10] An incident for Dattani is different from an event. Refer to point 3.

Figure f. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* Gaur's representation of the traumatic effect of the bell on Javed. Bobby holds Javed from reacting. (Timestamp, 1:29:04) ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

The stage direction in the present scene sets up the reader for the climax of the play. Though Dattani informs the audiences or readers about Javed's traumatic childhood experiences involving the prayer bell through Bobby's narration,[11] he makes the effects visible only in the present scene. Contrastingly, in Gaur's production, Javed does not stiffen but moves aggressively towards Aruna, who is ringing the bell. Bobby holds him from doing anything irrational in his trance while the others look perturbed. The situation has a strange effect on Bobby himself, who suddenly begins to walk towards Aruna. As Dattani (2005) continues:

> BOBBY: There is one final deed to be done, Javed.
>
> *Deliberately removes his footwear and advances towards the puja room slowly. Low drumbeat.*
>
> *God knows, my intentions are pure. (Aruna notices him coming towards her.) It has to be done to prove to them* […]
>
> ARUNA. Stop! *(Bobby is near the puja room).* Stop him!
>
> *Bobby suddenly picks up the image of* [God] *Krishna, which is tiny enough to sit in his palm.*
>
> *Put that back! Oh God! No!* […]
>
> BOBBY: *(Extends his hands and shows the image to everyone).* See! See! I am touching God!
>
> CHORUS ALL: *(Pounds [the floor] thrice).* We are not idol-breakers!
>
> BOBBY. Your God! My flesh is holding Him! Look, Javed! And He does not mind!
>
> *The Mob/Chorus pounds.*
>
> BOBBY: He does not burn me to ashes! He does not cry out from the heavens saying He has been contaminated! (pp. 72-73)

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[11] Bobby reveals that, as a child, Javed was mistreated for touching their neighbour's letter, which the postman asked him to deliver.
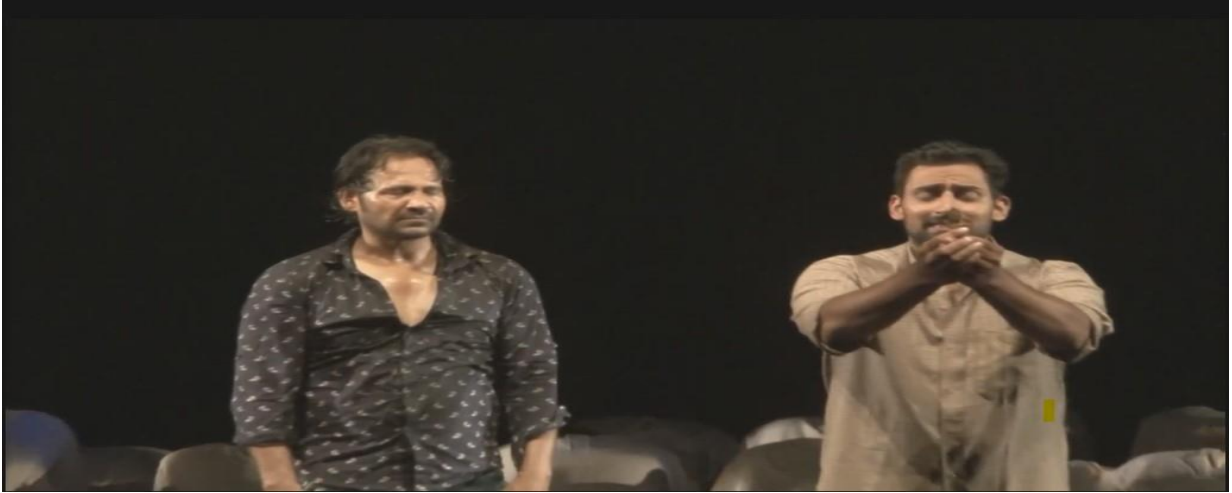
Figure g. *Source: Asmita Theatre: YouTube.* Bobby's final deed. (Timestamp, 1:29:50) ***Note:*** The image used in the article is the property of the YouTube channel of Asmita Theatre, an organization based in New Delhi under the leadership of renowned director Mr. Arvind Gaur. The author(s) have Mr. Gaur's written consent to use the image for academic and research purposes. The author(s) have submitted a copy of the email of consent from Mr. Arvind Gaur, originally obtained on March 27, 2023, to the journal Theatre Academy.

During the first half of the story, these two are hated for toppling the Gods; during the latter half, they are hated for picking Him up. In Gaur's production, the most significant difference in the representation of this scene is the background performance of the mob/chorus, who drop to their knees as if pounding the ground with their knees instead of using the mask sticks as in Dattani's direction. Bobby's "final deed" of picking up the idol of Krishna and resting it on his palm is an act of breaking numerous unwritten, unspoken stereotypes that are considered sacrilege. The scene conveys a strong message to those who believe that respecting and worshipping the deities of other religions is a sin to one's own religion. It is also a message to those who believe that allowing 'others' to access their religious premises is equivalent to blasphemy.

Dattani uses similar scenes throughout the play to communicate his reformist visions. For instance, Javed's sarcasm at the Hindu caste system, when he says, "We do love our own blood. Unlike you who treat your own like shit which can't be touched" (Dattani, 2005, p. 32); his argument with Hardika who asks him whether he has ever contemplated going to Pakistan to which he replies, "I prefer Dubai" (p. 70). Amidst all the major scenes, questioning communal ideologies and prejudice, Dattani finds significant space for issues pervading societies across the world. Issues such as women's oppression appear repeatedly in the play. For instance, Hari beats Hardika upon hearsay that she ate "their food" (meat), Ramnik's condescending attitude towards Aruna's beliefs in rituals and customs while boasting of his liberal and progressive mind. He is chided by Smita,

who says that expressing her feelings about her mother's religiousness to him "would have been a triumph for you [him] – over Mummy. And I [she] couldn't do that to her" (p. 60); and also, her conversation with Hardika who deems Smita foolish "To think you [she] can create your [her] freedom" (p. 68). These scenes, complemented by precise stage directions, leave the audience with several questions about what it means to have a liberal and progressive mind. However, Dattani, like his inspirations (Tendulkar, etc.), does not fall for the illusion of providing unrealistic solutions and rather ends the play on tough ground for all the characters. The Gandhis are left with questions about their perspectives on religion and progressivism. The two Muslim men, Bobby and Javed are left to introspect the extremities of following and not following religion. While the readers/audience are left with questions about their perspectives on the issues played before them. Interestingly, Dattani himself claimed[12] that it would have been extremely difficult for him to do *Final Solutions* in the present times.

Conclusion

Aparna Dharwadker (2005) calls Mahesh Dattani the "most successful contemporary playwright in English" (p. 64) and has credited his works as "the first to challenge effectively the assumption that Indian drama written in English represents a disjunction between language and sensibility, material and medium" (p. 83). The reason for this is not only the thematic resonance of Dattani's plays to contemporary Indian society but also his dexterity as a playwright-director. His plays are not just dramas in the conventional literary sense of the word but instead a 'Drama' that Richard Schechner (1973) defines as a – "written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map" (p. 7) of performance. The article argues for this assertion and examines Dattani's *Final Solutions* as a '"self-reflexive"' play that accentuates Dattani's craftsmanship as a director.

Final Solutions has been studied time and again for its emphatic call to the social consciousness of people to see beyond the us versus them narrative of divisive politics. The play has also been studied for its recreation of the traumatic memories of partition by Jisha Menon. This article extends these studies by integrating to the profound social appeals Dattani's penchant for stage design and construction. It begins by contextualizing Dattani among the earlier and post-independence traditions of Indian English drama. It also tries to trace him in the broader streams

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[12] He made the assertion while addressing a class of aspiring creative writers in a workshop organised by IIT Jodhpur. I was there as a participant.

of post-independence Indian theatre and the profound influences of the Western realist playwrights on the Indian stage, especially, Henrik Ibsen.

Advancing through a perusal of Dattani's stage construction in his plays, the article reports that it involves a certain degree of extravagance (by using multiple levels and spaces for nothingness) and is remarkedly different from the stage construction of other Indian playwrights. It yields that the stage directions in *Final Solutions* complement the dialogues in the story, rendering them lucid theatricality, and also act as blueprints for other directors in the construction of the mise-en-scene. They act as companion pieces to the dialogues and reveal the layered meanings. They also highlight the irony and, in other instances, emphasize the seriousness of the situation. Dattani, in his stage direction, employs a distinct technique of providing the readers with knowledge about the story that is rarely accessible to them. The study also finds that Dattani's stage directions are irreplaceably significant in the presentation of the mob and its fanatic mentality, which Huxley (1922) calls the "social equivalent of cancer" that secretes a poison under the influence of which the mob starts to "behave with a savage violence" (p. 367). By contrasting Dattani's stage directions with another stage production of the play under the renowned director Arvind Gaur, the article identifies Dattani's orientation towards performance in the play-text itself. The study concludes that his stage directions posit a difficult challenge for other directors who then employ their own skills to achieve similar effects.

The article studies *Final Solutions* as a play reverberating contemporary reality and submits that Dattani's reformist agendas, combined with his stagecraft, have established him in a league of his own among the present Indian playwrights. He has not only emancipated the tradition of Indian English drama from the label of closet drama but also made it a living-thriving performative tradition.

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