

Child Sexual Abuse In Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

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ABSTRACT

The plays of Mahesh Dattani emerged as 'fresh arrival' in the domain of Indian English drama in the last decade of the twentieth century. Dattani showcases the mean, ugly and unhappy aspects of human life in his works. His plays deal with contemporary issues. The conflict between individual and social convention is the central motif of his plays. He is the first Indian English dramatist to be awarded Sahitya Akademi Award. He aims not only at changing society, but also giving the audience some kind of insight into their own lives.

Keywords

Sexual abuse, Human life, Maternity, Social Convention

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* deals with the subject that simmers dangerously below the surface of our consciousness that is, girl child sexual abuse. The girl child is considered as a neglected being in India. Girl child abuse can be understood as an unwelcome intimate contact for which the girl is gently encouraged, bribed, tricked, or forced to take part. One such sufferer is Mala, the protagonist of Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*, who suffers abuse at the hands of her maternal uncle, Vinay from the age of seven to thirteen. The play portrays the issue of incest through Mala and her mother, Shanta. Both the daughter and the mother are sexually molested in their childhood by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta's own brother. The sexual molestation affects both 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 progressing in therapy, confident and articulate in February 2004. 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; sometime 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 Volume Two* 9).

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! (53) 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 . . ." (22). 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).

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" (25). Shanta fails to pacify Mala who continuously attacks her mother's conscience and forces her to face reality. 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).

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. Mala 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 theirs 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” (31)

Shanta 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” (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. (55)

Both suffer molestation in their childhood 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 Shanta, ruins two lives—hers and her daughter's.

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 "I treat her like I would treat my own daughter" (48)

Thus, in *Thirty Days in September*, which is essentially a family play, Dattani has raised his voice against child sexual abuse.. Female is considered as a sex object and it should be opposed and avoided. 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 play is about healing and recovery in which the involvement, active participation and the crucial role of men have been emphasized.

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