

**THE WORLD OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE VICTIMS IN MAHESH
DATTANI'S *THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER***

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's conviction to dramatize sensitively the tormented soul of the victims of Child Sexual Abuse is an untraded path in the tradition of Indian English Drama. Dattani's insightful depiction of the life of Mala and Shanta, the victims of incest strikes a chord with his audience in *Thirty Days in September*. The after effects of sexual abuse like stigma, horrible memory, perversions and reclusion added with the rehabilitative measures of counseling and moral support from the near and dear ones have been portrayed with the realistic actions and artistic dialogues.

Keywords: The Travails of Incest, Stigma, The Rift in Mother- Daughter Relationship, Recovery Mechanism

Mahesh Dattani has infused life into Modern Indian English Theatre that has been supplied with translated works, with his original remarkable English plays. He has emerged as a dramatist with multifaceted talents as actor, dancer, director, screenplay writer and playwright, thus contributed to drama in all aspects. His plays have established him as a dramatist who wants to connect himself with the audience through the medium of theatre. His insightful dealing of the taboo issues that are usually hidden under the rug like incest, hijra, gay and HIV disease demonstrates his more than a humanitarian outlook and the compulsive urge of a creative artist. His strength of conviction to bring taboo issues to the common platform, thus generating a discussion among the audience is a rare quality found among the Indian writers.

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* is a tragic story of a mother and daughter duo afflicted with the stigma of incest. It is a Three Act play written for RAHI, a support group for women survivors of incest. It was first performed at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai on 31st May, 2001. This play is eulogized by Little Dubey as it has won the hearts of people everywhere with its sensitive and powerful portrayal without ever offending sensibilities and brought the horror of

incest within the framework of a very identifiable mother- daughter relationship. Dattani known for his treatment of taboo issues has handled the theme Child Sexual Abuse and its far reaching effects. Dattani has deliberately chosen the urban upper middle class as a setting for his treatment of incest since he does not want the people to dismiss sexual abuse as something that does not happen to people like them.

Dattani has crafted the play with the main focus on the mind and actions of the victims of sexual abuse. His interaction with the victims before writing this play has given him insightful understanding of the tormented soul of the victims. The burden of the guilt, the stigma of aversion by society, the trauma of abuse, all together cloud their innocent mind and handicap its growth into maturity. Their life afterwards revolves around the effects of the horror of abuse. Their thought, speech, and action are directed by the gloomy psyche that starves them of enjoying life. They become devoid of feelings and emotions and do not feel substance in their relationship with other human beings. Dattani's deep understanding of the victims' mind is known through his portrayal of Mala and Shanta. Outwardly they look normal and active but internally the compulsive instinct leads them to a pathetic life.

Mala, the protagonist of the play is a modern upper middle class girl working in an advertising firm. Her expertise in her chosen field brings laurels to her and is on the top of her career. Having a feminist outlook, she attempts to create advertisements devoid of gender construction and portray women as equal to men. It is reflected in her suggestion of making an ad for sanitary napkins as

To start with, I don't think she should be skipping rope with her daughter. That's not real freedom. It is still very gender constructed....If you ask me she should be playing cricket with her daughter and husband. You have to say it all in fifteen seconds. The important point is her physical ease and freedom. Start with the batting. A perfect hit. She makes two runs with daughter .Then show her bowling while her husband is batting. He makes a snide remark about her being irritable because it is that time of the month .She bowls, hits him straight in the crotch. He runs yelping in to the house. She tosses the ball in the air.... (19).

Mala is praised for her beauty, intelligence, dynamism and honesty by men around her. Her talent has been appreciated with IAAFA award and her official life is filled with harmony, enthusiasm, and job satisfaction. She lives the best as far as her professional life is concerned. On the contrary, her personal life is synonymous with hell. Her soul is torn apart, her mind is gloomy, speech is defected, and actions are perverted. This contrast in Mala's personality is deftly presented with scenes that expose the dual life of Mala. The act of incest by her close relative, her uncle, has weighed her down and led her to mistrust human relationship. The pangs of incest that destroy an individual restricting his or her thinking, directing actions in a damaging manner, is brought home by Dattani through his sensitive, and compassionate soul.

Dattani has used the relationship between Mala and Shanta at home to unravel the disturbed mind of the victims through their abnormal behaviours. Family is not a place to gather grace for Mala. There is no life at her home since both mother and daughter are reclusive and live in their own world seeking solace. All the household chores are done mechanically without love and affection. Mala usually spends her time at home reading magazines while Shanta immerses herself in performing pooja to Sri Krishna picture. Mala cannot help herself from taking Shanta to the task whenever they converse. Her anger towards Shanta for not coming to her rescue during the time of her abuse is visibly prevalent in her speech and action with Shanta.

Even Shanta's genuine caring words of preparing food for Mala ends in dire consequence, with the latter accusing her mother of using food to shut her mouth. Mala thinks Shanta's act of feeding her, whenever she goes to her being hurt and crying during her childhood days, is a sign of the latter's attempt to prevent her from revealing the matter. She talks her mind as

That is how you always pacified me ... Instead of listening to what I had to say. You stuffed me with food. I could not speak because I was being fed all the time, and you know what? I began to like them. I thought that I 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 Know, Otherwise You would not have been so prepared. You knew all along what was happening to me, and I won't ever let you forget that. (24)

Mala's awareness of her mother's role in her horrible past and the devastating suffering endured by her at present life, provokes her to pour venom on Shanta .So to avoid any confrontation with her mother, she chooses to engage herself in reading or going out to parties.

Mala's stigmatized mind does not permit her to have a healthy and pleasant sexual relationship. Only to escape from the pain of memory and out of the impulsion as a consequence of the incest, she seeks to gratify her urge with many men. Although she is aware of her actions, when the impulse engulfs her, she stands helpless but yields to her mind's wanderings. The image of her uncle haunts her while she tries to have a nuptial relationship with Deepak. She is not able to feel Deepak's true love for her and his concern to break her free from the shackles of the past memory. Her association with all male members only reminds her of her uncle and she cannot expect any relationship other than sexual with the men in her life. Her attempt to suppress the pain and anguish results in magnifying her trauma and she unknowingly spoils her life as well as around her.

The wound of sexual abuse is so intense that to come out of its shackles is a Herculean task for the victims. They cannot help themselves in this regard but a helping hand; caring heart can foster faith and hope then eventually give a new lease of life to the victims. Mala sees light of the day when Deepak takes her to a counsellor. Dattani's depiction of the Mala's counselling session motivates the victims of incest to find the right solution for their suffering. Mala's hesitant and frightful articulation at the first sitting is a testimony to Dattani's insight of the chaotic mind .Mala confesses in her first sitting as

“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 sure about this....and a lot of other things. But this ...This is the first time you see that I (After a long pause, where we do hear her breathing)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. May be I was born that way, may beThis is what I meant for It's not anybody fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish that my mother (It gets to be difficult for her)” (9).

But after several sittings at the end, there comes a dramatic change in her. She boldly talks of what has happened to her, who is a culprit and how she is innocent and have no fault of her own for what has happened. But one can decipher from her confessions at various times how she is tormented by the haunting memories of molestation by her uncle. Her uncle viciously provoked her to indulge in sexual act with him. She could not be aware of the maliciousness of

her uncle's instructions and actions. She indulged in it as an act of game but once she has grown up, she could understand the filthy nature of her actions with her uncle and cousin. She has developed a guilt of sin and considered herself as a prime cause for the sin. Thereafter her life has become a hell and the memories of the past have disillusioned her often and induced her to become a pervert. She feels that her mother would have interfered in her painful story with her uncle, her life would have been a heaven on earth with all the blessings the Almighty bestowed on her. So she directs her frustration and anger on her mother. Shanta's silence enrages Mala so that she uses abusive words and treats her as a servant and does not have any bond as a mother. She cannot dare to face her uncle who visits her home on her mother's request. In his presence, she is reminded of her scars of the past. So she seeks accommodation in Deepak's house.

Shanta's suffering is more hostile, pathetic and long lasting than Mala's suffering. She suffers in the hands of her brother for ten years then the effect of incest turns her a lifeless doll to make her husband leave her for another woman. For her survival, she has to seek help only from her brother who has decimated her life. Her stigma and agony prevents her from saving her daughter and that adds burden as a guilt on her. She keeps all her pain with herself and bears Mala's words patiently and tries to forget and escape from the pangs of incest by surrendering to Sri Krishna. With Deepak's entry into Mala's life, she sees light at the end of the tunnel. So she takes pain to arrange the marriage between Deepak and Mala. Dr. Bipin Kumar Parmar opines Shanta's arrangement of Mala's marriage with Deepak as an attempt to erase the haunting memories of Mala. He jots down as "She is anxious to get mala settled as early as possible. The main motive behind her marriage is to enable Mala to forget all that have happened"(Parmar 118).

Shanta's salvation comes at the end with her revelation of what has happened to her and what she has undergone throughout her life. Dattani has crafted her character as a silent, nervous, timid woman to drive home the pangs of suffering of the victims of incest. Her body language, mechanical way of doing things and non-lively nature add weight to the play in grasping the attention of the audience. At the end of the play, the audience pays pity more on Shanta than on Mala. Mala being educated, working and modern woman finds place in her mother to show her frustration, anger and dejection, whereas Shanta being a simple house wife with no exposure to the outer world lives with the shame, guilt and pain with no one to share with. Her only outlet is to be engrossed with the pooja of Sri Krishna to forget the dark story of her molestation. So when she opens up at the end, it is heard so loud. She confesses to Mala of her inability to save herself and become a dumb to escape from the torture of memories. She too cannot find anyone to save her, so she looks to Sri Krishna to absolve her sins and save her and her daughter. She puts in words her mind as,

Shanta:"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 feeling. No pain no pleasure. Only silence. Silence means shanti, shanti. but my tongue is cut off. No. No. It just fell off somewhere didn't use it,no.I cannot even speak about it.No.I can't .i am dumb.(To the man, Speaking like a mute person making unintelligible sounds).Uh.eh,oo,oo,aa,aa,aaaaaaaaaa,(Gesturing with her hands to say she will not tell anyone while making the sounds.)Aaaa, ooo ee oooo aa eeeeeeee, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa eeeeeeee(55)!

Dattani unravels the condition of the victims' sexual abuse as dumb without the strength, confidence and courage to fight against the abusers. The trauma and stigma of exploitation deprives them of the vital qualities needed to live life in normal terms. The need of the helping hand extended from outside is inevitable since they become disillusioned and dejected so that they become mute and excluded regarding opening up what has happened to them and realizing that there is no fault of their own. To relieve them out of the negative mental trap, they need a caring and supportive heart that lends ears to their feelings and problems. With regard to Shanta, She is all alone with her sufferings from her childhood. She cannot seek solace from anyone sharing her agony and even her husband is not trying to figure out her problem rather he finds fault with her for being sexually inactive and leaves her for another woman. With no support, she has to remain silent and mute spectator to the exploitation of her daughter with bleeding heart. To add to her worries, her daughter feels her to be the part of the exploitation meted out to her.

The art of Dattani always aims to render hope and confidence to the ostracized, stigmatized soul. In this play through the character of Deepak, Dattani establishes that there is still hope for the victims with people like Deepak around them. He is portrayed as an ordinary, educated and humanistic guy from a decent family. He falls in love with Mala not for her beauty but for her intelligence and honesty. He stands apart from other youngsters when he does not end his love once he comes to know of Mala's perversions. He understands it as a result of her psychiatric problem and finds means to recover her from the filthy habit. Moreover his conduct with Mala when she comes to stay with him in a night justifies his love for Mala and elevates him as an extraordinary human being. Only through his intervention, the cat comes out of the bag and the victims get reprieve from their haunting past and hope for a better future. Dattani stresses the necessity of the understanding minds regarding the problems of victims of sexual abuse.

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