
LIFTING THE VEIL: A STUDY ON MAHESH DATTANI'S *THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER*

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani, a multifarious artist of contemporary Indian English drama is a director, dancer, actor, teacher, and writer. Being conscious of the positive role that a creative writer especially a playwright can play in social reformation, Dattani chose tabooed themes such as homosexuality, child sexual abuse and gender discrimination - not merely for shocking the public but with a specific purpose of arousing awareness about these invisible problems mainly the repressed desires, innermost emotions, loneliness, feelings of different groups, etc..

This paper attempts to bring out the trauma of a girl child's life as she is a prey to incest in the play *Thirty Days in September* written by Mahesh Dattani. It describes the silent sufferings of a girl and her mother. This paper creates awareness on this situation and the courage to break the barriers of faceless life. Mala is the protagonist of the play. The scattered life of Mala transforms into the life of freedom. Similarly, her mother Shanta cross over her silence in order to acclaim to the world that women too are human beings who has to be respected and honored.

Key Words: *incest, silence, protest, power, women*

Dattani has dramatized the foremost sensational issue, child sexual abuse in the play 'Thirty Days in September' where the different factors have to be lifted to the audience. Dealing with the child incest, the play throws more light on the effects after the forced sexual relation on the individual's psyche, which gets intense with the passage of time, than the issue itself. The protagonist of the play Mala is molested by her maternal uncle before reaching puberty. As she comes to the stage of adolescence, she finds that the world is hostile and human relationships are insincere. Thus she becomes physically vulnerable and sexually addicted. The play '*Thirty Days in September*' opens with Mala talking to the counselor, which reveals her confused mind. Her abuser who is her uncle subconsciously lives with her all the time, as part of her dirty reflections which damages her natural growth, deters her from pursuing her love interests beyond the ominous thirty day period, scars her soul every now and then and above all silence her voice. Mala does not want to face society and she endures the humiliation by herself. Her anguish becomes too severe when she thinks of her mother's silence towards her life scenario. As Mala withers under the psychological pressure exerted on her by the abuser, her mother watches her silently, living her own pain and suffering mutely.

Pedophilia or Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is the physical or mental violation of a child with sexual intent, usually by an older person who is in some position of trust /or power. The

term pedophile refers to any adult who habitually seeks the company of a child or children for the gratification of his/her sexual needs. Child sexual abuse occurs in three ways typically: incestuous abuse (i.e. by family members of victims), sexual abuse by strangers, and child prostitution. Families often choose to 'resolve' the issue privately because they consider it as not a criminal matter. In Indian culture, the place of the maternal uncle is given great importance. Maternal uncle is revered as a double mother where he has to perform the responsibility of "Kanyadan" during the marriage ceremony. He is supposed to be the best custodian in Indian culture, second only to the girl's father, but here the custodian turns out to be the exploiter of Mala. If a teenage girl is seduced by her own maternal uncle, who should the girl trust? It throws light on the condition on almost all Indian women, especially the girl children who have to face humiliation and pass an ordeal at each and every step of their life. In their life, they get a ray of hope but the same ray destroys their trust.

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 silent receivers of pain by presenting the clash between mother and daughter. Revolving around Mala and Shanta, the play reveals the betrayal in blood relationship in a country like India where even to think of such relationships is beyond imagination. Mala, sexually abused by her maternal uncle, at the age of six has to suffer continuous sexual molestation which leads her to the arms of any man whom she comes in contact with. She hesitates to love Deepak because she always realizes her uncle's presence with her. But still, with his help, she becomes successful to fight against her exploitation by refusing her maternal uncle's gift of the house.

Mala blames her mother Shanta for her irresponsibility towards the suffering of her daughter. The pathetic situation is best expressed in Mala's lamentation:

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 maybe 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 you already knew the answer.

Thus women are brought up as passive listeners, bearers, and acceptors from the tiny age itself to survive in the male-dominated society. The play involves its climax when we come to know that the mother also is the prey of incest even to the same person. Now we recognize the cause of silence from Mala's mother.

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 the summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!! (Pointing to the picture of God.) I looked at 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)

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" (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 play, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. 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 the male gaze. Vinay's attempts to molest both Shanta and Mala do not only challenge Indian morality but also reflect the male hegemony over female. He does not feel shame when he is called 'Bhaia' by Shanta; instead, he confidently claims to act as 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." Shanta 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. She frankly turns down Deepak's proposal of marriage and reveals to him her passion for sex with several people. She conveys him her inner turmoil and tells him the reason for her behaving in such a way is beyond her imagination. She considers herself to be a bad and characterless person.

First Dattani presented the incestuous relationship between brother and sister; and between Niece and Maternal Uncle. Both these relations in any religion or society of the world are still considered pious and pure. In India, when we consider brother-sister relationship Sister ties holy strand (Rakhi) on the wrist of her brother and brother gives the promise to protect her till his last breath against any odd moment. After father, brother is supposed to be the custodian of a sister. But this relation was polluted by the brother of Shanta. Vinay has shredded the thread of pious relationship established by society and religion in India and other countries. The silence of the sister encourages him to continue his destruction over his sister. The play "Thirty Days in September" opens with the recorded voice on tape as methods of self-revelation, Dattani unveils the conflict of Mala's conscious and unconscious mind. She assumes herself responsible for the havoc which changed 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 . . .

She could have prevented a lot from happening . . ." (9). But in the case of Mala, she was only seven, an age to play with dolls and to sing nursery rhymes "Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November." She was unable to understand Uncle Vinay's activities with her. She didn't like it but she is weak was unable to protest him. She even tried to inform her parents but of no use. Her father sent her to her mother and her mother turned deaf ear to her and tried to divert the topic for an unknown reason. Her father did not pay attention to his own daughter and always brushed aside the responsibility to her mother. "I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle would molest me. When I was seven. Then

eight.Nine.Ten. You were busy in either the puja 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 (25-26).

The silence of her mother against her molestation which subsides in her unconscious mind hurts her emotionally. Gradually she grew up and her traumatic experience of physical exploitation and her mother's indifferent attitude towards it starts coming at the surface level that resulted in lifelong suffering for Mala. Girl child always needs protection from the cradle to grave. They feel themselves alone and as a refugee in their own house and consider it to be the 'unsafe nest'. These children are somehow encouraged, tricked, bribed, pressurized or else forced to take part in this crime. In that small age, they are unable to express their pain and the harm done to them. In fact, they themselves don't know that it is something dangerous for them and even the doers convince them by giving them their favorite things which they can't get from their parents. Dattani wants the women to raise their voice from the teenage itself and fight for their rights. Unless and until one comes forward to tell the injustice happened to them, the crime will be on the top. Moreover, their silence will definitely give strength to the abusers to move freely and do this abuse openly without any sort of hesitation. The writer brings such plays in front of the society with the hope that they will come out to raise their voice for the sufferers along with the writer. Hence sexual education must be imparted to all the school students and even practical classes should be taken for the girls to tell the different sort of abuses and even the remedies to overcome the problem. Child abuse is like a viral fever seems to be spreading all over India. The Indian government has to take necessary steps to remove it from the root otherwise it will destroy the peace and prestige of our country.

However, the atmosphere of silence and secrecy that pervades the family isolates each woman in her suffering and they end up taking out their pain, anger, and fear on each other, unaware of the common bond they share as survivors of incestuous sexual abuse by the same perpetrator. And, if you have a young child, girl or boy, teach them the difference between good touch and bad touch. Make them feel safe and loved enough to be able to confide in you. And most importantly, always listen to and believe in your child, even if you don't like what you're hearing. If you have been a victim, don't blame yourself, don't let anyone else blame you, and don't let that determine the course of the rest of your life. Get help, get on with your life... don't let the monsters win! And remember, it wasn't your fault! Child incest victims are often called 'secret survivors' as there is often no one to take their side or to listen to their shame, confusion, and self-loathing as incest is a taboo topic. Years of silence. Silence wrapped the life of Shanta and Mala like a cocoon. In India, women are reluctant to speak out about their abuse as it would invite social humiliation, ridicule, and disbelief.

Exploring the painful problem, Mahesh Dattani brings valid concerns and structures, a world of optimism where the wrong can be corrected and the resurrection of brutalized faith is possible. Children who often have low self-esteem and may find it difficult to trust. *Thirty days in September* is as much a tale of lifting the veil from a stricken daughter and a silently suffering mother, as it is one that impressively addresses the issue of child sex abuse. The play endeavors to lift the veil of silence which surrounds the issue of incest. From a very insecure, shy and diffident girl at the beginning of act 1, see her transforming into a confident woman

ready to face the world. The silence is used in order to be deconstructed; the silence is not an absence of sound; rather it is full of violent noises. As such, it is an insidious formative force. Mala is made to suffer time doubly, first through abuse and then through the silence done to her. Yet the play continues Dattani's attempt to explore in Indian society. The new horizon has been explored to represent the voice of women crushed under the wheels of exploitation of elitists. Dattani unfolds the layers of the butchered psyche of Mala who suffers at two levels - her struggle with her own inner self and secondly her discontent with her mother who maintains oppressive silence to escape horrors of the reality. The suffering of Mala and Shantha justifies the 'silence' against sexual colonialism is a common fate of all women in all generations. The breaking up of that silence is not only a postcolonial creed but a psychological device to bring the sufferer out the hell of 'guilt' and 'self-accusation'. In the end, Mala and Shantha come to a common point where the silence of them speak out their own conflicts.

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