

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mirroring Emotional Strangulation of Relations: Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

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ABSTRACT

This present paper tries to analyze emotional strangulation of relations in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*. *Thirty Days in September* is a remarkable work by Mahesh Dattani. Here the playwright unveils one of the darkest sides of our society that is "Incestuous Relations". There are a vast number of children suffering the trauma of being molested at the hands of their loved ones; the outcome of such situations is "loss of trust" and "low-confidence" of the victim. Dattani, in his play portrays the pain of a girl, who had suffered molestation; the trauma, the grief and the twinge of that childhood memory haunt Mala and make her vulnerable. The playwright has aptly caricatured every scene and character and has successfully portrayed the perpetration of women in our society.

Keywords: Emotional strangulation, Incest, Trauma, Molestation, Perpetrator.

Mahesh Dattani is a renowned name in Indian English drama and is famous for revealing the dark sides of our society and speaking about the barbarian realities that prevail in the present times. He has used drama as a medium to reflect the mean, ugly and unhappy aspects of life and has effectively and powerfully probed into the taboo genres of our culture. This paper attempts to reflect the theme of women subjugation and child abuse in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*. It is a play about multi-generational incest in an Indian upper middle class family.

The play *Thirty Days in September*, introduces the struggles of two women, both suffering from the same ordeal; Mala, a young woman has been raped by her uncle, first at the age of seven, then repeatedly in every vacation, whenever her uncle visits them and the next woman is Shanta (Mala's mother). She was also molested by the same culprit. Her mother, Shanta is employed as a "mute witness" as she was aware that her brother was abusing her daughter but did not try to stop it. Later in the play it is revealed that she herself

was sexually abused as a child by this same brother and had to keep it a secret. Shanta's molestation had killed her self-reliance and subjugated her to the wrong wishes of her elder brother, the same silence, aggravates the pain of Mala (visibly) and her own (invisibly). In this play, Dattani has employed Shanta's silence to reflect the subjugated condition of women in our society, at different levels of life. Shanta's family represents the upper middle class section of Indian society where she plays the part of the youngest child and her culprit brother is the eldest son of the family. When Shanta was six years old, she became a victim of her thirteen year old brother's lust. She could have looked towards her parents for help but was afraid of her perpetrator brother. Her fear could be a result of, over attention and freedom given to male children in our Indian families, whereas the girls are only supposed to bear all the stress silently. Had Shanta told about the incest to her parents, she would have been saved but her fear and secondary status in the family never allowed her to speak, contrary she suffered silently and that silent suffering

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resulted in her broken married life and molestation of her daughter too. Later on, this silence and ignorance isolates the daughter from her mother, as Mala being unaware of her mother's trauma, considers Shanta responsible for her (Mala's) grief. This isolation forces both of them to live and fight the pain, anger and fear of each other. Though by the end of the play they come out as the survivors of the same incestuous sexual assault by the same perpetrator yet their suffering and trauma leave them inwardly broken.

The play opens up with Mala talking to an imaginary counsellor and revealing the most terrible part of her life, "Mala Khatri, February 2004... (listening to the counsellor) Why not?...I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There is nothing to hide. Not for me. After all, it is he who must hide."(8) This caption of Mala's counselling session belongs to a quite later stage, when she is able to fight her fear and trauma with the help of her lover, Deepak and the counsellor. The real height of her trauma and fear can be seen in her first counselling session, where she hesitates in telling her name because she considers herself responsible of the guilt, which she had never done. Her stammering and inconsistent talking reveals her fear;

I – I don't know how to begin .
. . . Today is the 30th of
September . . . 2001, and my
name is . . . I don't think I
want to say my name . . . I am
sorry. I hope that is okay with
you . . . I am unsure about this
. . . and a lot of other things. I
know it is all my fault really . .
. It must be. I must have asked
for it . . . Somehow, I just seem
to be made for it. Maybe I was
born that way, maybe. . this is
what I am meant for. It is not
anybody's fault, except my
own. (9)

Dattani has raised the issue of sexual abuse of children even in the urban and upper class families. Though this issue is not new but rarely dealt in literature, Dattani makes a bold attempt by unveiling such a controversial subject. Child sexual abuse is a heinous crime leaving its negative impacts on the minds of children. This crime is not limited to the girls only but even small boys are also been victimized but the scales are heavily tilted

towards girls. During the last few years approximately 69% of girls had suffered sexual assault at the hands of their own family members. This ratio is not limited to the lower or the middle class or the rural families but the members of the upper class as well as urban families are also equally involved in the crime. In our society, family is the most valuable institution, and parents or guardians are the sole relying point for the children. The changing scenario of the society has made it difficult and unsafe for the children to count on their near and dear ones. In urban as well as rural areas the rate of child sexual abuse and incest is increasing. The NSW Child Protection Council (CPC) definition states, "Child sexual assault occurs when an adult or someone bigger than a child uses his power or authority over the child and takes advantage of the child's trust and respect to involve the child in sexual activity. In all cases the offender / abuser has more power than the child and misuses that power to take advantage of the child." Similarly in incest the child is abused by some elder who is in close proximity and very reliable.

In our country, incest is not regarded as a separate crime that is the reason there is no separate law against incest. The culprit is punished under section 376 of the Indian penal code, which covers rape cases, whereas the developed countries have separate law for incest. Britain sentences a prison of 14 years for this crime and Massachusetts from 20 years and in US the imprisonment differs from state to state. In India, the situation is still pitiable, though the amended law includes, policemen, hospital staff who abuse women in their custody yet it overlooks the plea (of social activists) to include the abusive fathers who violate their responsibility. A Mumbai based women's rights activist lawyer, Flavia Agnes says, "In most cases of sexual abuse, it's the father who is responsible for the heinous crime. He is the custodian of the child. So, a custodial rape should also look at father as a suspect."(NSW)

The victim of incest loses self-confidence and the trust on other family members also. Being a girl Mala looks towards her mother for help but Shanta never attempts to help her, on the contrary, she keeps silent. Mala takes her mother responsible for her molestation as she never tries to save her from that trauma. Instead of talking and saving

Mala, she escapes to pooja room and hides herself in the disguise of prayer and religion. Mala's anger towards her mother explodes when she says to her, "Tell me. No don't look at your God, look at me, look me in the eye and tell me—'yes, that is all that you are talking about" (25). Mala's enraged anguish and her suppressed anger all come out when she goes to the pooja room and throws the portrait of God; this breaks Shanta's patience and forces her to speak. Shanta accuses Mala of her willing involvement in the incest, whereas the reality is that Shanta kept silent due to the financial assistance, which she received from her brother. Mala cries aloud, "He bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter!" (52). Shanta's accusation of Mala can be seen as her attempt to run away from her responsibilities of safeguarding her daughter and the terrible situation, which reminds her of her past life because she herself had suffered the same stigma and never protested. Like an orthodox and subjugated female, she forces her daughter to try to forget all that and accept her guilt, "If you forget it ever happened, then you won't have anything to hide....you have been a very bad girl, you have gone astray. But Krishna will show you the way." (CP II, 29). This behaviour of Shanta mirrors the enslaved condition of Indian females, though this slavery is not physical. In the subcontinent, a great percentage of women are mentally slave to their male counterparts, this slavery goes on hierarchically thus strengthening the suppression of females. The accusation of Shanta towards Mala is a clear evidence of this mental slavery.

Nevertheless the revelation that her uncle helped them financially, since her father had left them, further breaks Mala and aggravates her pain. As a child she believed on Shanta's lie that her father had been sending them money and this revelation accentuates her grievances towards her mother. The molestation was not limited to her body; it has raped her spirit, her privacy, her innocence and her self-confidence too. In our society, the male counterpart tries to prove his superiority by making forced physical relations, ruining a woman's self-esteem and compelling her to live in terror. Dattani has presented the same fear and trauma in Mala's character too, deceived and molested by her uncle and further ignored by her mother, Mala's craving for love

and concern brings a negative change in her character. Her mother's betrayal intensifies Mala's sense of loss, "You know, I couldn't say anything to you. You never gave me a chance to. If only you had looked into my eyes and seen the hurt, or asked me 'beta, what's wrong?' Then may be, I would have told you . . . But Ma, I did look to you for help, while you were praying, your eyes avoiding mine, and I knew, deep down I must have known, that you will never ask me that question. Because you already knew the answer." (CP II, 53). She makes her mother's silence responsible for her shattered existence and character, "By staying silent doesn't mean I can forget! This is my hell...it is your creation, Maa! You created it for me. With your silence!! You didn't forget anything, you only remained silent!" (54).

Mala's pain is outspoken but her mother suffers inwardly and silently, the sexual assault tortures both of them. This generates a sense of guilt consciousness in Shanta thus she pleads Deepak to marry Mala, ".....She is a very nice girl at heart. Sometimes she gets angry with me but.... It is always my fault.... I I forget things. I am the one to blame. But she is a very nice girl at heart. If she settles down, she will be all right."(CP II, 15). However Mala refuses to marry him as she thinks, they are not compatible. Her exploitation has made Mala physically vulnerable and she tries to attract every man now and then for sexual gratification. Once in a party, she dances with a man and clutches him in the presence of his fiancée, Radhika. She insists on him to take her to his room and at his refusal she becomes desperate and says, "Do whatever you want with me, but take me with you now."(21). When Deepak asks her about what she likes most, her reply shows the extent of her vulnerability, "You want to know what I feel most?...If he had (a man sitting next to them) looked at me, I would have felt- I would have felt- truly alive."(31) Mala's vulnerable behaviour towards sexual gratification is a result of her horrible past, she is never able to forget that memory, her inconsistent relations with several men is an attempt to escape from her past.

Dattani mirrors some of the oblivious aspects of the society with sensitive experience and great insight. The drastic and negative change in Mala's character gives us an insight into the mind of a victim of sexual abuse; it

clearly reflects her sense of guilt and the problems and confusions of a mother-daughter relationship as well. The silence of her mother is a kind of mental subjugation of women, where she dares not to speak against her brother. Sometimes this silence seems to be a result of the monetary help given by Vinay (the perpetrator) though it's true to some extent yet it actually is an outcome of the age old traditional mental slavery of women. The monetary help and moreover the traditional values direct women to remain silent and bear everything patiently. These situational compartments overpower Shanta and she surrenders to the victimization of her daughter. This heinous crime creates a shift in Mala's character. She strategizes her love affairs in a way so that they end up within 30 days; this strategy of thirty days is quite symbolic and related to the topic of the play. The title of the play also reminds of the nursery rhyme, "Thirty days has September, April and November..." The same rhyme Mala was forced (by her uncle) to sing when she was first molested. Those few minutes of molestation haunt her always and have left an age long tarnish on her mind, which shatters her soul. Mala says to her mother, "Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty one or whatever." (53). This has engraved in her childhood mind and subconsciously she schemes up her love affairs for thirty days only.

She makes temporary relations, it shows the inconsistency of her behaviour which itself is a result of her dark past. Mala's inconsistent sexual relations never last more than thirty days, the reason behind is her painful childhood and the repeated molestation at the hands of her uncle. The guilt, the pain and the anger all have come forward to transform her into a woman who enjoys being taken advantage of Mala's inconsistent behaviour. It is best understood by her last boyfriend Deepak, when Mala plans to leave him, he refuses to let her go. He is the first man to sense her need for help and persuades her to consult some counsellor. He meets Mala's mother to find some clue to help Mala and this time the issue of Vinay comes to fore. Deepak suspects Vinay's presence and despite the initial hesitation of Mala and her mother, he succeeds in urging Mala to openly blame her uncle. This leads to the revelation of the

reason of Shanta's silence and her refuge in religion. Shanta's victimization has covered her up in the shroud of silence. However, later on Mala understands the mental condition of her mother and thus comes to reconcile with her.

This can be seen as subjugation of women by the dominating male members of the society. First Shanta suffers the molestation of her body and couldn't muster courage to revolt against it. Then her daughter, Mala undergoes the same pain and again Shanta suffers quietly. This time even Mala's father passively strengthens the power of trauma, as he could have listened to his daughter and had stopped all that. But he prefers to send the girl to her mother thus neglecting his responsibilities, later, he leaves his family. Vinay tortures both the women for his illegal sexual gratification, had he been checked from the very starting, had Shanta dared to revolt then she could have saved her daughter from undergoing that molestation. Mala though revolts and from the very starting tries to tell her mother, about the incest but Shanta's silence aggravates the pain. Mala though at the end succeeds in making her mother speak but the impressions of molestation can never be removed from her soul. This is the reason why she refuses to marry Deepak. The suppression of 'second sex' reaches to its height when Shanta seeks Vinay's help to settle the marriage of Mala with Deepak. Then the shameless executer promises to help and blames Mala for being unruly, "I definitely will do my best to see that this marriage goes through. In spite of her loose ways... if only you had controlled her from the very beginning. She has always been wayward. You know that." (57).

Thirty Days in September is a play not only about the sexual molestation of a seven year old girl Mala by her own maternal uncle Vinay, but also it is about the molestation of childhood, molestation of dreams and molestation of life. This molestation has snatched her innocence and her peace; she feels it hard to live normally and fails in having a married life. Dattani has employed the technique of self-revelation by exploiting the counselling sessions of Mala and her recorded voice on tape. This technique unveils the conflict of Mala's conscious and unconscious mind. These counselling sessions relax her and help her overcoming her fear.

Mala frankly reveals her real name, “Mala Khatri” and confidently asserts that it is that person, who molested her, should hide himself from being recognized because she has not been a participant but a victim of his beastly passion. The recuperation of Mala from her state of shock is presented through her taped conversations with her psychiatrist. From a very insecure, shy and diffident girl at the beginning of Act I, we see her transforming into a confident woman ready to face the world. The insights afforded by psychoanalysis and other disciplines enable her to analyse her own subjectivity and pinpoint the root of her problem. Towards the end, rather than blaming herself or her mother for her woes, she points her finger at the real culprit- her maternal uncle who had abused her for a period of six years. The play ends up with the death of Vinay and resurrection of Mala as a self-confident, fearless and guilt free girl.

The other symbol that Dattani uses is a big doll whose dress is folded upwards covering its face; this doll signifies Mala as she was asked by her uncle to cover her face with her frock while he molested her. By the end, the doll is nicely dressed and placed on a chair reflecting Mala’s calm position. In this play Dattani aptly reveals the mental conflicts and broken personality of a suffocated and tormented child. Child sexual abuse prevails in every section of our society; it can be stopped by the empowerment of women. The first step in this direction is to provide same social status to females and give similar attention to the girl children also as is given to the boys. Dattani has touched the nerve of society with this play, written on the appeal of RAHI, an NGO, working to save the children from being abused; it has reached to the inner soul of the readers as well as viewers of the staged play. It has been proved that during the ages of 4-5, children realize their potential of being good or bad; too much criticism creates a guilty feeling or low confidence in them. As happened with Mala who develops a guilty feeling, considers herself responsible for her molestation. Later, stages of 6-11 years help the child develop a sense of worth self-confidence and a sense of loyalty, and then at the ages of 12-19 they develop an identity and purpose in life. It never happened with Mala, as she considered herself guilty of own molestation and surrendered before the situation losing her own identity and purpose.

The dramatist has successfully raised his voice against the perpetration of women and has provided an emotional relief from the trauma.

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