

RESEARCH ARTICLE



HOME, AN UNSAFE NEST: A STUDY ON MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAY 'THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER'

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani in the forum of Indian English Drama has a sustainable growth by the fusion of the avant-garde subjective approach and an agitprop objective approach. Mahesh Dattani, a theatre personality presents reality as it exists in *Thirty Days in September*. He addresses the issues of child abuse in India. The play was written based on the real-life experience of such victims. The incest creates the worst horror and prolonged psychological trauma and it leads to further victimization when the child grows into adult hood and the theme of child incestuous abuse elicits emotional and intellectual response from the audience. emphasises the dangers of silence maintained by the victim Mala and her mother Shanta to avoid social embarrassment. It is a family play completely somber, very serious and horror struck. Dattani asserts that betrayal in the familial relationship generates unbearable anguish and frustration. The play portrays the issue of incest through Mala and her mother, Shanta. Both the daughter and the mother are sexually molested in their infancy by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta's own brother and Mala's maternal uncle. The sexual molestation affects both the victims differently as Shanta bears it silently due to social pressure and taboos and seeks rescue in the idol of Lord Krishna but Mala revolts against it, becoming physically vulnerable and seeks the company of men for sensual gratification. Though incest threatens to break the family, love helps to keep it intact.

Keywords – Child sexual abuse, incest, Unsafe nest, Somber

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Thirty days in September has touched hearts and consciences everywhere. Sensitive and powerful without ever offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship – Little Dubey

Mahesh Dattani in the forum of Indian English Drama has a sustainable growth by the

fusion of the avant-garde subjective approach and an agitprop objective approach. Prejudice, hypocrisy, guilt and compromise form the thematic threads of his works. Dattani, in particular, is concerned with the minorities who are forced to live a double life so as to be part of the mainstream. His recurring theme is an individual struggle over societal demands or inflictions in an urban society. The innovations he has made in the

area of themes made him popular both at home and abroad.

Mahesh Dattani, a theatre personality presents reality as it exists in *Thirty Days in September*. He addresses the issues of child abuse in India. To reveal the horror of the dangerous, damaging and humiliating assault on a child's mind, soul and body on stage, he met some adult women who were out-spoken about their sexually abused childhood experience by their immediate family members. The play was written based on the real-life experience of such victims. The incest creates the worst horror and prolonged psychological trauma and it leads to further victimization when the child grows into adult hood and the theme of child incestuous abuse elicits emotional and intellectual response from the audience.

Many of his plays display Indian middle-class morality and defend the outcasts and potential rebels of urban society. The urban society is characteristically patriarchal; it is run by men and only the men directed political, economic and cultural life. Individual families are normally set up on a patriarchal basis, with the husband and father determining fundamental conditions and making the key decisions where the women in the family are quite observers.

Dattani's 2001 stage play, *Thirty Days in September*, emphasizes the dangers of silence maintained by the victim Mala and her mother Shanta to avoid social embarrassment. In the pursuit of power the weaker one is always defeated in the name of adjustment or compromise as the situation demands. There is a continuous struggle for identity. It is a family play completely somber, very serious and horror struck. Dattani asserts that betrayal of the familial relationship generates unbearable anguish and frustration.

Until recently, the girl child was a neglected agenda and child sexual abuse has become common in India. Child sexual abuse happens because the system of the very silence encourages men to happen, which allows to underestimate the child, specially the female child and create a climate in which abuse can thrive. Instead of being a refuge from the hostile outside world, the natal home quite often becomes the 'unsafe nest' where the protectors turn into

predators. Here, in the play, the home becomes 'unsafe nest or precarious home' for both the mother and the daughter.

The play deals with the most heinous issue, incestuous relationship, which not only shakes the whole humanity and also damages the equilibrium of an individual mind. The play portrays the issue of incest through Mala and her mother, Shanta. Both the daughter and the mother are sexually molested in their infancy by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta's own brother and Mala's maternal uncle. The sexual molestation affects both the victims differently as Shanta bears it silently due to social pressure and taboos and seeks rescue in the idol of Lord Krishna but Mala revolts against it, becoming physically vulnerable and seeks the company of men for sensual gratification.

It is the story of Mala, the traumatic experience of getting raped by her maternal uncle at the age of seven not only leaves her with a sense of guilt, but also causes a rift in the mother – daughter relationship since Mala feels she has been betrayed by her mute mother. The psycho-neurotic behavior of the protagonists is the result of buried hatred, pain and the sense of betrayal that torments her. She stops trusting her own feelings because no one acknowledges or hears her agony. The agony makes her learn not to feel. This strong, lonely, desperate child learns to give up the senses. As she grows older she gets stronger. The pain still lurks, but it's easier to pretend it is not there than to acknowledge the horrors she has buried in the deepest parts of her mind. Later, she drifts from one affair to another, none lasting beyond thirty days. Her self-destructive flight comes to an end with Deepak, who is determined to marry her. Mala narrates her story with full confidence to the counselor, and in so doing, she confronts her horrid past and redefines her present. Finally, the mute mother Shanta also opens out her stunted past of helplessness and discovers her inner strength. The telling in either case is seen as a metaphor for personal healing, and what seen like compelling reasons for suppression are presented as social hypocrisy that stunts the development of the abused.

Mala's father had left her and her mother long ago; Mala holds her mother responsible for all that has happened to them. The play begins with Mala talking to an imagined counselor, which brings the dilemma in her mind to light. She says,

"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 II 9)

Mala not only bears the pain of sexual assault at home daily 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. All she knows is pain, desperation, loneliness and isolation. As she grows, her traumatic experience of physical exploitation and her mother's indifference attitude towards her sufferings results in a lifelong clash between the mother and the daughter. She asks her mother,

"Where were you when he locked the door to your bed room while I was napping there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes everyday 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!" (Collected Plays II 53)

Mala, the victim of this abuse 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. Betrayal in any close relationship is as painful as sexual abuse. 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" (Dattani)

Mala's relationships are overwhelmed by the power of her emotions. She reaches out for help, but never seems to find what she is looking

for. The pain gets worse and loneliness sets in. When the feelings return, she overcomes with panic, pain and desperation. Dattani vividly dramatizes the raw emotion and the stark, undiluted reality with remarkable insight and bring to the fore the psyche of the protagonists.

The story is told in retrospect through the eye of the survivor and moves back and forth with multiple stage sets and three time zones. The play opens with Mala progressing in therapy, confidently articulating her past to the counselor in February 2004, understanding that the very first part of healing is shattering the silence. In a flashback the play, then moves four years back when she is in her first therapy on September 30, 2001 who is without confidence and fears to say her name even. In the third time zone, Mala's suffering and her behavioral problems can be seen in different settings at home, at a restaurant alluring a man, at Deepak's home, etc.

Mala refuses to enter into a permanent relationship with Deepak, who admires and respects her. Instead she indulges in promiscuous thirty days affairs usually with older men and puts a cross in the calendar every month after the end of the relationship. She craves for male attention as she suffers from low self-esteem. Once in a coffee house, she tells Deepak that a man was staring at her, and then confesses:

"No. He wasn't staring at me... I wanted him to ... you want to know what I feel most? If he had looked at me, I would have felt – I would have felt - truly alive." (Collected Plays II 22)

Thirty Days in September is a sensitive and powerful play, has touched hearts and consciences everywhere and it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship. When the fragile fabric of familial relations is ripped apart, the memories of a traumatic past return to haunt the mother and the daughter. The abuse causes its victims to be self destructive, over controlling and abusive to others, as well as addiction to alcohol, drugs, food and sex. Mala became physically vulnerable and sought the company of men for sensual gratification. Her mother feels helpless and did not stop Mala from doing this. The mother of the child feels helpless. When a child falls and

scrapes her knees parents can erase the hurt by kissing it and putting a band-aid on it, but not so with the pain of sexual abuse. Girl child sexual abuse can be understood as an unwelcome intimate contact for which the girl child is gently encouraged, bribed, tricked, pressurized and forced to take part. Very often, the abuse begins as an extension of affection and the reaction of the victim is that of confused, ambivalent feelings and one of passive acceptance. The play works from within the psyche of the alienated protagonist Mala who is seen bereft of the wharf.

Shanta, a traditional woman, is a bearer of the pain by keeping her voices silent, and Mala as a girl with modern sensibility who revolts not only against her mother's silence but also challenges male supremacy by rejecting Deepak's proposal for living together. Vinay's attempt to molest both Shanta and Mala does 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. 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 "She is like my daughter." Thus Dattani has mocked at the traditional concept of relationship which explains the purity of the relationship between brother and sister and warns society of being cautious of relatives like Vinay.

Mala cannot bear her mother's silence and negligence. She hates her mother's attitude of rushing to take support from Lord Krishna during most of her critical moments. Shanta wants to help her by praying desperately for her. She has immense trust on Lord Krishna that He will set the thing right. Shanta's turmoil was double inside and she had buried her stormy thoughts deep in her heart and rarely allowed them to peep in her routine life. She recalled many painful realities of her daughter Mala and her sexual advances towards her brother, Vinay.

Deepak wants to open the door to Mala's life and his hope and mission is to shed light on the hidden wounds of her and to make her courageous, strong, inspired and determined. He sincerely wants to marry her and Shanta too approves of it.

But Mala has turned down the proposal in a rude manner. This is what Deepak tells Mala's mother, "Last week, I told her that she was the most intelligent, sensitive and dynamic woman. I had met, she just stared at me and said, "I have something to tell you. It is over. I don't want to continue with our relationship. She does not want to see me ever again."

Deepak sees through the scarred psyche of Mala and takes her to a counselor where she hesitatingly reveals some truth. But ultimately it is because of Deepak's understanding and loving gestures that Mala unburdens herself. The memory of her uncle's misdeeds haunts her and she subjected to continuous abuse by her uncle Vinay and four years later her uncle says, "You have become a whore at thirteen." And this accounts for her distorted personality.

However, there is a marked change in her after the disclosure. Her easy manner and the body language reflect that she is at peace with herself. At the counselor's desk during her last session, she says:

"Mala Kahtri. February, 2004 ... I do not hesitate to use my real name now ... After all, it is he who must hide ... He should look the other way ... I have the power to do that now because I know it wasn't my fault ... I know now." (Collected Plays II 8)

It is with great effort that she gets rid of the guilt of being a 'bad girl' and wins a psychological battle by consciously shunting away the painful memories of her childhood. It is only because of Deepak's support, concern and understanding that Mala discloses and lives life anew.

Shanta has a strong belief in God, keeps herself always busy with praying, represents the traditional figure of women who never dares to protest against molestation. Contrary to her, Mala is a new woman. She, being financially independent, gets angry at her mother's silence against her molestation and questions her uncle's financial assistance. She frankly turns down Deepak's proposal of marriage and reveals to him her passion for sex with several people.

Thus, in *Thirty Days in September*, which is essentially a family play, 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 woman as a silent receiver of pain by presenting the clash between mother and daughter.

Though incest threatens to break the family, love helps to keep it intact. The union between mother and daughter in the end shows the triumph of love over depression and disintegration of family. Mala begs her mother's forgiveness as she says "It's not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn't my fault". (Collected Plays II 58) The realization leads to the resolution of their conflict.

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