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Incest, Betrayal and Individual's Psyche: Portrayal of Social Taboos in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

Dr. ZEBA SIDDIQUI

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, AUMP



**Dr. ZEBA
SIDDIQUI**

ABSTRACT

Sahitya Akademi Award winner and dramatist Mahesh Dattani is well known for bringing up marginalized issues to the fore, issues which are rare in Indian society. In this play he brings out the issue of incest. It is a study of child abuse, sexual abuse, how individuals respond to such tragedies and how the society takes them. It also opens a window into psychiatric and psychological counselling that is a budding medical profession in India.

Keywords: Incest, child sexual abuse, taboo, Sahitya Akademi award

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Thirty Days in September is about multi-generational incest. The plot opens slowly. At first we only get hints of what is the central tragedy of the play. The play also speaks about the gender issue and how the male gender still dominates Indian society, even at level of very un-matching social statuses. This seems to be an abiding theme for Mahesh Dattani, figuring in everyone of his play, even in those where the central issue is entirely different. For example, in the beginning of the play, Shanta, the mother of the heroine Mala of the play is dealing with the paper-wallah who is nothing but machismo on walking sticks. The way Dattani has given stage instructions brings out his masculinism, sexism and dominance of the female sex quite flagrantly.ⁱ

The same goes for some other instances and some other characters in the play. Even the very good character of Deepak holds masculine poses in threatening manner.ⁱⁱ Seems that men cannot be good in Dattani's plays except when they are gay, are suffering from AIDS or are extremely disrespectful of religion.

Almost as an aside, Mala, the heroine of the play is directing someone on how a play should be performed and in that she is depicting a scene where a mother is skipping rope with her girl child. Mala thinks that the scene is gender-constructed and she should be playing cricket in a very aggressive, rough and masculine manner and should be scathingly sharp in her attacks both on and off grounds.ⁱⁱⁱ Dattani wants her women to acquire the poses and postures of men which he himself criticizes umpteen times.

Mala comes out as an insecure and confused girl with lack of confidence, but slowly the play reveals that it is not her fault that she is confused and does not have confidence in herself. Dattani cleverly inserts lines in her conversation which reveals that she does not have confidence in herself because she thinks of herself as a bad girl, a girl who has strayed out of the right path of chastity and she thinks it is her fault and it is the fault of the Western values which she has somehow contracted. She admits that she has been with many men and somehow it is her fault and not that of others.

Deepak loves Mala and wants to marry her but Mala is constantly trying to put him off and keeps sending him off, saying it will never work between them. She does not want to get out of the life that she is leading, where she abuses her body for the sake of companionship but does not seem to get it.

Her relationship with her mother is the focal point of the play. Gradually, as the play proceeds the audience gets to know that Mala was sexually molested in her childhood by her own uncle and that her Shanta kept quiet and never spoke anything about it. She never tried to comfort her daughter, never addressed her physical and psychological wounds. She just kept feeding her and found solace in religion, in her god. Mala hates her for that and hates the religion too. Dattani brings the religious angle here, revealing his agenda.^{iv}

When she finally forces Shanti to confront her on the issue of why she kept quiet at molestation, by throwing the image of her deity and thus offending her out of her comfort zone. But to her initial surprise, Shanti blames her for all the abuse that she got in the childhood. She tells Mala, that it was Mala who pleaded her uncle, Shanta's brother for molesting her and that it was her who pleaded her cousin to do the same. Shanta tells her that she had been an immoral girl since the beginning and this is all her doing. At first, Mala protests but then falls into acquiescence. This shows a strange side of her, as she herself is not very sure, what happened to her.

Here, Mahesh Dattani is trying to show how difficult it becomes for individuals to face something like child molestation. Mala not very typically responds with a much sexualized character in which she finds herself helpless in giving herself along with whole of her body to strange men, with whom she flirts shamelessly. She thinks that she cannot help it and confesses so to her psychiatric counsellor. Even then she can never feel anyone else in the act of love, as uncle Vinay and his horrible touch is all she can remember.

This is shown beautifully in a scene where two scenes merge into one, at least for Mala and for her audience. Her uncle Vinay, who used to molest her when she was young, comes to stay with her

family. She is not home and has gone to Deepak for finding some comfort. While at her home, Vinay is talking to her mother Shanta. While in Deepak's house she is talking to Deepak and Deepak is trying to give her some comfort by giving her human touch. But slowly the two scenes are merged into one by Dattani and even in Deepak's touch, Mala feels the horrifying touch of her uncle Vinay, thus portraying the quagmire of scalding memories from which Mala finds herself is unable to untangle.^v

Mala even shows signs of sympathizing with her abuser, her uncle Vinay, as she is not willing to go all out for punishing him and does not even accept it when Deepak tries to bring out the truth in front of Vinay. Here Dattani is making Mala display the Stockholm syndrome,^{vi} where a victim develops sympathy for the victimizer and actually starts defending and justifying his cruel actions.^{vii} Here Mala may be suffering from the same.

In yet another aside, Dattani engages in his familiar rhetoric of bashing everything Indian and praising the Western world and all its values. In the play, the monster Uncle Vinay is portrayed as the one who espouses Indian cultural values and even respects religion, while it is Deepak who is the good guy who does not value religion and quite enthusiastically espouses the Western culture and its values. In quite an unnecessary tirade against India and Indian values, Dattani is trying to etch a portrait in which Indianness comes out as arrogant, hypocritical, superstitious and downright cruel, while the Westernness comes out as a paragon of virtue, supporting humanity and individualistic values.

Though later on in the play, the behaviour of Uncle Vinay betrays that such two things as his character and traditional values cannot go together. He is lavishing wine on her niece Mala. No Indian family which espouses traditional values does the same. This discrepancy in behaviour of his characters betrays a sense of artificiality and pushed agenda.

At the end of the play it is revealed that it was not only Mala who was abused by her Uncle Vinay. It turns out that her ever silent mother Shanta was also abused by the same man, while she was young. She was shy and was definitely

traumatized by the event and hence she never told anyone. As a result, she tried to brush the tragedy under the carpet, somewhere in her subconscious and even unconscious mind. She finds solace in religion and devotes herself to it.^{viii}

As she grows up and has a daughter and when her daughter Mala becomes old enough, the cycle of sexual molestation is repeated all over again and the same Uncle Vinay who abused his sister when they were young, now abuses his niece, the daughter of Shanta too. Shanta is not unaware of the situation but keeps quiet and forgets the incidents and denies that they every existed. She secretly and unknowingly hopes that Mala forgets it too and leads a normal existence, but the past comes haunting in Mala's present. The reality has to be addressed. When Mala comes to know about her mother's secret then her hatred of her mother is reduced and she understands why she was always so weak, shy and wanting to forget everything. The trauma was too much for her to bear.

Mala's wounds are not completely healed but they start to heal at the death of the man who molested both her and her mother; that is when Uncle Vinay dies. Mala is now married to Deepak and is leading a comparatively peaceful life. Mala regains her confidence and becomes surer of herself, as is witnessed in one of the last scenes of the play where Mala is confiding her newfound confidence to her counsellor. She decides to celebrate the date of the death of her molester as Freedom Day.

In this way, Dattani illustrates a way in which a woman can start healing mentally, with some outward symbolic victories over the perpetrator of those heinous crimes.

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