

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*: A Study in the Treatment of Incest

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Mahesh Dattani is an Indian English Sahitya Akademi Award winning playwright who has trained his critical gaze at depicting the ground reality of the Indian society which is often side tracked in spite of the fact that it is quite noticeable. In his play, *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani has dramatized the most heinous issue, child sexual abuse. Dealing with the child incest, the play throws more light on the effects of the forced sexual relation on the individual's psyche, which gets intensified with the passage of time, than the issue itself. The protagonist of the play, Mala, is molested by her maternal uncle before reaching her puberty. Her mother does not raise voice against her daughter's molestation. As she grows, she becomes physically vulnerable and sexually addicted. The play also highlights the mother's silence against her daughter's molestation resulting in a conflict between them which ends with the mother's revelation that she herself was molested by the same person in her childhood.

Critically examining Mahesh Dattani's play, *Thirty Days in September*, the present paper reveals and criticizes such social stigma as the practice of incestuous relationship, the social taboos which define women as pain bearers, and the effects of child sexual abuse on an individual's psyche. The play deals with the most heinous issue, incestuous relationship, which not only shakes humanity but also damages the equilibrium of an individual mind, when it is forced on a child.

Dattani, in the play, *Thirty Days in September*, first performed at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, on May 31, 2001, has dramatized the issue of child sexual abuse and its effect on an individual's psyche which becomes more poignant when it involves the gamut of incestuous relationships. The play portrays the issue of incest through Mala and her mother, Shanta. Both the daughter and the mother are sexually molested in their infancy by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta's own brother. The sexual molestation affects both of the victims differently as one is dragooned into bearing it silently due to social pressure and taboos and the other revolts against it.

The play opens with Mala talking to the counsellor, which reveals her puzzled state of mind. Exploiting the counselling and the recorded voice on tape as methods of self-revelation, Dattani unveils the conflict of Mala's conscious and unconscious mind. Mala frankly reveals her real name, Mala Khatri and confidently asserts that it is the person, who molested her, should hide himself from being recognized because she has not been a participant but a victim of his beastly passion. Mala's voice on tape which is played in the black-out takes her back to September 30th, 2001 and presents her as a more confused and to a great extent, a nervous person. She assumes herself responsible for the havoc which turned her attitude to life; sometimes she suspects that it is her mother who is behind her destruction. She, being a victim of sexual exploitation before reaching her puberty and in early youth, and of betrayal at the hands of her mother becomes indecisive about her action: "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 know it is all my fault really . . . It must be. I must have asked for it . . . it's not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish that my mother . . ." (*Collected Plays* II 9). Later she says: "The only person who can, who could have prevented all this is my mother. Sometimes I wish she would just tell me to stop. She could have prevented a lot from happening . . ." (*CP* II 18). Mala not only bears the pain of sexual assault in her childhood but also equally suffers the emotional hurt caused by

her mother's silence against her molestation which subsists in her unconscious mind. As she grows, her traumatic experience of physical exploitation and her mother's indifferent attitude towards it starts coming at the surface level resulting in a lifelong clash between mother and daughter. The realization of betrayal on her mother's part upsets her mind and she interrogates her mother:

Where were you when he locked the door to your bed room while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one or whatever. That's how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life! (CP II 53)

To avoid the horror of the exposition of reality, Shanta tries to divert Mala's mind by calling her horrifying experience a story which intensifies Mala's anger and she retorts:

I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation when we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You were busy in either the pooja room or the kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could even tell him why I was crying he would tell me to go to you. (CP II 25-26)

Sexually molested by her maternal uncle, Mala faces betrayal at the hands of her mother. According to Beena Agrawal: Mala, the protagonist, is the victim of this abuse but she maintains silence against injustice. As soon as she comes to the stage of adolescence, she finds that the world is hostile and human relationship is a betrayal" (118). Portraying the relationship between mother and daughter, Dattani has tried to shed light on the fact that betrayal in any close relationship, as Mala realizes, is as painful as sexual abuse. In his conversation with Lakshmi Subramanyam, Dattani says: "Though sexual abuse is at the core of my play, the mother-daughter relationship is equally important. The main protagonist, who has suffered at the hands of her uncle, feels a deep sense of betrayal that her mother did not stop the abuse and failed in her role as protector" (133). Facing the lack of communication with her mother, Mala consequently becomes contemptuous and accuses her mother of ignoring her, "I don't know whether you are telling the truth or simply trying to escape as always . . ." (CP II 22). Criticizing her mother for stuffing her with food instead of consoling her, Mala expresses her mother's insensitivity to her pain:

Oh yes, you would remember that I always like alu parathas because that's what I got whenever I came to you, hurt and crying. Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food. I couldn't speak because I was being fed all the time, and you know what? I began to like them. I thought that was the cure for my pain. That if I ate till I was stuffed, the pain would go away. Every time I came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. You knew. Otherwise you wouldn't have been so prepared. You knew all along what was happening to me . . . (CP II 24)

Her anger towards her mother becomes more violent when her mother, instead of talking to her, escapes to the Pooja room; Mala detains her from taking shelter in the image of God, "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'" (CP II 25). Shanta fails to pacify Mala who continuously attacks her mother's conscience and forces her to face reality. In order to divert Mala's attention, Shanta calls her heart-breaking experience, a story, which enrages Mala against her mother. Her suppressed desires against her mother's cover of silence start coming out in the form of rebellion and she cries out, "I won't let you get off so easily. There is only

one way I can make you listen to me” (CP II 26). She goes to the pooja room and throws the portrait of the God out. It breaks Shanta’s patience and she accuses Mala of her willing participation in sexual pleasure. Ultimately Shanta is forced to accept that it was the financial assistance which kept her silent. Mala cries out, “He bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter!” (CP II 52). Thus, along with the humiliation of her body, her spirit, her privacy and her innocence is also raped. In this way, Dattani has tried to focus that the forced physical relations which signify man’s victory over woman can ruin her life completely. Molested and deceived by her uncle and ignored by her mother, Mala expresses her painful longing for love:

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)

Thus, Mala’s anguish and pain is intensified from her realization of her mother’s betrayal. In this regard Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri observes: “Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the abused” (73).

Sexual molestation in childhood in *Thirty Days in September* breeds a sense of guilt consciousness which has been discussed by Dattani in his earlier plays such as *Tara*, *Final Solutions*, and *Bravely Fought the Queen*. In *Tara*, and *Final Solutions* he has elaborately dealt with the theme but in *Bravely Fought the Queen* he has only touched upon the issue. The sexual assault on Mala in her childhood and betrayal at the hands of her mother not only affects Mala’s psyche but also develops a sense of guilt consciousness in her mother, Shanta. Both of them suffer pain of their sexual exploitation but with Mala it becomes more effective. To compensate for her guilt of being silent to the injustice meted out to her girl, Shanta requests Deepak to marry Mala but to no avail. She turns down Deepak’s proposal for marrying her arguing that they would not be compatible. Being exploited in her infancy Mala becomes physically vulnerable and starts seeking the company of men for sexual gratification. When Deepak asks what she likes the most, Mala fingers at the man sitting at the table next to their’s and complains against his staring at her, which enrages Deepak and he starts beating him but in the meantime Mala takes Deepak back to their table and reveals that it is not true; she made it up and she did it just to gain his attention towards her which would enliven her. She says, “. . . If he had looked at me, I would have felt—I would have felt truly alive” (CP II 31). She dances with the ‘Man’ in the party and grasps him in the presence of his fiancée, Radhika. When “Man” denies her proposal to take her to his room, she becomes restless and says: “Do whatever you want with me, but take me with you now” (CP II 21). Answering Deepak’s question as to what she likes the most she expresses her true plight: “He wasn’t staring at me . . . I wanted him to . . . You want to know what I feel most? . . . if he had looked at me, I would have felt—I would have felt—truly alive” (CP II 31). At the end of the play when, after the revelation of the reality that she was molested by her maternal uncle, Deepak asks her to come with him but she refuses and says “You don’t understand! YOU JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND!! I cannot love you” because “I see this man [her uncle, Vinay] everywhere. I can never be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone . . . else” (CP II 54). Her molestation is ingrained in her mind to such an extent that she can rationalize all arguments except her guilt. She speaks boldly, “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!” (CP II 54). In this way, Mala fails to reconcile the reality which has ruined

her femininity and keeps haunting her mind, and becomes more intense with the realization of her mother's silence against her exploitation. Shanta also suffers a guilt consciousness. Like Bharati, in *Tara*, who becomes more affectionate towards Tara to hide her guilt, Shanta also expresses her love for Mala to compensate for her guilt. She feels herself guilty of Mala's pitiable plight and accepts: "It is always my fault . . . I-I forget things. I am the one to blame. But she is a very nice girl at heart" (CP II 15).

Moved by Mala's pain, Shanta reveals the reality of her life and the reason for her keeping her lips shut:

I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen . . . and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!! (*Pointing to the picture of God.*) I looked to Him. I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel pain, I didn't feel pleasure. I lost myself in Him. He helped me. He helped me. By taking away all feelings. No pain no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti. Shanti. But my tongue is cut off. No. No. It just fell off somewhere. I didn't use it, no. I cannot shout for help, I cannot say words of comfort, I cannot even speak about it. No, I can't. I am dumb. (CP II 55)

Her mother's revelation of the fact that she also suffered the molestation for ten years by the same person when she was six, moves Mala and she regrets: "While I accused you of not recognizing my pain, you never felt any anger at me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive but—I never acknowledged your struggle" (CP II 58). Thus, it is Shanta's silence which creates misunderstanding between them, and they start distrusting each other. As the silence is broken, they find each other on the same plane. Mala is filled with remorse for torturing her mother mentally: "It's not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn't my fault. Please, tell me that you've forgiven me for blaming you. Please tell me that . . . I know you will, mother. I know you have" (CP II 58). In a conversation with Anitha Santhanam, Mahesh Dattani remarks: "It's the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It's the silence that makes the abused feel betrayed." In this way, both mother and daughter share the same fate. Both suffer molestation in their infancy which affects their lives—Shanta becomes senseless to pain and pleasure but Mala always feels longing for sexual gratification. Shanta's silence, which she takes as Shanti, ruins two lives—hers and her daughter's. Her silence against her daughter's sexual abuse and even against herself symbolizes two things—the first, degrading Indian morality, and the second, the stereotypes for women which present them as objects of male gaze.

After discussing Shanta's image of traditional woman as a bearer of the pain by keeping their voices silent, and Mala's as a girl with modern sensibility who revolts not only against her mother's silence but also challenges male supremacy by rejecting Deepak's proposal for living together, it will be better to focus on the character of Vinay, who represents the male chauvinistic picture of society. Vinay's attempts to molest both Shanta and Mala do not only challenge the Indian morality but also reflect the male hegemony over female. Vinay has no feeling of remorse or sympathy for Shanta and Mala who undergo mental and physical sufferings. He does not feel shame when he is called 'Bhaia' by Shanta, instead he confidently claims to act like a father figure when Mala's marriage is concerned. He, who ruins Mala in her teens, does not hesitate in using the expression "She is like my daughter." Thus, in the play, Dattani has mocked at the traditional concept of relationship which explains the purity of the relationship between brother and sister etc. and warns the society of being cautious of relatives like Vinay. The conflict between tradition and modernity also figures in the play. Shanta, who has a strong belief in God and keeps herself always busy with praying, represents the traditional figure of women who never dares to protest against their molestation. Contrary to her, Mala is a *new woman*. She, being

financially independent, gets angry at her mother's silence against her molestation and questions her uncle's financial assistance. She frankly turns down Deepak's proposal of marriage and reveals to him her passion for sex with several people.

Thus, in *Thirty Days in September*, which is essentially a family play, Dattani has raised his voice against child sexual abuse, especially in the case of incest which ruins the lives of the victims breeding not only the physical anguish but also the mental distortion, and has challenged the social customs which define women as a silent receiver of pain by presenting the clash between mother and daughter.

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