

Holding a Mirror to the Society: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's Play *Thirty Days in September*

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ABSTRACT

The problem of child abuse still remains out of the mainstream discussions in India. It is not at all surprising in a country where the only relationship that remains is that of brothers and sisters, rather than cousins. The elders are revered and worshipped in the country, and any foul word against them is considered blasphemy. The status of elders is high, the relationships are strong, but the issue of child abuse is a reality, and the fact that children are abused by their close relatives, neighbours and teachers is even harsher. Though there have been T V shows in India that have discussed the problem. The issue still remains a non-issue. Mahesh Dattani has taken up the issue in his play *Thirty Days of September*. The paper studies the play and brings out the psychological problems faced by the victims throughout their lives.

Every society on the planet considers children sacred. They are treated as epitomes of innocence, honesty and selfless love in almost every society. There are laws and moral codes in every society that govern how people deal with children. However, in recent times, it has been observed that children are also the easiest targets for sexual perverts. The perverts target them in every society. The first case of sodomy was reported in the United States of America in 1897 (<http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/illinois.html>). However, the sexual abuse of children is as old as society itself. The cases of child abuse started getting attention, probably with the publication of biographies of native Australians and Canadians who were subjected to brutal torture in residential schools (in the case of Canadian Natives) and the charitable mission run by Missionaries (in Australia, such children are called The Stolen Generations). The children who were abused physically and sexually developed severe psychological problems and carried these problems throughout their lives.

It was Freud who shocked the world by saying that a person has to resolve many psychosexual conflicts at a young age. In his theory, Freud described the following psychosexual stages: "oral stage, Anal Stage, the phallic stage, the genital stage" (Carducci 68-70). Freud, for the first time, spoke about how the younger male children craved for their mothers and females for their fathers: "every new arrival on this planet is faced by the task of mastering the Oedipus complex; anyone who fails to do so falls a victim to neurosis" (Freud, Vol. 7, 149). According to Freud's theory, anyone who successfully resolves the psychosexual conflicts as a child can do so as an adult. In fact, according to Freud, these psychosexual stages were a sort of training for the children that they must undergo to grow into adults. Freud's work did not concentrate on the effect of sexual molestation faced by children at a young age. However, many of his successors did considerable research on child sexual abuse, and their findings indicate that child sexual abuse can debilitate the mind as well as the body of the victim.

Many societies have been very candid in accepting the reality of child abuse, but Indian society is still coming to terms with the problem which is growing at a very fast pace. In a society where elders are respected and even worshipped, the existence of such diabolism is not even considered. The problems of child abuse are still considered to be non-existent in India. But the reality is shocking. In fact the statistics of child abuse in India are shocking:

According to a report by UNICEF, almost 53% of children in India face sexual abuse of some kind at least once in their lives. That means almost 1 in 2 Indians have been molested or worse, raped as children. (Jalan)

In recent times, so many rape cases have come to light where the elders have raped the minor children, but such cases have been reported only because the victims of the abuse were hospitalised. The children are abused in homes by their close relatives, but instead of reporting such abuses, the children go into a cocoon because they know that their parents will not believe what they are saying. Indeed, such abuse by the people who are close to the family is unthinkable. In fact, ours is a society where incestuous relationships are still considered myths. However, the cases do occur everywhere, due to the social pressures, children never report such abuses and develop severe psychological problems, which make their life a hell.

Mahesh Dattani, in his play *Thirty Days in September*, presents such a situation where the lives of two major characters have been turned into hell due to the sexual abuse they faced during their childhood. The play opens in the office of a

counsellor, where the protagonist Mala Khatri has come for a counselling session. During the course of the play, readers come to know that she was abused by her real maternal uncle when she was a child. In Indian society, maternal uncles are treated at the same level as the father, so it is unbelievable that a maternal uncle can abuse his own niece. Due to the reverence for elders, they are believed to be capable of causing harm. This psychological conduct has an impact on Mala; instead of blaming the molester, she blames herself:

I know it is all my fault really...it must be. I must have asked for it...somehow, I just seem to be made for it. Maybe I was born that way, maybe...that is what I am meant for. Its not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish my mother...(8)

The research has pointed out that Mala's attitude is a result of her exploitation and molestation. This often occurs in childhood when the children think that they are being punished for some mistake: "the child may have made assumptions about his or her inherent badness, based on misinterpretation of maltreatment as, in fact, punishment for unknown transgressions" (Briere 25). Mala grows into a young woman, but her understanding of her molestation does not grow; she keeps on blaming herself:

I-Oh God!!I-I seduced my uncle when I was thirteen! I –slept with my cousin- and- anyone who was available...no, there is nothing to tell about my uncle, forget all that, please help me stop this behaviour. (32)

The above lines clearly show the impact of conditioning of Mala by Indian social and cultural mores, according to which elders cannot do anything wrong. Mala, instead of blaming the perpetrator, blames herself and her 'karma'. This has probably compounded her psychological problems manifold: one, because she is a victim, second. After all, she believes that she is herself responsible for a crime that was perpetrated upon her and suffers from guilt. This kind of sexual abuse during childhood is like injecting a dangerous virus into someone's body; even if the effects are not visible, the person still carries the threat inside (Collin-Vezina et al. 29).

In fact, child abuse is even more dangerous and psychologically debilitating to the children because it is done by the close relatives or the family friends who cannot even be suspected:

The most disgusting thing about child sex abuse is that in most cases, the perpetrator is known to the victim. And the most horrifying fact about it is that most perpetrators have no set gender, age or criminal history. Anyone could be a monster. (Jalan)

Under the garb of their relationship, they go on molesting the children for long times without any detection. The victims suffer silently because they are always under the impression that nobody would believe them, and their own parents will silence them.

In fact, child sexual molestation is a silent emergency that needs to be tackled:

In 2002, WHO estimated that 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 years experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence involving physical contact (United Nations study on violence against children). Millions more are likely exploited in prostitution or pornography each year, most of the times lured or forced into these situations through false promises and limited knowledge about the risks. Yet the true magnitude of sexual violence is hidden because of its sensitive and illegal nature. Most children and families do not report cases of abuse and exploitation because of stigma, fear, and lack of trust in the authorities. Social tolerance and lack of awareness also contribute to under-reporting. ("Sexual Violence against Children")

In a country like India, the reporting becomes even more difficult because of the lack of a support system for the children. Even the parents refuse to believe their children if sexual abuse is reported. The same thing happened with Mala, instead of paying attention to what Mala was saying and taking it seriously, she devised a way to assuage her feelings by feeding her with her favourite food:

Oh yes, you would remember that I always like *aluparathas* because that's what I got whenever I came to you hurt and crying. Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food. I couldn't speak because I was being fed all the time, and you know what? I began to like them. I thought that was the cure for my pain. That if I ate till I was stuffed, pain would go away. Every time I came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. (24)

In fact, the same problem is faced by the victims of sexual abuse all around the world. The same fact that was brought out by a boy named Christopher in the Four-Day World Congress against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents." In his statement, he observed: "There are quite a few children out there who have suffered a lot and still have memories of their suffering in their minds and hearts. Very often they tell it to their parents and their parents will not believe them" ("Four Days"). Mala also blames her mother for not being there for her whenever she needed her (24).

Instead of helping Mala, her mother always maintained silence over the issue; she never opened her mouth. This kind of attitude adopted by parents is harmful to the children. The readers come to know the reasons behind Shanta's silence: that she herself has been a victim of the same man, and that, due to her victimisation, she has lost her mettle, her will to protect her child from harm, and she advises Mala to forget "bad dreams" (25). Her failure as a parent proves disastrous for her daughter:

I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You were busy in either Pooja room or kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could tell him why I was crying he would tell me to go to you. You always fed me- and you never said it but I knew you were saying to me without words. That I should eat well and go to sleep and the pain will go way. And, and –Oh God! It did go away. But it comes back. It didn't go away for ever! (25-26)

In the introduction to the play, Jeremy Mortimer maintains that all drama "aspires to the genre of detective play" (vii). Mahesh Dattani maintains the same in *Thirty Days in September* as well. It is only towards the end of the play that readers realise that the mother fails to save Mala because she herself was also a victim of this man. Mother and daughter are the victims of the same monster, who happens to be the real brother of Shanta, Mala's mother. By revealing the identity of the perpetrator, Dattani once again enforces the idea that the perpetrators of such crimes are the insiders: "Young people are most at risk from those living with them, related to them or acquainted with them, such as fathers, stepfathers, uncles, older siblings, boyfriends, neighbours and caretakers" (Deb75). So the people who molest children are the people who are expected to safeguard them. Shanta and Mala are victims of someone who is in a blood relation with them. Both of them suffer immense psychological torture throughout their lives.

Mala blames her mother for her exploitation, and Shanta appears before the readers as a mother who is a failure as a mother, a person who fails to save her daughter. But this is not entirely her fault. She develops this passivity and powerlessness because of her exploitation:

Perceptions of helplessness and chronic danger are thought to result from the fact that the abuse occurred when the victim was a child, and thus physically and psychologically unable to resist or defend against the abuser. (Briere 25)
The helplessness remains throughout life:

Abuse-related learned powerlessness also may present as passivity in the face of danger and self-perceptions of inadequacy and inability to cope with aversive circumstances.... This sense of helplessness to stop painful or intrusive events can render the survivor especially vulnerable to revictimization later in life, lead her or him to accept or endure dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal relationships. (Briere 26)

The play clearly shows that the sexual abuse during childhood does not destroy the life of the victim alone, but it can affect the lives of the victim's coming generations. Shanta fails to protect Mala from the abuser because of her own psychological problems.

Both of them are victims of the same person, but they develop different psychological problems due to their victimisation. Shanta seeks refuge in religion. In the very first scene, she is seen singing a hymn: "Mere to Girdhar Gopal, Doosro na koi Mere to Girdhar Gopal, Doosrona koi..." (9). She becomes meek and submissive, which is evident in her response to the paper wallah:

Shanta has been looking down while the paperwallah made his comment on her situation. The man easily towers over her, pelvis thrust out in an imposing manner, making Shanta very uneasy. (11)

Some studies have pointed out that the victims of sexual abuse find it challenging to maintain relationships: Most child abuse occurs in the context of relationships or intimacy. As a result, it is not uncommon for abused children to fear, distrust, or experience ambivalence about interpersonal closeness. Sexual abuse survivors, for example, often report difficulties in forming and sustaining intimate relationships, as do many adults with histories of other forms of childhood maltreatment. (Briere 50)

Shanta's molestation by her real brother at a young age has a terrible impact on her. She becomes meek and "subservient," and develops a sense of guilt. She starts looking at sex as a sin and becomes frigid. She has to pay dearly for her victimisation. Her marriage breaks because of her attitude and her guilty conscience:

He left you not me. I know he didn't care about me, but he didn't leave because of me. He left because of you. You didn't love him. The only reason you shared my room was because you didn't want to sleep with him. All night long I have to listen to your mumbling saying you didn't want him near you. You didn't want him touching you. You even moved that horrible picture of your god into my room saying he will protect us...I remember daddy's last words to me. You know what he said. He said to me 'I married a frozen woman.' A frozen woman. (36)

Shanta's response shows that she has suffered deep psychological stress/neurosis due to her sexual exploitation at her childhood. For her, every male has become an extension of her brother Vinay, who exploited her, and sexual relations even with her husband have become profanity. For her, every male is Vinay, and she should be afraid of all the Vinays, an attitude she carries with her throughout her life. Shanta's condition clearly shows that she has become unfit for society; unable to enter into any relationship and unable to fulfil any responsibility. Her childhood experiences have crushed her personality.

On the other hand, Mala develops totally different psychological problems due to her sexual exploitation at the age of seven. Her mother becomes "frozen" and she becomes a nymphomaniac who is ready to impart sexual favours to anyone. These relations are purely physical where no emotions are involved. Her mother is also a witness to her sexual escapades with her close relatives:

Please don't misunderstand me, Mala. I remember, seeing you with my brother during the summer holidays. You were pushing on him in the bedroom. (27)

For her, sex is an escapade, a barter which she is ready to do for company. But she is afraid of entering any permanent relationship, she runs away from responsibilities. She cannot carry on a relationship for even more than a month and to follow her routine religiously, she marks it on the calendar so that she might not exceed her limit in a relationship. These one-month relationships are also the result of her exploitation during the childhood because it was during the one-month vacations that she was abused by her uncle. Moreover, she likes to enter the relationship with only the older people:

It has to end in months' time. In fact I like I like it best when I can time it so it lasts for thirty days. I even mark it on my calendar. After that I have to - move on, if you know what I mean... well it means that it is no longer satisfying to me, and I don't mean physical part of it, although that is usually the main attraction for me...not that I actually enjoy it when they are doing it to me... sometimes I do, with the right kind of people... the right kind of people are, let me see... usually older men though not necessarily so, Deepak my fiancé, is only a few years older to me...I think I like it...when they - sort of - you know-use me....(18)

The UNICEF manifesto "End Sexual Violence against Girls" mentions that patriarchy is to be blamed for such cases where girls are exploited inside the house and they cannot seek help from anyone:

Patriarchal social norms often translating into low status of women and girls also contribute to men feeling legitimized to exercise power through sexuality. Wide spread impunity contributes to making offenders feel safe in their heinous act as they believe they will not be punished.(2)

Both Shanta and Mala are oppressed by patriarchy. Shanta suffered in pain as a child because she knew nobody would believe her. In fact, women have been left bereft of the vocabulary that can articulate their oppression and abuse by their close relatives:

Yes. Yes! I only remained silent. I am to blame....I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak. I-I cannot speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off... my tongue was cut off years ago...(55)
Shanta's abuse was even more horrifying:

I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen... and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years! (55)
Mala and Shanta had no other option but to be exploited. They were conditioned by patriarchy to remain silent. That was the only option available to them. They knew that the males, and especially the close relatives, are insulated by patriarchy where males are free from such blame.

Moreover, "by virtue of lesser social status, training for obedience, smaller physical size, and lesser strength, he or she had few real options when assaulted or exploited by an adult" (Briere 26). If a girl articulates anything, even then she is blamed for the wrong that has been done to her; this is what Vinay tells her:

If they hear you they will say you are a bad girl. This is our secret. (like an order but in a whisper.) Don't cry! (43)
He blames her for what he has done to her:

(Now more moralistic than before, the furtiveness gone). You like it! You enjoy it. After four years, you have become a whore! At thirteen, you are a whore! (44)

Patriarchy places tremendous power in the hands of males, which allows them to do anything and then allows them to go scot-free. The woman is left all alone to bear the blame. In the play the readers see it happening blatantly, where the abuser himself accuses the victim of "loose ways":

I was saying, that I definitely will do my best to see that marriage goes through. In spite of her loose ways... if only you had controlled her from the beginning. She has always been wayward. You know that. (45)

The blame becomes even more shocking when it is revealed to the readers that Shanta was also sexually exploited by Vinay. This is patriarchy's most horrifying show where the abuser blatantly blames a girl before a mother who herself had been a victim.

In India, the issue of child sexual abuse and molestation has been kept out of mainstream discussions and has remained a taboo even among the media. Mahesh Dattani's play *Thirty Days in September* is a bold move to bring the issue into the mainstream, and at the same time, it also highlights the damage done by sexual abuse to the children. The play clearly shows that physical bruises and scars of the victims may heal, but mental scars remain throughout life, especially when the victim does not have a support system. Sexual abuse during childhood may result in many behavioural changes in the victims. The changes include:

Anxiety symptoms such as fearfulness, phobias, insomnia, difficulty at bath time and bed time, nightmares that directly portray the abuse, somatic complaints, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dissociative reactions and hysterical symptoms such as periods of amnesia, daydreaming, hysterical seizures, and symptoms of dissociative identity disorder.

Depression manifested by low self-esteem and self-destructive behaviours and self- manipulative behaviour.

Disturbance in sexual behaviour as an adult including emotional problems related to intimacy, sex guilt and sex anxiety. (Deb 77-78)

Thus, Dattani's play is not only an aesthetic pursuit; it is not a play that is meant for entertainment only. The play is an agitprop that aims to influence the people's consciousness and conscience. The play shows in no ambiguous terms that child abuse is the reality, and people should not play possum with it. If the parents continue to ignore the symptoms of child abuse and keep on ignoring the child, then it could ruin the lives of their children. The physical wounds of the children may heal; their psychological wounds may not heal throughout their lives. So the play brings out the harsh reality of society. The playwright urges the people to open up and save the children from the monsters around them.

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