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From Silence to Suffering: A Study of Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

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Abstract: *Thirty Days in September* is one of the most celebrated plays of Mahesh Dattani which deals with the physical and psychological traumas upon victimised female child Mala khatri and her mother Shanta by the patriarchal ideology of Indian society. It discusses the topic of sexual harassment of women in their own family and it also highlights that silence plays a crucial role in the suffering of women. Unless or until women raise their voice against the injustice of male authority, there is no redemption from the exploitation. The drama is a typical record of painful experiences of sexually victimised girl for whom life becomes a hell.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, Patriarchal ideology, Exploitation

Mahesh Dattani is a versatile playwright who has acquired a prominent literary position among the contemporary Indian English dramatists by dint of his successful dealing with the contemporary invisible issues in a different and unique way and his dynamism in skillful handling of stagecraft and dramatic techniques to reveal the complexities of modern life and human relationships. Born in a middle-class family, Dattani got the opportunity to observe the patterns of behaviour and the stereotyped practices of urban middle class Indian society and he dared to come forward with his criticism about the malpractices contaminating

the Indian society. We notice that people marginalized on the ground of caste, class, religion, sex and gender occupy the major part of his dramas. In most of his plays, he basically attempts to depict the harsh realities of our Indian society especially women and children. The article aims to project that silence is crucial in suffering of women. Women are considered to be submissive, self-sacrificing and simple as Sita, Sati and Savitri. Their endless silence causes their exploitation and sexual slavery.

Thirty Days in September is one of the most serious plays of Mahesh Dattani which attempts to depict the sexual harassment of girls in their childhood. It is a dramatic work dealing with the theme of female exploitation and sexually abused girl child. Sexual colonization is the very common form of women subalternity where a woman is victim of her own family members, Woman is a subaltern in the patriarchy of Indian society. She is treated as a marginal creature who is hardly assumed to be a human being. She has to undergo several physical, sexual, psychological and economical tortures, The pitiable condition of women has been pointed out in this drama. Anita Myles Comments upon Mahesh Dattani's treatment of women characters,

“Actually, Dattani's plays have been acclaimed widely for their social realism, more so because he brings out the plight of the subaltern woman who is no better than a second grade citizen in her own country. As a playwright, he has succeeded in portraying the innermost emotions and feelings of the women characters. Though society suppresses them, yet they have a desire to make a mark for themselves.”¹ (Myles 119)

The play is divided into three acts. It is the story of Mala and her mother, Shanta. In the play, both mother and daughter are victims of incestuous relationship and both are molested by the same person during their childhood. Mala, the protagonist of the play, is abused by her maternal uncle, Vinay during her childhood. She was forcefully silenced against sexual molestation and injustice. She bears the pain of humiliation and tries to explain to her sole companion, that is, her mother, but she is not allowed to reveal the truth before the society. The deep scars on her mind and psyche ruin the life of Mala and make her incapable of adjusting with her would be husband Deepak.

The play begins with the tape conversation of Mala Khatri with her counsellor. During her conversation with the counselor, Mala reveals her hesitation and her past through stream of consciousness. She tries to reveal the truth about her childhood which she could not dare to expose during childhood. She has become bolder after the death of her molester, her uncle Vinay who is addressed in the play as the Man. She has no fear about disclosing her name and the nature of exploitation she underwent. She is confident and outspoken. Mala says,

“I do not hesitate to use my real name now. Let people know. There’s nothing to hide. Not for me. After all, it is he who must hide. He should change his name, not me. It is he who must avoid being recognized.... I wish he were here now ,so I could see his face when I tell him I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn’t my fault... Now. I know now.” (Dattani 88)

As the play proceeds, we come to know that Mala was sexually molested by her maternal uncle Vinay who used to come to stay with them during holidays. Uncle Vinay kept on exploiting Mala and when Mala tried to explain to her father and mother, she was fed with aloo parathas so that she could not speak and reveal the truth. When Mala reminds her mother Shanta of her childhood exploitation, her mother calls it only a bad dream and asks her to forget. But Mala has become aggressive. She is an adult now, and she can understand the injustice done to her. She says to her mother,

“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 when we went to visit him, or when he came to stay with us. You were busy of either the pooja room or the kitchen. I would go to Papa and cry before I could even tell him why I was crying, he would tell me to go to you. You always fed me and-and you never said it, but I knew what you were saying to me without words. That I should eat well and go to sleep, and the pain will go away. And, and- Oh God! it did go away. But it comes back. It didn’t go away for ever!” (Dattani 106)

Mother Shanta stuffed and silenced her. Mala thought that this was the way to cure her pain and she kept on bearing the pain on her body and her mind. Mala says to Shanta, “...I always like alu paranthas, 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.” (Dattani 104)

She further says,

“Five years ago, six years ago, I can't remember exactly when! We were in the kitchen and we were talking about that rape case that was in the papers. You said something about children also not being safe. Don't you remember anything at all? Then I told you about- what happened to me. But you changed the subject. At that time I wondered...” (Dattani 105)

It is very ironical that a woman helps in the exploitation against another woman. The practice of suffering and silence transfers from one generation to the other. Even a mother cannot help her daughter despite knowing the pain and the anguish. This is the worst form of male chauvinism and women exploitation. Shanta herself has been victimized by her maternal brother Vinay. Towards the climax of the drama Shanta discloses that she too had been the victim of child abuse at the hands of the same man who is the representative of the patriarchal society. 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 feeling. 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.” (Dattani 135)

Her brother Vinay does not feel ashamed when he's called “Bhaiya” by Shanta in the play. Dattani has mocked the traditional concept of relationship where the bond between brother and sister is considered to be pure based on selflessness, cooperation and true love. Through the character of Vinay, Dattani has warned the society to be cautious of relatives.

Shanta's own married life was not successful due to the incestuous relationship. She herself had suffered the physical pain and sexual molestation but she is unable to help her daughter. She has turned herself to the religious chants of 'Om Shanti ,Shanti, Shanti' and has turned deaf to such complaints. She has learnt the lesson of silence and she gives the lesson of silence to her daughter too. Shanta is helpless. She has reconciled to the male authority and its power. Vinay has been addressed as "the Man" who is the most powerful agent in the patriarchal society. Through the conversation of Mala we come to know that Vinay is the person who provides the financial support to Shanta's family. Mala was thinking that it was her father who was sending money. But in the later part of the drama, she comes to know the truth.

Mala says to her mother , "He did not just buy a flat. He bought you."

Shanta: That's not true! Oh God!

Mala: He bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what did he did to your daughter. (Dattani 133)

Money is the governing power. Man has the earning capacity, and so he can do anything by his power of money. Shanta is helpless and remains silent despite knowing the fact that her maternal brother was exploiting her daughter because she knew that if she resisted she could not survive. The Man was like God for her. Disapproval of his sexual desire would kill her. This is example of sexual colonialism. She was also scared of the social stigma. So women will remain exploited unless or until they raise their voice. Shanta is the type of woman who chooses to remain silent instead of going against the man power while Mala is another type of woman who chooses to express the anger against this system. Shanta knows everything but she turns a blind eye to everything and makes herself busy in worshipping the god and doing her household works. She believes that it is the fate of woman to bear the pain as she is powerless to remedy the situation. She silently bears the pain and becomes a "frozen woman", the title given to her by her husband. She is aware that her daughter has been victimized by her brother Vinay, but she keeps silent, may be due to the financial support which her elder brother extends to her or the male authority of the society against whom she cannot raise her voice.

“Shanta: (defeated) Yes. Yes! I only remained silent. I am to blame. That is why God is punishing me today. I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn’t know how to speak. I-I cannot speak. I can not say anything. My tongue was cut off... My tongue was cut off years ago....How could I save when I could not save myself?...” (Dattani 135)

Her deep involvement in religious tasks is a kind of her effort to divert her attention from the injustice being done to her daughter. She is helpless. She cannot do anything and that is why, she tries to console herself in worshipping the god. Moreover, she notices that her daughter is enjoying and is attracting her brother and cousin, so she does not find any solution. She only says that her daughter is spoilt and she needs to be corrected. When Deepak comes in the life of Mala and tries to marry her, Shanta becomes happy because this was the only chance to correct her spoiled girl. Deepak was a ray of hope for a better life for Mala.

The consequences of sexual exploitation of girl children are beyond expectation. In fact, the girl children often suffer from trauma which may lead to deep rooted psychological scarring which manifests itself in a number of varied forms. As Dr. Edward Rowan states,

“Survivors of rape, child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, natural disaster, terrorism, hostage- taking and war- all situations in which a person is rendered helpless by overwhelming forces-may show the characteristic manifestations of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).... Survivors are “disconnected from the present” and continue to react to life experiences as if they were anticipating, experiencing or responding to the earlier trauma.”² (Rowan 29-30)

According to the report of survey, the afflicted individuals often suffer from various obstacles in everyday or professional interactions. The survivors often suffer from a whole gamut of psychological and behavioural problems in the absence of adequate counselling, therapy and familial or institutional support. The situation might further deteriorate and become life threatening. As Dr. Rowan explains,

“Overall, the victims, and then the survivors lose faith in what is supposed to be the natural order, where children are cherished and protected, and where they are safe in the family and community. For them, the world becomes unjust.” (Rowan,37)

Mala is betrayed both by her maternal uncle and her mother. Her anguish is intensified from the realization that her mother did not support her. The sexual assault in the childhood affects the personality of Mala adversely and she has disorder in her behavior. Both Shanta and Deepak notice the abnormal behavior in Mala and Deepak feels the need to help Mala. Deepak is the boy who is in intense love with Mala, but her eccentric behavior puzzles him. He tries to find the answer from her mother Shanta. He is very surprised to know that Mala changes man every month. The betrayal by her maternal uncle has generated deep rooted hatred for men in Mala. That is why, she is not satisfied to hold her relationship with one man. She loves Deepak, but is not stable in her relationship with him. She has no faith in Deepak. From her childhood experiences she has doubt about Deepak's relationship with her. Mala has been turned into a whore by her maternal uncle. In the beginning of the sexual molestation she experienced pain, but now she enjoys in attracting men and having sexual relationship with them. This kind of behavior puzzles her mother who wants to see her daughter established with Deepak. Shanta is relaxed when her daughter is busy doing some work. But she gets anxious when Mala has nothing to do. She feels that the loneliness causes anxiety and deeper realization of pain in Mala while her going out and business keeps her happy. She explains to Deepak, "There are times when she is at home early from work, and spends the whole evening reading magazines. She feels very restless then. That is when we quarrel. She is fine when she has work, or when she goes out. That is why I feel sometimes, thank God she is going out. At least then she looks- happy. But I am her mother. I must worry about her. I pray for her. I never pray for myself. Only for her happiness" (Dattani 96)

Mala blames her mother for everything. She holds her responsible for the injustice done to her. Mala says to counsellor, "I don't know. I can't explain it 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..." (Dattani 98)

Mala says to Shanta, "Where were you when he locked the door to your bedroom while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one of whatever. That's how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life!" (Dattani

133)

Mala's past life doesn't let her proceed further in future. She has love for Deepak, but she is unable to decide whether to marry him or not. She has been turned into a whore. She is not satisfied with one person. She meets men and enters into relationship, but she deals with them in such a way that the relationship ends within a period of thirty days. She discloses the list of many men with whom she has spent her time. The incomplete sentences and extensive use of monologue depict the internal conflict of Mala. She turns down Deepak's proposal of marriage. The impact of her maternal uncle is so much strong upon her that she is unable to love Deepak. She says to Deepak, "(Looking at the Man) Because-because -How can I even begin to explain to you?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 were, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone...else." (Dattani 134)

Mala clearly says to Deepak, "you don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!! I cannot love you." (Dattani 134)

The unsuccessful married life of her mother is another reason which causes repulsions for marriage. She is nervous and her nervousness assumes the form of revolt and contempt. It is only where after the confession of her mother about her past victimization and sexual molestation that Mala controls herself in blaming her mother. Mala becomes defiant and rebellious. She orders the Man not to speak anything to her mother. She cannot resist the Man touch her mother Shanta. She remembers every act which the Man did to her in the form of a doll activity. As she remembers, she grows more violent. She tries to strangle the man with her blows. The past memories instill hatred and repulsion for every man.

In the last part of the drama both the women realize the power of male authority and the social setup in which he is free to control the life of women by his power of money. Mala becomes sympathetic towards her mother and asks to help her. She realizes that victimization of women is not the fault of women; it is the fault of man and so she is not to blame and she is not entitled to be ashamed of. She becomes very humble towards her mother and she also promises to try to forget everything.

Both Shanta and Mala resemble the character of Jaya in Shashi Desh Pandey's novel, *That Long*

Silence. Like the character of Suhasini or Jaya, Shanta and Mala silently bear the suffering and surrender themselves to the male power. Both Shantha and Mala consider Vinay to be a “sheltering tree” without whom they cannot think of their existence. Mala resembles the character of Sonali in Dina Mehta’s *Getting away with Murder*. Sonali, too, has been sexually abused by her drunk uncle in her childhood and she confronts the repressed trauma which causes hysteria and agitation. Like Mala, Sonali also suffers from psychological crisis.

In this way, *Thirty Days in September* has been successful in bringing out the theme of sexual molestation of women in Indian society. Mahesh Dattani has depicted how silence and servitude play role in women exploitation. There are two types of women one modern and one traditional. Shanta represents a traditional woman and Mala represents modern woman. Both women react to the sexual molestation in different ways. Shanta chose silence while Mala chose to become violent to challenge the male authority by her sexual power. Her relationship with men only for one month and thereafter their rejection indirectly is a form of taking revenge upon man and man made society. She was repeatedly abused by her uncle and so she has a fascination for older men with whom she enters into casual sexual liaisons to masochistically experience that feeling of being used. But even this aberrant behavior cannot console her. Somewhere in her mind and soul she is restless. Dattani shows that the scars on the mind and soul can hardly be removed. The women who are suffering from sexual colonization cannot get peace of mind and their whole life is ruined by the incest. He wants the society to take steady and firm action against such crimes and he makes guardians and parents beware of Vinay like relatives who can prove very dangerous for their children.

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