

**30 DAYS IN SEPTEMBER: ROLE OF TRADITION AND INDIVIDUALITY
IN THE ‘CYCLE OF INCEST’**

Thokchom Sunanda Devi
Research Scholar
K.R.G. Govt. P.G. College,
Gwalior

Tayenjam Rajesh Singh
Research Scholar
M.L.B. Govt. College of Excellence, Gwalior

Dr. Charu Chitra
Associate Professor
Department of English
K.R.G. Govt. P.G. College,
Gwalior

Abstract

The present research paper analyzes the ‘cycle of incest’ that are perpetuated in certain families and analyzes the individual responses and the obstacles of tradition that are encountered by the victims. Mahesh Dattani is a playwright who invests each of his plays with the spirit of social concern. Generally he addresses the travails of the marginalized. In *30 Days in September* he has addressed the problem of incest that goes on in many families but is never a major issue with the society as it will bring bad face for the family. As a result, the women and children, and even some young boys who are the victims of incest, are perpetually exploited and their concerns and travails are never properly addressed, resulting in many psychological deformities and behavioral patterns. The present research paper attempts to analyze these currents as portrayed by the characters of Mahesh Dattani in his celebrated play *30 Days in September*.

Mahesh Dattani is known to have written plays taking up themes which are considered taboo in Indian society, themes like homosexuality, sexual promiscuity etc. Ironically, these ‘taboo themes’ are so popular in the modern authors and playwrights that they have become the norm. In his play *30 Days in September*, Dattani has taken up the issue of incest, which to him seems a burning problem in modern India. The play takes up the social cause of domestic violence against women and even young girls that Dattani claims to be the problem that India faces today.

According to many statistical surveys conducted across the country, incidences of rape inside India are not that uncommon. They have been reported in many families and it is surmised that there are many more which never get reported because of many social taboos and the fear and shame that is generally accosted with the victim of this crime. Though family is a very good institution, sometimes these individual injustices are ignored for the ‘name of the family’. Dattani harks upon this problem in his play *30 Days in September*.

“It is the first Indian English drama on “incest”. Mala, the daughter of Shanta, is molested by her maternal uncle, Vinay. Whenever she endeavoured to tell her mother, she finds her busy in her worship of Lord Krishna or other household works. Mala blames her mother for the painful life she is living. Dattani uses the technique of dramatic monologue to give room to Mala’s anguish. She feels that only her mother could help her to prevent her agony. At last the bitter truth comes out when Shanta reveals that she too had been molested by the same person, her elder brother, Vinay. When she could not save herself how could she save Mala? Now Mala apprehends the meaning of her silence and both mother and daughter share their emotional, psychological, physical and social effect of child sexual abuse with creating mechanism.”ⁱ

Most of the plays of Dattani are ‘social justice calls’ as understood in the Indian elite of 21st century. With these ‘social justice calls’ Dattani tries to arouse his audience for a certain cause, mostly on the lines of gender discrimination and crimes against women. In this play he dwells upon the subject of incest and domestic rape with young children that is prevalent in some households but which are seldom reported for the fear of bad name for the family. Though the law favors women in India, but the path from the time of the crime committed to the time that the case gets justice in the court is a torturous one and not many are able to trace the entire path.

The play is about betrayal instead of love. While in general we understand that incest is done by men against women. Mahesh Dattani compels us to think that even some women are complicit in this crime because of the taboos of the society. Mala is the one who was the victim of incestual rape by his maternal uncle while she was young.

Her mother knew in many ways but just like the rest of the society blamed her instead of her brother. She had also been the victim of incest in her childhood by the same man. Her brother had raped her. And when it comes to the incidence of rape of her daughter by her brother, instead of putting forward her foot to stop the atrocity, she silently bears it and even hides the crimes of her brother, thinking it to be a normal thing.

Her abuser, her own uncle: “subconsciously lives with her all the time, as part of her dirty reflections. He damages her natural growth, deters her from pursuing her love interests beyond the ominous 30-day period and scars her soul every now and then. As Mala withers under the psychological pressure extorted on her by the abuser, her mother watches silently, living her own pain - suffering mutely.”ⁱⁱ

Mahesh Dattani calls this the cycle of violence. A woman was the victim of incestual rape by her brother. Instead of blaming the man, the society blames the woman in such cases and hence because of this social and psychological pressure the woman kept quiet during the entire period of life. In turn when it came to the stage where her brother started raping her own darling daughter, instead of raising her head against the atrocity she bore it silently and even helped perpetuate the crime.

Mother is a figure in which every child, girl or boy, finds ultimate respite. She is the one who never does injustice to her children, or at least this is the common image of the mother. But in the story of Mala, in *30 Days in September*, Mala’s trust in her mother is broken, as her mother perpetuates the cycle of violence by tolerating and suppressing it. She is making another victim in her own image and instead of killing the cycle of violence is forcefully perpetuating it. This ‘cycle of incest’ becomes a pattern when Mala’s uncle chooses his new victim, Mala. In his youth he had oppressed and raped his own sister and had no mercy for her. Now in his old age,

he is raping his niece and has no compunction about it. Mala's mother preferred course of action is to keep quiet and this is what she recommends Mala to do.ⁱⁱⁱ

As a result, Mala's psyche is distorted in unimaginable ways. The cycle of violence does unprecedented havoc with her behavioral impulses. She becomes too confused and too insecure for an adult person. She has absolutely no confidence in either her body or her personality. This is by no means her own doing, but the result of the discrimination that she has born as a woman and the incest that was inflicted upon her when she was a child.

Consequently, when she becomes an adult, she starts taking many lovers, one after another. Her lack of confidence makes her distrustful of long-lasting relationships and she dumps one boyfriend after another. It seems like she is just after the sexual part in a relationship, but it is inherent and internal lack of confidence which makes her unable to get into a long-lasting relationship. The society dubs her a 'bad girl' with 'loose morals' sexually speaking.

In one way, she is conscious of her behavior and Dattani forces his audience to think that Mala, in many ways, is a mouthpiece of the rebellious spirit of Dattani who has done nothing in his plays but to take up taboo issues and splash them across his plays with his art. The rebellion of Mala from everything traditional in Indian society is the rebellion of Dattani in many ways.

"Mala, the daughter, is molested by her maternal uncle, Vinay. Whenever she endeavored to tell her mother, Shanta, she would stuff her with her favorite alu-parathas or rushed to her Lord Krishna to take support from Him. This estranged their relationship more and more. Mala blames her mother for the painful life she is living. She feels that only her mother could help her to prevent her agony. At last, the horrid truth comes out by the mother in front of Mala's molester. She reveals that she too had been molested by the same person, Vinay, her real brother, for ten long years. The mother-daughter relation is entirely metamorphosed now sharing their emotional, psychological, physical and social effect of child sex abuse. Thus, Dattani applies the healing mechanism."^{iv}

Going into yet deeper analysis of her behavior, one is forced to think that her being 'easy' with taking men and boyfriends is related to her being a victim of incest by her uncle. She was sexually molested by her uncle while she was a child and that screwed up with her psyche in many ways.

Just like in her childhood where her mother made her think that she was at fault and not her uncle, in her adulthood she always thinks that she is a bad girl in any relationships and that is what makes her date and dump men like they are trash.

"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."^v

Mala is blamed for her 'deviant behavior' and her behavioral deviances are blamed on 'western decadence' that is said to be quite prevalent in big cities like Mumbai. But this is not something which Mala has come to believe by herself. This is what the society has blamed upon her and by constantly blaming has made her to believe in it deeply. She herself thinks that it is because of the western decadence that she has become so 'easy' for men.

This is the reason that she is taken aback and thrown off her grid when Deepak treats her with respect that is due to women and to Mala. She is not used to it. She is being used to be in casual relationships; to be used by men like article and then discarded and this is the life that she has come to accept for herself but when Deepak treats her differently, she is thrown off guard. And it is Deepak who gradually helps her attain a semblance of normality.

After coming in contact with Deepak, Mala starts confronting her mother, Shanti on various aspects. She gradually dwells upon the difficult question that has been haunting her since childhood, the reason behind the fact that her mother did not protect her; blamed her instead; and hid herself and her pain in the worship of her god, Krishna.

Mala becomes angry one day and throws the images of the god, the beloved of Shanti. Shanti is jolted into reality with a shock when her favorite god is disrespected and it is then that she starts confronting the reality for the first time in her own life. She is thrown out of her comfort zone and faces the charges from Mala, another victim of incest.

But Shanti does not take upon the blame lying down. She hits back upon Mala and tells her that it was not that her brother had molested Mala. It was Mala who had encouraged him to do that and in this way, Mala was responsible for the incest herself and not her brother. It is then that Shanti also reminds her of another bout of incest that Mala bore in her life when one cousin of Mala molested her shamelessly. Shanti tells Mala that the reason that incest happens to Mala again and again because Mala is an immoral girl and it is 'in her' to behave like this.

The reader expects that Mala must fly in to a fit of rage over this, but strangely she does not and even more incomprehensibly she takes the blame herself and because of her distorted psyche due to the injustices met to her she also believes that she must be an immoral girl and this is incest has been happening to her all her life, first by her uncle and then by her cousin.

It is not easy to face the consequences of child molestation for the victim and this is what Mahesh Dattani is trying to get across to his audience. In a very non-typical manner, she becomes a hyper-sexualized person who is wont to behave in a sexually promiscuous manner. She gives herself away to strange men at the whim of the moment and she does not regret it. She 'knows' that it is 'immoral' but knowingly does it. She has to take psychiatric help and this is where she confesses that this behavior is out of her control. She says that every time she has sex it is only the touch of her horrible uncle and the memories of incest that come to her.

"Dattani who is based in Bangalore has been quoted as saying that he "didn't want to make the subject matter palatable" and that "he wanted the play to make people feel uneasy." On both counts he succeeds. The play is bold in its approach to a controversial issue. It looks at some of the more complex aspects and prolonged effects of incestuous child sexual abuse when there is denial, silence and lack of effective intervention."^{vi}

This denial, silence and lack of effective intervention is shown in an effective scene by Mahesh Dattani. It occurs when Vinay, Mala's uncle, the sexual molester of her childhood comes to live with her and her mother. Vinay comes and starts talking to Shanta about her 'immoral' daughter Mala. Mala is not home as she is with her Deepak, the only man who ever respected her.

In Deepak's house, Mala is trying to get some solace by talking to him. Deepak is a nice human being who respects Mala for what she is and does not expect any more from her. He is trying to console her wounded soul. He is touching her in friendly manner but Mala is forever haunted by the childhood memories of incest and suddenly she feels that it is her uncle who is touching her all over with his dirty hands in an attempt of incest. The quagmire of scalding memories is the castle in which Mala lives and from which even Deepak seems to be unable to rescue her. Sadly, for Mala there is no rescue from the tower of memories in which she is locked.^{vii}

Deepak still tries to fight for Mala and when he comes to know about the horrible truth of Mala's childhood he is aghast and is bent upon justice. So when Vinay, the molester uncle of Mala comes to live with her mother and her, Deepak flies out of rage and tries to make him confront the ugly truth. But again, giving to her unstable behavior, Mala confusedly and shockingly supports Vinay and supports his version of the narrative. Mala's shows signs of Stockholm Syndrome and sympathizes with the her molester uncle.^{viii}

While almost throughout the play, Shanta is shown as a perpetrator, at almost the end of the play it is revealed that she was also a victim, a victim of molestation by her brother and that is what made her perpetuate the cycle of violence and incest. Being shy and uncomfortable by the moralizing ways of the society, she was unable to open up about her trauma and in the process she started justifying it and blaming herself and the other victim, her own daughter for it.^{ix}

She finds solace in religion, like many of her ilk. She loves her god Krishna and it is when Mala throws his idol that she is jolted into reality. Dattani is trying to show that many like her are silent about the transgressions of society against them and keep themselves to religion. This is the reason that she lets the cycle of violence perpetuate with her daughter Mala.

“This family drama holds out the fine example of certain social aberrations which would of course never see the light of day, but would only turn into personal tragedies with reasons behind them always remaining mysteries. Through *Thirty Days in September* Dattani issues a serious caution against the dangers of single-parent family setup, with a financially weak mother administering it. Similarly, Mala-Shanta psychological and emotional rift, further throws light on the seemingly growing aberration in the context of the Indian tradition, which upholds the status of motherhood. The mother-daughter relationship in the Indian context has assumed a kind of ever-serene ambience around it, thanks to the spiritual notations attached to the relationship over generations.”^x

It is Mala and not her mother, who first comes to her senses and tries to understand the intensity of the pain that the other was inflicted to. She understands that her mother lived in an age which was even more orthodox than hers and there was no Deepak to make her feel confident and safe and that is why she bore the brunt of incest quietly and developed defense mechanisms to battle the rage within. The resulting weakness in her character is then made understandable to Mala.

Later on, the audience gets to know that Vinay, the molester is dead and Mala finally starts recovering from the great tragedy of her childhood. There is some good news in the play at the end. She marries her love, Deepak, the only man who respected her and is now leading a far more comfortable life than she ever imagined.

She starts opening up more to her psychiatrist and tells her that she will celebrate the death of her molester and will keep doing that her entire life. This play brings up the issue of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual molestation and the combination of all these in the evil of incest and manages to put it across to the audience in an artistic and powerful manner.

The play gives the society the hope that the cycle of incest can be broken with a strong will and a determination to end it for one's own self and also from the society. If the victims take up the issue with courage and clarity and try to raise awareness about it in the society then the social taboo that is associated with revealing such an act, will be no more. If men also start sympathizing with the victims of the incest rather than hating them for being a victim, then conditions will improve dramatically. This is the message that Dattani's readers and audience take from the play *30 Days in September*.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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