Mother- Daughter Discord in Mahesh Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September*

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**Abstract:**

The sexual abuse of children in any part of the world is considered a horrendous crime. In the modern Indian society, both in rural and urban households, according to various surveys done by several NGOs and other agencies, child sexual abuse has been reported to be highly rampant. Subsequently, in order to bring awareness among the masses and to curb its menace, a landmark legislation called Protection of Children against Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) came into effect on Children’s Day, November 14, 2012. Unfortunately, despite this legal provision, the number of cases of child sexual assault hushed up is far more than the number of cases reported. The grave fact being, child sexual abuse in India is still considered a social taboo. In this context, the present paper brings to light how the contemporary Indian English playwright, Mahesh Dattani, who has earned considerable reputation for depicting family and social issues in a bold new light addresses this pertinent issue which is confronting the modern Indian society through his gripping play *Thirty Days in September* in 2001, way long before POCSO was promulgated.

**Keywords:** Child sexual Abuse, POCSO, taboo, sexual assault, horrendous crime.
Mahesh Dattani has earned considerable reputation for depicting family and social issues of the contemporary Indian society. In a bold new light, he addresses this pertinent issue of child sexual abuse which is confronting the rural and urban Indian families. Thirty Days in September is Dattani’s shortest full-length play on incest and child sex abuse. The play is a gripping tale of love and betrayal that reveals the trauma and angst of the sexually abused victims who suffer at the hands of a male pedophile within the confines of a family. In his essay entitled “Problems of India’s Changing Family and State Intervention” J.P. Singh, an Indian professor of Sociology at Patna University, says, “Violence within family settings is primarily a male activity. The prime targets are women and children. The women have been victims of humiliation and torture for as long as we have written records of the Indian society” (7). The female protagonist Mala and her mother Shanta are shown as the victims of incestuous sexual abuse perpetrated by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta’s own brother. Dattani makes it evident through the play how the occurrence of domestic violence against women arises out of the patriarchal setup, the stereotyping of gender roles, and the distribution of power in society.

Shanta is a woman in traditional mould. Since the time her husband abandoned her for ‘another woman’ (CP2 33), Shanta has been under the protection of her brother Vinay who has taken charge of her family. She silently suffers and endures the pain of sexual molestation caused by her own brother due to social pressure and taboos. Mala works in an advertising company and is a successful professional. She is a modern girl who has “always been so bold and frank” (CP2 26) in her attitude. She does not want to bow to pressure but revolt and expose her uncle’s sinister deeds. Dattani’s moving portrayal of Mala’s agony is stupefying. Her characterization is juxtaposed against her mother. While Shanta is traditional and meek, often seeking recourse in spirituality to escape from the verbal torture of her daughter, Mala is modern, adopting a revolutionary attitude towards sexual exploitation. As a result of this clash of attitudes, a deep misunderstanding takes place between the mother and the daughter paving way for conflict.
As such, conflict between the characters becomes the important ingredient of Dattani’s plays, as they cannot remain unaffected by the changing times and shifting values. Especially the central theme of his *Thirty Days in September* reflects serious conflict—internal and external, psychological and physical. The play assumes all seriousness as it exposes the decadence and degeneration of human values belonging to a middle class milieu through the interaction among the members of family. The characters depict greed and viciousness, degenerate nature and sensuality—all add up to a naturalistic depiction of those baser aspects of human life that one would like to shut one’s eyes to. Dattani gives his personal remarks on the play, “I sometimes see the funny side of even the tragic events that I am concerned with. But in this, [Thirty Days], I did not have that scope. There’s no way you can see the funny side . . .” (qtd. in Chaudhuri 45).

The play unfolds with the protagonist Mala pouring out her anguish to an invisible female counsellor at a therapy session. The child abuse by her maternal uncle has proved a nightmare in Mala’s life, leading to a bitter disgruntlement and emotional rupture with her mother Shanta, for her callous silence to the crime. Mala has no respect and love for her mother as she considers her to be the cause of her anguish, pain and suffering. The mother-daughter relationship is of hatred and not of comradeship. Dattani efficiently portrays the trauma suffered by the girl who finds the betrayal of her mother even more powerful than the heinous act of incest. Dattani is convinced that the betrayal of personal relationship is the worst possible tragedy that can ever happen to a human being in life. In an interview with Anitha Santhanam Dattani says, “It’s the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like in this case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It’s the silence that makes the abused feel betrayed” (qtd. in Sonker 4).

Dattani, by revealing Mala’s confused state of mind, gradually unveils the circumstances that lead to the psychological clash between mother and daughter. Having grown up, Mala now suffers from terrible self-guilt as she considers herself to be a bad and characterless person. She blames herself for indulging in several adventurous sexual liaisons with strangers. At the same time, Mala holds her mother responsible for failing in her role as a caretaker and for not being able to check her sexual profligacy. A thorough
scrutiny of Mala’s mindset reveals that she loathes her mother for the plight into which
she is being thrown. One could even see that it has become a habit for Mala to fault her
mother for her suffering. Mala says, “The only person who can, who could have
prevented all this is my mother. Sometimes I wish she would just tell me to stop. She
could have prevented a lot from happening . . .” (CP2 18).

Mala is a lone fighter in her battle against sexual abuse. No one in the family has ever
told a helping hand in her struggle. Her mind is haunted by the past memories of her
molestation. She recollects how she was molested by her maternal uncle several times
during every summer vacation when she was a kid. In fact, Mala had great expectations
from her mother, Shanta, for emotional support and understanding. Every time she tried
to tell Shanta about the traumatic experience, Shanta deliberately ignored her, changed
the topic and stuffed her with food. As a result, Mala as a child was morally weakened
and had nobody around her to save her against sexual assault. Regular exposure to sexual
abuse made Mala learn to live with the pain. She may be able to bear the pain of
humiliation of her body but how can she forget her mother’s insensitivity to her pain. For
all her present sexually aberrant behaviour Mala accuses her mother:

MALA. Oh yes, you would remember that I always like alu parathas 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, the pain would go away. Every time I
came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. You knew.
Otherwise you wouldn’t have been so prepared. You knew all along what was
happening to me . . . (CP2 24)

Mala has turned into an embittered and hardened adult due to her traumatic childhood.
She has lost faith in humanity and in human relationships. She is skeptical about divine
intervention in human lives as no God or Goddess has come to liberate her from physical
torture and trauma. So, her anger towards her mother intensifies when Shanta, instead of
talking to her, escapes to the Pooja room; Mala detains Shanta from taking shelter in the
image of God Krishna. Mala says to Shanta, “No don’t look at your God, look at me, look me in the eye and tell me—‘yes, that is all that you are talking about’” (CP2 25). Shanta fails to pacify Mala who continuously attacks her mother’s conscience and forces her to face reality.

In order to divert Mala’s attention, Shanta calls her heart-breaking experience a story, which enrages Mala against her mother. Her suppressed desires against her mother’s cover of silence start coming out in the form of rebellion and she cries out, “I won’t let you get off so easily. There is only one way I can make you listen to me” (CP2 26). She goes to the pooja room and throws the portrait of the God out. It breaks Shanta’s patience and silence and she accuses Mala of her willing participation in sexual pleasure. Her silence is full of stormy thoughts inside. She has not forgotten as yet some of the painful realities concerning her daughter’s abnormal and awkward sexual behaviour in her childhood. She thinks it is Mala who first provoked and seduced her brother Vinay into the incestuous relationship. Shanta retorts, “Not when you were seven but when you were thirteen . . . I remember, seeing you with my brother during the summer holidays. You were pushing yourself on him in the bedroom” (CP2 27). But she is completely unaware of the fact that Mala was first sexually abused by her brother when she was just seven years old. Thus, communication gap between Shanta and Mala is also in a way responsible for the rift between them.

Holding up the heinous crime of child sex for total censure, Dattani doesn’t miss to project both Mala and Shanta in some noble shades. The act of revolt on the part of Mala against Shanta gradually undergoes a transformation. Mala realizes that it is not just economic necessity that has driven her mother to remain a mute spectator to her personal tragedy. Ultimately, the development of Shanta finally breaking her silence and revealing to Mala the injustice done to her by her own brother in the form of incest for over a decade closes the long-standing and vexed misunderstanding between the mother and daughter. Shanta’s final revelation is shocking and moving at the same time:

SHANTA. I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen . . . and it wasn’t only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!! (Pointing to the picture of God.) I
looked to 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.

(\textit{CP2 55})

The love and moving sympathy that cropped up in Mala for her mother brings out the much required humanitarian aspect in the play. Mala is stunned and regretful of all the accusations she had levelled against her mother. She is repents as she says, “While I accused you of not recognizing my pain, you never felt any anger at me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive but—I never acknowledged your struggle” (\textit{CP2 58}). Thus, it is Shanta’s silence which creates misunderstanding and mistrust between them. As the silence is broken, they find each other on the same plane. Mala is filled with remorse for torturing her mother mentally. She tells her mother, “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” (\textit{CP2 58}). This development leads to the fading out of the sufferings of Mala before her mother’s miserable past. The helplessness of Shanta and Mala towards the stigma of incest is given an honest treatment, which is revealed in a fine manner as we find both getting reconciled and shedding tears for each other. Naturally, a girl-child would be safer nowhere in the world except in her mother’s lap. In contrast to the natural law guiding the mother-daughter relationship, Dattani’s play seems to be an appeal to the perpetrators of incest to simply stay away from wrecking tragedy in the lives of the girl-children.

This family drama holds out the fine example of certain social aberrations which would of course never see the light of day, but would only turn into personal tragedies with reasons behind them always remaining mysteries. Through \textit{Thirty Days in September} Dattani issues a serious caution against the dangers of single-parent family setup, with a financially weak mother administering it. Similarly, Mala-Shanta psychological and
emotional rift, further throws light on the seemingly growing aberration in the context of the Indian tradition, which upholds the status of motherhood. The mother-daughter relationship in the Indian context has assumed a kind of ever-serene ambience around it, thanks to the spiritual notations attached to the relationship over generations.
Works Cited


