

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*: Dealing with Incest

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ABSTRACT: *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.*

KEYWORDS: *Impact of incest, mother daughter relationship, pain, silence, anguish, and healing mechanism.*

Indian English literature has become an independent and outstanding creedal writing in the Commonwealth literature. And contemporary Indian drama in English/translation has made bold innovation and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and dramatic techniques. It has been increasingly turning to history, legend, myth and folklores, with splendid popularity and results. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama in English translation. Over the last few decades, Indian English drama has also started to blossom like all other literary genre. It is reflecting upon the issues that beset human race for a long time. But quite a few contemporary playwrights have made a significant contribution to the development of Indian English drama and Mahesh Dattani, the winner of Sahitya Akedmi Award, is one of them. He is India's first playwright who has given a new direction and sense of purpose to Indian English drama and theatre not only in India but also in the West. Dattani has been making conscientious efforts to showcase the issues and problems of contemporary Indian society making them the integral part of his dramatic credo. He is a powerful craftsman and devout humanist, delves deep on the depiction of the suffering and subjugation of those who dare not to voice their pains and problems. In his play *Thirty Days in September*, he focused on the sensitive issue of child sexual abuse within the range of familial relationship. The play was commissioned by an NGO called RAHI (Recovery and Healing from Incest) that helps survivors of child sexual abuse. The frighteningly high prevalence of incest and child abuse in Indian families has not been properly recognized. A survey made by RAHI is highlighted by Sumanspati:

RAHI's survey involving middle class and upper middle class women in the four metros of the country revealed 76 per cent of them had been sexually abused as children. More than 40 per cent of these were survivors of incest.²

The present play reveals and criticizes such social stigma as the practice of incestuous relationship, the social taboos which define women as pain bearers, and the effect 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's mind, when it is forced on a child. Mala, the protagonist of the play, is the victim of this abuse but she maintains silence against injustice. She bears the pain of self-humiliation but she is not permitted to reveal the truth before the society. But the scars cut deeper and the suffering of the victims lasts much longer often extending for their whole lives, because of the great emphasis placed in our society on preserving family reputation at all costs. As Mala's mind was preoccupied with the sexual abuse done to her by her maternal uncle, Vinaya (who is called 'Man' in the play). The play begins with the taped conversation of Mala with her counsellor. In the play Dattani very skilfully uses the technique of tapping, a form of EFT (Emotional Freedom Techniques), which is an energy based psycho-therapeutic tool. The conversation of Mala extends the sense of self-realization instead of self-revelation. In her conversation, in the beginning of the play, she seems quite confident and does not hesitate to reveal the name of the real culprit, who destroyed her life. She admits:

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 . . . I have the power to that now . . . I wish he were (SCI) here now, so I

could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn't my fault . . . Now. I know now. (Ibid,8)

But she is not so confident earlier. She is afraid to even utter her name. She hesitates to tell anyone what is bothering her and she also feels herself responsible for all the problems of her life. She stammers out her sentences in a taped conversation:

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. (Ibid,9)

Mala is not equipped to understand the root of her suffering. Her reaction comes out of her anger caused by her mother's inaction to protect her from her uncle. Mala accuses her mother, "The only person who can, who could have prevented all this is my mother. Sometimes I wish, she would just tell me to stop." (Ibid,18)

Action in the play moves through extensive use of monologues and incomplete sentences echoing the internal conflict of Mala. She bears a grudge against the male-dominated society and as a result turns down Deepak's proposal of marriage. The conversation of Mala and Deepak reveals her psyche:

MALA. It can never be over. It won't work between us.
DEEPAK. For God's sake give me a chance and it will. For your own sake.
MALA. For your own sake forget me.
SHANTA. Go, Mala. Just go with him.
MALA. You know I can't!
DEEPAK. Why not?
MALA. You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!! I cannot love you. (Ibid,54)

Her anguish becomes more painful on the realization that even her mother maintains silence. Adhering to the framework of dramatic domain, Dattani explores the sexual oppression and exploitation of the children, specially girl child, within the familial range in a realistic and remarkable way. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri rightly observes in this connection, "Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the abused."³ The dramatic tension, in the play develops through the unorganized and fractured consciousness of Mala.

The forced sexual molestation and betrayal from mother generate a discontent in Mala. Her wilful suppression becomes the cause of physical and mental disorder. Dattani is also convinced that the betrayal of personal relationship is the worst horror of human life. He says that the lack of communication between parents and children generates unbearable suffering and its leaves permanent impression on human consciousness. Like a psychologist, Dattani contemplates on the disintegrated self and its abnormal responses in this play. Every child needs to be catered with proper warmth and love as well as attention and affection. The deficiency of the facilitate non-amicable dealing with the surrounding and ultimately leads towards neurotic order. The child placed in non-corresponding social and familial environment in terms of life and affection turns out to be hostile to the world showing contempt for cultural values and social canons. Karen Harney viewed it:

Neuroses are generated by cultural disturbances and conflicts which the person has experienced in accentuated form mainly in childhood, in which he did not receive love, guidance, respect, opportunities for growth.⁴

Shanta's silence against her daughter's molestation 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. The mother of the victim sees the abuse as destiny and thus leaves the problems on God, which is a way for human beings to escape the responsibility of being able to do something about problems like incest. She every time avoids to answer Mala and seeks shelter in the picture of Lord Krishna and singing His hymns, "*Mere to Giridhar Gopal, Doosro na koi.*" (Ibid,9) As a result Mala finds herself helpless and it leads her to rebellion. Santosh Kumar Sonkar in his article on the play points out, "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."⁵ Mala meets men and enter into relationship with them. But she time it in such a way that the relationship ends within a period of thirty days. Her obsession with thirty days seems to suggest her desire to remain a control of the situation.

When she meets Deepak, she tries to end the relationship after thirty days, but Deepak likes her and tries to know her problem so that he may help her. He goes to meet her mother Shanta and there he sees some names, crosses and ticks on Mala's calendar. Deepak guesses from these marks what Mala is going through and sends her to consult a psychiatrist. Through Deepak and Mala's taped conversation with the counsellor, the dramatist allows us an insight into Mala's inner conflict. She is afraid to raise her voice against her victimization but she does not realize the psychic damage she is doing to herself. She has learnt to remain silent from her mother. Both the mother and the daughter are portrayed as the victims of patriarchal society in which they have no any right to raise their voice against the injustice done to them by the male dominated society. Gayatri C. Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* analyses the question of female subaltern in colonial/postcolonial discourses:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject the track of sexual difference is doubly effected . . . It is rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominate, if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the female is more deeply in shadow.⁶

The metaphor of silence in the play can be compared to that in Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session!* The silence in these plays is used in order to be deconstructed; the silence is not absence of sound; rather it is full of violent noises. Mala is shattered by her experiences and separated herself completely from her family. In an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, Dattani says that he was deeply moved to hear the accounts of this abuse's victims whom he met at RAHI. He adds:

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.⁷

Beyond it, Shanta, Mala and uncle Vinaya have their own guilt and make desperate attempt to cope up with their present. Shanta is impatient for the marriage of Mala and Deepak because it seems her to be the only possible remedy to bring her daughter out of the shadows of guilt and sin. She confesses to Deepak, "It is my fault only. I will feel easy once she settles down." (Ibid,15) In contrast to her anxiety, Mala expresses her indignation for the marriage. She feels nervous, and her nervousness assumes the proportion of revolt and contempt. But Deepak is still unaware of the cause of her refusal from the marriage. He inquires to Shanta, ". . . what is worrying you about your daughter. There is something you are not telling me." (Ibid,15) On the other hand uncle Vinaya, to make up his guilt, tries to give the ownership of his flat to Shanta. Vinaya, the elder brother of Shanta, used to help her financially when Mala's father had abandoned them. It could be the financial angle that prevented Shanta from breaking her silence. But one day, after a long pause and endurance, she breaks her silence and accuses her daughter for her willing share in sensual pleasures. But, for Mala, her sexual pleasures were the results of her own ignorance and the same pleasures convert into rebellion on the realization of the horror of the situation. She feels her abuser's presence everywhere, in every relationship with men. Dattani in *Thirty Days in September*, like his other plays, maintain balance of different events with the shift of memory in the past and the present. It is an evidence of his skill in controlling human passion for a more vibrant theatrical experience.

The play comes to its climax as Shanta, after passing through the stage of silence, discloses that she too had been a victim of child abuse at the hands of the same man, Vinay who represents the male chauvinistic picture of the society. His attempts to molest both Shanta and Mala do not only challenge the Indian morality but also reflect the male hegemony over female. He has no feeling of remorse or sympathy for both the mother and the daughter who undergo mental and physical sufferings. He does not feel shame when he is called 'Bhaiya' by Shanta, instead he confidently claims to act like a father figure when Mala's marriage is concerned. He, who is the culprit of Mala too, does not hesitate in using the expression, "Isn't she like my daughter also?" (Ibid,38) 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. In the play there is also the conflict between tradition and modernity. Shanta represents the traditional figure of women who never dares to protest against their exploitation. While on the other hand, Mala is a new woman. She is bold, confident and financially sound. The play pathetically highlights how the forced physical relations signifying the triumph of masculinity is the worst horror in the life of a woman. The suffering of Mala and Shanta justify that the 'silence' in sexual colonialism is a common fate of all women in all generations and its breaking is not only a postcolonial creed but a psychological device to bring out the hidden pain and helplessness of the sufferer. As Shanta cries out in anxiety and pain:

Yes. Yes! I only remained silent . . . I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak . . . My tongue was cut off years ago . . . How could I save her when I could not save myself? . . . (Ibid,54)

There is a perfect use of objective co-relative to manifest the state of her conflict, as her passionate action of picking glasses from the portrait of Lord Krishna and jabbing in her mouth. She remains unconscious and blood start floating her mouth. Uncle Vinaya tries to console both the mother and the daughter, but all vain because it is too late now. Shanta's hurting herself is a projection of the terrible flow of emotions going inside her. The dramatic narrative affords the possibility to unfold the layers of the butchered psyche of both, mother and daughter. Shanta knows everything but she turns a blind eye to everything and makes herself busy in worshipping the God and her own household. She believes that one has to bear the pain when one is powerless to remedy the situation. She silently bears the pain and tries to forget all about it, although it makes her "A frozen woman." (Ibid,36) in the eyes of her husband. But after her confession, Mala understands her pain and admits:

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 acknowledge your struggle It's not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn't my fault. (Ibid,58)

Thus, the play successfully depicts the tragedy of the victims of child sexual abuse. In 'A Note on the Play' Lilliete Dubey says, "*Thirty Days in September* has touched hearts and consciences everywhere. Sensitive and powerful without every offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship."⁸ The play has a fine balance of form and content and every expression is potent enough to convey a meaning beyond the verbal suggestion. Dattani's plays do not end. They are simply preambles of the advancing complexities that are yet to be faced. His works are slice of life, to expose the misery of sexually marginalized sections and to reflect man's struggle with his inner-self confronting with socio-ethical restrictions constitute a specific strain in his dramatic art.

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