ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research paper is to look into the concept of “sacred space.” sacred space has been variously taken as a space of ‘collective worship’, ‘specifically produced geography’, ‘Cognitive mapping’. In reality, spaces are constructed and to be more specific, religious spaces have been constructed by human beings. The present paper will explore and analyze how ordinary space is converted into sacred space and the psychology that works behind it. The paper will try to deconstruct the notion of sacredness and holiness through reading Mahesh Dattani’s play Final Solutions.

Keywords: Sacred Space; Cognitive Mapping; Hierophany; Geopiety

I

Certain spaces are defined and these spaces have a major role in shaping up lives of several human beings in one way or the other. As in Hindu religion the temple area is taken to be a ‘sacred’ place as critically shown in the play Final Solutions. These sacred spaces are not sacred because of some inherent quality in them but because specific meaning is imposed and the holiness of the place get institutionalized by the dominant group of the society. Sacredness is a quality crafted through human intervention. In that way, specific geographies are ‘produced’. Space is the new cultural dominant (Wood 117). A space which is an area of reverence for one having emotional attachment to it could be a tourist spot for another person. The fact is that it is through human beliefs and practices that sacredness is defined and valued. Collective worship at certain places is not wrong in any way but secluding and segregating one group from the other group in the name of sacredness of a place is something one should question.

Etymologically, the word "sacred" came from the Latin sacrum, which referred to the gods or anything in their power, to sacerdos and sanctum, set apart. Sacred connotes here something to be set apart for some special purpose and which is entitled to reverence and fear. It was generally conceived spatially, as referring to the area around a temple. There is a word called ‘hierophany’ which is an important term in this context. When ordinary objects i.e. a tree or a stone is taken to be sacred and considered to be a manifestation of God, the Supreme Being, is called hierophany. These things are worshipped because they are hierophanies, being sacred to be worshiped and here, this sacred is equivalent to power (Eliade 11-12). There is another concept called geopiety which is made of two words geo (earth, land, space) and piety (reverence). Geopiety is typically related to the sense of reverence evoked by the wonder (or even terror) of the earth in all diversity, J. K. Wright points out (qtd. in Singh 218).

Place worship can easily be found in different religions like Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity etc. Religion is by and large a geographical phenomenon, said Park (qtd. in Singh 218). Spaces has conventionally been defined as an absolute, static and fixed but in early 1960s, scholars started questioning this rather simplistic formulation of space and said that space is never innocent and not available online on www.abhinavjournal.com
pre-given because spaces cannot be free of human desires and intents (Raju 4-5). In the postmodern era, nothing is accepted as pre-given and fixed. Marxist geographers Henry Lefebvre and Edward W. Soja argue that space has to be perceived as humanly constituted and ‘socially produced’. Mitchell calls it ‘geographies of control that modernity has invented’ (qtd. in Raju 7). Fredric Jameson asserted that the global confusions of postmodern times are ‘the disorientation of saturated space’, and he calls for an exercise in ‘cognitive mapping’. If spaces are in the state of constant flux and socially constructed then there are possibilities of negotiation and transformation too.

II

Mahesh Dattani (Born on August 7, 1958) is one of the most prominent, prolific and innovative playwright in Indian Drama in English in the contemporary scenario. He has been conferred the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his Final Solutions and Other Plays. His plays are, originally, written in English but he does not follow western dramatic canons. His indianized English plays have been welcomed by the multi lingual audience of India and much appreciated by the critics as well. He calls theatre as “a craft of communicating through the language of action.” He writes his plays keeping stage production in his mind. In his plays, he has raised numerous issues and problems of modern urban Indian society like communal tension, child sexual abuse, gender discrimination, identity crisis, homosexuality etc. He presents socio-political realities of our time. Where There’s a Will, Dance Like A Man, Tara, Final Solutions, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful, Seven Steps Around the Fire are his major plays. Dattani is also an accomplished actor, director, scriptwriter and dance teacher.

In the play Final Solutions, Dattani has tried to analyze and dislocate the centralized position of certain spaces which creates distance and space among humans and paralysis humanity in the name of God. “Even those objects that are considered inherently holy generally gain that quality as a result of human action: the regular gathering of ten people, for example, is what makes a synagogue a synagogue” (Bokser 293). In the same way, the faith and belief of Hindus makes an idol of Krishna, the Lord Krishna. In the play, monologue of Daksha, a fifteen years old girl, suggests the same while recalling the period of riot when she hid herself in the pooja room with her mother where the idol of Lord Krishna was kept. She said,

I felt that the idol I had grown up seeing my mother worship was just a painted doll. A doll no difference from the ones I used to play with and think it was a real person. (Silence.) And then I knew it was Krishna slapping me in the face, punishing me for being a non-believer. A stone hit our gramophone table, breaking it. Krishna chose to destroy what I loved most (Dattani, Collected Plays 167).

In the previous lines, the meaning of the concept geopiety was discussed. Tirtha yatra (pilgrimage) in Hindu faith is an apt example of it here which also indicates towards the special relation between human beings and nature (reverence for river, mountain, tree, stone etc.) positively but this love and reverence for one’s own religion together with hatred towards other religions has been turned into destructions of both, human beings as well as nature. This hatred is the main reason behind taking famous pilgrimages like Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, Vaishno devi in Jammu etc. as sensitive areas and because of that fear/hatred these places are always under strong surveillances of government body. In the play Final Solutions, the scene of procession of the idols over huge chariot in rath yatra is important to mention here as Dattani narrates the scenes along with the sarcastic remarks over the issue with the help of the characters.

RAMNIK. The rath yatra started as it does every year from the Vishnu Mandir a few hours before midnight. It passed Shanti Road, Nehru Gardens, and when it reached to Kareem Bagh, the trouble started. Nobody knew how.
They say someone threw stone at the idol. Someone else said it was sabotage (Dattani, Collected Plays 193).

After the incident curfew was imposed in that area. In such situation, some people who are in power politicize such matters to serve their purpose and they are probably the same people who create riots at public spaces and give birth to hatred among people. Javed also suggests in the play that they are paid for creating disturbance and riot at different places. In such riots, people from both communities lose their lives! “We’ve come to accept violence as a normal, everyday occurrence. All kinds of violence,” said Jayant Kripalani (qtd. in Padmanabhan vii).

Eisenman, recognizing the paradox, said that one cannot escape what is handed down from the past (qtd. in Woods 105), but yet one can attempt to prevent oneself from being controlled and regulated by that history. In the play, Smita tells her mother Aruna, “It is truth only because you believe in it” (210). The character of Aruna who is a typical pious Hindu woman, belongs to that major group of people who believe that mere touch of a non Hindu will contaminate everything around them and those people should not be even allowed to enter into their houses. She explains by calling it her ‘inheritance’ and sanskaar. This sense of belongingness gives a sense of security but at the same time it also stifles one by imposing certain limits and protocols. The catastrophic impact of it can be very well understood by one incident of Javed’s life which turned to make him a rioter from a hero. The way Javed was treated by the so called Brahman living in his neighbourhood was very humiliating when he went there just to hand over his letter while the Brahman was busy in practicing morning pooja. The man wiped the letter and the wall where Javed kept the letter and the gate also which had been ‘contaminated’ by Javed! Certain practices of one community can turn oppressive for the other if one does not respect others’ religion too.

Where there is dominance there will be resistance too. This pseudo sacredness of physical spaces has been shattered at the end of the play where Bobby deliberately enters into the pooja room, picking up the image of Krishna to prove everyone that the God did not contaminate from his touch. He said, “I hold Him who is sacred to them, but I do not commit sacrilege.” Further, he said to Aruna, “You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant flowers because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human being believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world!” After that, Bobby replaces the image in the pooja room and Aruna who is badly hurt, said,

ARUNA (breaks down). Oh! Is there anything left that is sacred in this world?

BOBBY. The tragedy is that there is too much that is sacred. But if we understand and believe in one and another, nothing can be destroyed (225).

In her essay, Angelie Multani writes, “It is largely through food habits and taboos that we all draw the lines that separate us from each other.” Further she emphasized the fact that these taboos are most clearly expressed in our realities through particularized spaces, as in Dattani’s play the space of the room for worship, and the kitchen space where the food is prepared (127). Dattani has given details of these two areas in the play since these are the spaces where clear demarcation line could be seen. ‘Faith’ and ‘sacredness’ are not in the thing itself but in the minds of believers. People could live in harmony without any harm and destruction only if people of different religion start believing in each other too.

Dattani has painted the role of Mob/Chorus very craftily in the play which clearly suggests its subject and message of the play from the very beginning till the end. There are five men in the Chorus who does not belong to any religion, having ten masks, five Hindu and five Muslim masks. In Theatre, one can imagine and create anything on stage live by the skills of stagecraft and performance which makes drama different and more impactful in comparison to the other genres. In this play, the chorus presents their thoughts from the conservative perspective of Hindus when they ‘wear’ Hindu masks, and a point of views of Muslim community wearing Muslim masks which ultimately suggests that there is actually
no difference the biased way people of both religions think of the other group. In one of the scene of the play Mob/Chorus hid their masks and bullied two young boys Javed and Bobby without any specific reason. This Mob/Chorus suggest about the group of people who doesn't actually belong to any religion and their only job is to create disturbance and riot at certain places by creating conflict among two groups. Dattan took up the mirror to show the conservative and unprogressive face of the society in the present scenario which is yet to get over with Hindu-Muslim conflicts and politics over religions where the whole world is suffering from climate change, the biggest danger which can destruct the whole human race in general. So, through this play, Dattani suggests that now it is high time to get over these communal politics in the country.

First performed successfully in Bangalore in the year 1993, the play Final Solutions is not important because it has brought the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for the writer but because it deals with the sensitive issue of communal tension which has become the bone of contention for the country. “Things have not changed that much” (167), said Hardika in the play while reading her diary and thinking back how her father was killed in the communal riot forty years back and in the present time also the scenario has not been changed because number of people are still displaced and killed due to communal riots. The present paper is an honest attempt to understand a burning social reality i.e. communal violence in spatial terms. At the end, I would like to quote a few lines from Bharat Thakur’s poem ‘Thinking’:

Did thinking come first or man (human being)?

God had to think in order to create

Then why does religion want me not to think?

Thinking belongs to man or man belongs to thinking? (66)

REFERENCES