

Exploring the Psychological Implications of Child Sexual Abuse: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

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Abstract: *It is strange that an unfortunate section of Indian society which includes gays, lesbians, eunuchs and victims of incest, has largely remained under covers as far as being owned and projected in literary works is concerned. Most litterateurs are content with depicting the usual and commoner issues brushing this seamy side of society under wraps. Mahesh Dattani in *Thirty Days in September* highlights the-precarious plight of this dark segment of Indian society which has been living behind veils and has yet to "come out." He presents the saga of misery and helplessness associated with the unfortunate victims of child-abuse forced to live on the margins of the society. This study is an attempt to study how child sexual abuse and incest lacerates the psyche of the victims leaving them desperate and insecure, rendering them complete misfits in our self-righteous society. The damage done by incest is indeed irrevocable and unbearable for the victims as depicted through the harrowing experiences of Mala and Shanta in *Thirty Days in September*.*

Key Words: *Incest, Child Abuse, Margins, Psyche.*

"Most sexual abuse of children occurs in a residence, typically that of the victim or perpetrator – 84% for children under age 12, and 71% for children aged 12 to 17."¹

The demon of sexual abuse and incest is lurking everywhere on earth ready to devour up innocence. In the past, the victims were too scared even to acknowledge its presence. Now at least some cases of such abuse are being brought to light. The resultant trauma of this ubiquitous issue is equally crippling for all victims across the globe. Mahesh Dattani arrives as a crusader for reclaiming these unfortunate individuals whose psyche has been brutalized by child sexual abuse and incest. The number of such victims may be small but their misery is profound. They feel alienated from the society where such atrocities have been committed on them by their own close kith and kin. Even the discussion of such issues in public is still considered something like a taboo. The play is thus distinct from the conventional plays insofar as it addresses a silent issue of society. In the process touching the hearts of the readers and motivating them to extend their much-needed compassion to the unfortunate victims of incest forced to lead a marginalized life, far from the normal. Simmi Gurwara has rightly said, "Mahesh Dattani has done a commendable job by coming up with the issue of incest. The play has a huge social relevance and needs to be appreciated for its boldness." (206). The play *Thirty Days in September* by Mahesh Dattani deals with the theme of Incest and the social degradation associated with the stigma. The family drama depicted in the play captures the inner working of the minds of the victims with the finest details' and exposes how these margins are exploited by their abusers who are the least suspected in society, even by their closest relatives. The play touched new heights of artistic finesse allowing the readers/ spectators a peep into the torn, agitated and anguished hearts and psyche of the victims- Mala and her mother, Shanta. It unravels bit by bit, the pathetic odyssey of Mala and her mother who take refuge in a silence that paradoxically speaks volumes about their untold suffering. Amy Morin, a psychotherapist explains "When a child experiences a trauma that teaches him that he cannot trust or rely on that caregiver, however, he's likely to believe that the world around him is a scary place and all adults are dangerous—and that makes it incredibly difficult to form relationships throughout their childhood, including with peers their own age, and into the adult years"². This is reflected in the case of the victims in the play who fail to retrieve their normalcy after their traumatic childhood experiences. Mala lives under the shadow of the painful past. The dark memories of her abused childhood, when she was regularly raped by her maternal uncle right from the tender age of seven, keep haunting her even in her later years, incapacitating her from leading a normal life and entering into a healthy relationship with any man beyond the thirty days' period. The incubus of past memories continues to trouble Mala's traumatized psyche no end. Look at the

¹ https://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/all_statistics_20150619.pdf, last accessed on 27th April 2020

² <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-the-effects-of-childhood-trauma-4147640>, last accessed on 28th April 2020

birthday gift an uncle is giving to his niece on her seventh birthday, "Ready for a real birthday present. Lie down. Come on, quickly... Help me and I will love you more than your mummy and daddy" (Dattani 43). Can a seven-year-old be held guilty if she is sexually abused forcibly by her uncle? Why then there is no one to save her from withering away under shame and silence? She rots and chokes under the tremendous psychological pressure continued to be exerted by the abuser. "I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am. not so sure I want to be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability, to love anyone... else"(Dattani 54). Both Shanta and Mala are margins, but with fundamental differences in their temperaments which show Dattani's greatness as a writer. All victims are not alike nor are their reactions. There is a basic difference between the mother-daughter duo. Mother has a recourse to forgetting and praying. Mala can do neither. She has charted a different course for herself that of self-accusation, blaming. Mala frantically looks everywhere to find the cause of her troubles. As per a psychological concept given by Ballou and Gabalac, "If, however, a woman believes that she is in fact responsible for her own victimization, which is often the case in battering and sexual abuse, then personal blame results in self-hatred, lowered self-esteem, and depression." (277). Such a diagnostic analysis highlight the plight of Mala who has a tendency to indulge in self-accusation and personal blaming, as revealed in her confessional statements to her counsellor, "Today is the 30th of September... 2001, and my name is ..

I don't think I want to say my name....I know it is all my fault really. It must be. I must have asked for it ... May be I was born that way .. It's not anybody's fault, except my *own*"(Dattani 9). One thing which is conspicuously common to both, other than their victimization, is that they are both mechanical and somewhat seem to be in an automatic mode. They are victims of one of the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins, namely, Despair and have lost their human signature. They have become dehumanized otherwise how could a mother who too is a victim of similar abuse just ignore her daughter's plight and pleas, when she is being raped by her own brother. There are profound layers of psychological troubles raging deep in their psyche. According to Beena Agrawal, "Mala has a greater resentment against the behaviour of her mother. Her external erratic behaviour is a sign of the turmoil going on within her inner self."(119) With a distorted vision and a heart full of vengeance, Mala allows herself to be used and abused physically and mentally and carries herself from one affair to another. Mala feels that her mother is deliberately feigning ignorance over her suffering and she has sold her voice to her brother, her abuser. This only exacerbates her bruised feelings and intensifies her estrangement with her mother. She nurses a strong grudge against her mother and charges her with being ruthless and ill considerate towards her own daughter. Jackie Branfield, the Director of *Bobbi Bear Crisis Centre*, for counseling the sexual abuse victim says, "The father or brother may be the perpetrator, but we have und that mothers also play an important role in covering up this abuse. Mothers need to be made aware they could face criminal charges if it is found they knew about the abuse and assisted in covering up these crimes."(Juggie Naran). Apart from being a victim of sexual abuse, Mala is also a victim of emotional abuse which according to psychological experts is caused by failure to communicate and has dire consequences. Again and again Mala longs for her mother's response which would have filled her with a rejuvenating spirit and infused life into her listless and lifeless body. But the mother refuses to believe her words."Ma, I am talking about what I had told you five years ago, but you said it wasn't true, it couldn't be true" (Dattani 25). Mala loses all hope for her future. If the mother is not ready to trust her who would? Shanta keeps telling Mala to keep on moving and forgetting every painful memory. This is what she has been doing all her life and this is what has kept her alive. "I forget. I forget everything. Be like me.... You have been a very bad girl, you have gone astray. But Krishna will show you the way" (Dattani 29). Her words appear very ironical because like her Mala is also a margin, a victim of child abuse, abused by the same abuser. Even when both are victims one fails to console the other.

The revelation of the truth regarding her mother's tragedy, very similar to hers, is yet another catastrophe for Mala to bear. A broken Mala says, "We were both struggling to survive but ...I never acknowledged your struggle"(Dattani 58). Thus these silent sufferers find a catharsis only through self-expression invariably denied to them by the society for a long time. Towards the end we see a bold Mala in full control over herself and attending to her mother who has injured her tongue, perhaps to punish herself for her silence and her inability to protect her daughter. When the abuser uncle offers to lift the injured Shanta to take her to the doctor, Mala at once tells the man not to touch her mother. "Don't you dare touch my mother" (Dattani 56). Suddenly we see a new Mala with all the confidence and courage infused in her to fight the abuser. Mala gets a new lease of life after the self-revelation encouraged by Deepak. Just by easing out the pent up grief she is now a brave girl with her mother by her side. She knows that her mother was not in any way ignoring her, but was managing to carry on with the dreaded truth of incest silently. She celebrates the death of her abuser as her independence day, her liberation from the atrocious past. She declares, "I have made Feb 29th my Freedom Day. I will celebrate it with my husband" (Dattani 56). Such well-crafted plays serve a purpose. Dattani's message comes clear. It is a therapeutic intention which can be inferred from the play. The silence surrounding the victims can be broken by Deepaks-the light-givers. All we need is to have sympathy for the victims of sexual abuse and to bring out any such case in the open. It need not just be whispered

in low tones but needs to be announced at the top of the voice so that the abusers do not go about with their heinous designs, knowing that their victims would no longer remain silent. Such issues need to be openly discussed in schools and colleges to create awareness amongst the unsuspecting innocent children and to enable the society to overcome its inhibitions in discussing this closet issue.

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