

Thirty Days Has September: A Daring Dramatization of Child Abuse

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Abstract

It very difficult for any writer to raise such social and psychological perversions in their writings. Mahesh Dattani is such a daring writer who raises this issue very seriously and unhesitatingly in his plays specially in *Thirty Days Has September*. Almost every religion has its own observations regarding sexual relations and that certainly do not allow sex with blood relatives and innocent children. Every society too has defined illicit relations which violets the established rules and regulation. the main action and climax of the play shockingly reveal how the crime of incestuous relation is done by the same person who exploits mother and her daughter Mala. The message of the play is very clear that the boasting of the glorious history of our country, the so called social, economic and scientific development do not mean anything if the people do not have the courage to face and accept the bitter reality of incest which, unfortunately, has become the hidden part of our so called modern society. Any problem can be solved if the problem is accepted and addressed honestly. The problem of child abuse needs to be addressed very sincerely with top priority because children are the future of any nation and society. If they are not protected to bloom then even God cannot and must not save the nation. It is the need of hour to teach our children that silence against and surrender before any exploitation is the greatest sin.

Key Words: Incestuous, Relation, Exploit, Society, Child, Abuse

As we know every day Indian media is covered with the news of incestuous relations and children sexual abuse which is a disgusting blot on any civilized society. This shocking condition becomes very horrible when people and government have made it their practice to show their pretence of ignorance to the veracity of this social and psychological evil. The various reports on this evil such as MDCD in 2007, RAHI in 2013 as well as many NGOs' clearly show that even in Indian society the child abuse has deeply entered into the pious structure of social relations which have lost their essence of security and human responsibility. It very difficult for any writer to raise such social and psychological perversions in their writings. Mahesh Dattani is such a daring writer who raises this issue very seriously and unhesitatingly in his plays specially in *Thirty Days Has September*. The artistic effort of Dattani along with the NGOs is really praiseworthy which compels us to think and do something very seriously to form a better, awakened and more secured society for our innocent children and women. As far as Sex is concerned it is a natural instinct in all the beings including humans. Yet every civilised society has established certain norms to regulate the human sexual behaviour. If human sexual relation is in compliance with the social norms then it is legitimate, otherwise it comes under moral deprivation and social evil.

Almost every religion has its own observations regarding sexual relations and that certainly do not allow sex with blood relatives and innocent children. Every society too has defined illicit relations which violets the established rules and regulation. Any sexual relations beyond the norms of a family are known incestuous and considered as a social, moral and religious sin which will only lead to a horrible result. We may take the

example from Bible where illicit sexual relations is defined by God himself in Leviticus 18:

You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether brought up in the family or in another home. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, brought up in your father's family, since she is your sister. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's relative. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's relative. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and of her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are relatives; it is depravity. (Bible, 18:6-18)

The criteria of right and wrong may not be the same for every society. For instance in South Indian, an uncle-niece marriage may not amount to incest, however, in north India it is frowned upon. But that doesn't mean that incest is not taking place in the north. Abusive words mentioning mother-sister are an indicator that there is an awareness of this so-called taboo but nobody wants to talk about it. The problem of incest should be seen as individual perversions. Paedophilia, or Child Sexual abuse is the physical or mental exploitation of a child with sexual intention, generally by a matured one who may be taking the advantage of his reliability and the innocence of the child. The term paedophile is applied for any adult who is the addict the company of a child for his sexual gratification. We generally see the tree forms of Child abuse: incestuous abuse (i.e. victimization by family members), sexual abuse by strangers, and child prostitution. In Indian traditional society it is generally seen that incest is not reported to the police under the pressure of social embarrassment. Therefore such cases are either overlooked are taken lightly not as a heinous criminal matter.

A study by the Tata Institute on Social Sciences exposed in 1985 that our country one out of three girls and one out of 10 boys had been the victim of child abuse. The most striking and shocking fact was that Fifty per cent of child sexual abuse take place at home. India has the world's largest number of sexually abused children; with a child below 16 years raped every 55th minute, a child below 10 every 13th hour and one in every 10 children sexually abused at any point time. Ahuja Gupta, founder and executive director of an NGO called Recovering and Healing from Incest or RAHI,

"By not legislating a strict punishment, the law is simply reiterating that it's not a serious issue. If stringent punishment were made legal, then it has to be accepted that incest exists. But we don't even want to admit that. It's treated more like an aberration and so there is no harsh punishment. And this is true across the world." (BTS,2013) he further adds that somewhere we "don't want to interfere with our family values and as such keep quiet about it." Most often, the interest of the child is sacrificed for the greater interest of the family.

Nishit Kumar, the head of Communication and Strategic Initiatives at Mumbai's Childline India Foundation, reveals a very awful fact that in India, just 0.7% of the total budget is allocated to protect children below 18 in its last Budget. He says it is because of the question of priority in which there is no concern about the extent — and spread — of the crime. In post independence India, we find some substantial change in social, economic and political structures of states like Maharashtra, Delhi, and West Bengal. The awareness of Women makes some positive changes in their lives. The impact of the west and the movement of education also attribute to the positive transformation of Indian society. Various literary artists were disseminating the light of knowledge in the society to expose the real picture of so called changes. One of them is Mahesh Dattani who is a contemporary daring playwright. In his play *Thirty Days has September* he has

dramatized the most heinous issue of child sexual abuse. Dattani has fully depicted the psychological consequence of incestuous relationship on the psyche of the victimized child with the passage of time. Mala who is the heroine of the play looks very similar to Leela Benare, the heroine of Tendulkar's famous play *Silence the Court is in Session* who is molested by her maternal uncle in her innocent age.

It is in 2007 that we find Indian Government to be active when it presented a condensed report "Study on Child Abuse: India 2007" under the supervision of Ministry of Women and Child Development and says,

"The subject of child sexual abuse is still a taboo in India. There is a conspiracy of silence around the subject and a very large percentage of people feel that this is a largely western problem and that child sexual abuse does not happen in India. Part of the reason of course lies in a traditional conservative family and community structure that does not talk about sex and sexuality at all. Parents do not speak to children about sexuality as well as physical and emotional changes that take place during their growing years. As a result of this, all forms of sexual abuse that a child faces do not get reported to anyone. The girl, whose mother has not spoken to her even about a basic issue like menstruation, is unable to tell her mother about the uncle or neighbour who has made sexual advances towards her. This silence encourages the abuser so that he is emboldened to continue the abuse and to press his advantage to subject the child to more severe forms of sexual abuse. Very often children do not even realize that they are being abused." (Child Abuse, 73)

A WHO survey found that between 14% and 56% of the sexual abuse of girls, and up to 25% of the sexual abuse of boys, was perpetrated by relatives or step parents. It was also reported at many places that the parents frankly accepted their fear about the risk of sexual violence which their children faced at school or at play in the community, but rarely they speak of children's risk of sexual abuse within the home by family relatives: "The shame, secrecy and denial associated with familial sexual violence against children foster a pervasive culture of silence, where children cannot speak about sexual violence in the home, and where adults do not know what to do or say if they suspect someone they know is sexually abusing a child." (Child Abuse, 74) It was a daring step in on August 2002 that Mahesh Dattani was commissioned by RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest) to compose a play on the social evil of child sexual abuse. Ultimately a striking play *Thirty Days in September*, took shape as the the first play on incest in India. It was Commissioned and researched by RAHI and written by the bold contemporary playwright, Mahesh Dattani. The play was based on the reserches of RAHI's and the stories the women shared with the playwright. With the passage of time the play achieves as a critical approbation as well as commercial success, and now its success reaches to different parts of the country and even crosses the boundaries to have a global acclamation. The story of its success is proved by the fact that It has completed more than 75 shows and has been translated into several vernaculars. As far as RAHI's praiseworthy contribution is concerned it may be said that it is the first and only organization in India for women survivors of Incest and Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) since 1996. It is uniquely positioned, organized and conducted by Professionals and well informed people, to make easy the recovery process for women survivors through an informed and distinctive model of healing. RAHI with its professionally informed and deeply experienced feminist group sincerely worked in the direction to create a supportive environment for survivors. It has been very successful in breaking the silence of survivors and has become an influential voice which has put the crime of child abuse in the mainstream of discussion and social dialogue in India and. Since then RAHI has played a very active role in this field and successfully drew the attention of whole community to many heart stirring cases of incest and child sexual abuse. As a result these cases have been thoroughly examined to give a literary shape which was ultimately

published with the insightful, sensitive and suggestive title "Thirty Days in September". Having gone through the report "Breaking the Silence: Child Sexual Abuse in India" presented by RAHI in February 2013, we can see the amalgamation of two or more case studies in Thirty Days of September like the case of Jyoti (BTS,20-21), Case of Deepti (BTS,23), Case of Aditi and Riya(BTS,24).

After the background of the play now it would be very apt to talk about the main action and climax of the play. It shockingly reveals how the crime of incestuous relation is done by the same person who exploits mother and her daughter Mala. Whenever Mala was sexually abused, her mother pretended to be innocent as if nothing had happened. The mother never raises her voice against the molestation of her own daughter. When she is grown up grown up, we see her physically vulnerable and sexually addicted. The play also touchingly represents the conflict between mother and daughter which is born out of mother's silence against her daughter's molestation. Ultimately this conflict ends with this shocking revelation by mother that she herself was molested by the same person in her childhood. Thus the play really churns our minds when we come to know that both mother and her daughter are sexually exploited by the same person named Vinay who is no other than a very close relative as he is maternal uncle of the protagonist Mala.

Mahesh Dattani dexterously stirs the minds of his readers with his tricky action of the play which successfully achieves many objectives simultaneously. First we come to know about the incestuous relationship between brother and sister; and then between Niece and Maternal Uncle. We cannot expect such a sinful act by such a close relatives like uncle and brother. Any civilized society or any human religion cannot permit or accept such heinous acts from a brother or from an uncle because such close relations are considered to be very sanctimonious specially in a country like India where a pious festival of Rakshabandhan is celebrated when Sister ties holy strand (Rakhi) on the wrist of her brother and brother promises to protect her dignity and honour through all his life. Brother is not just the brother but he is supposed to be the custodian of a sister. The playwright has ironically dramatised how the holy relation of brother and sister becomes the offering of the lustful desires of the brother of Shanta. The importance and respect of maternal uncle in Indian society is beyond any doubt but Vinay has simply snatched all the respect and purity of this relation by molesting first her own sister and then sister's daughter.

The play *Thirty Days Has September* opens with the recorded voice on tape. This method has been used by the dramatist for self-revelation. Dattani's picture of the conflict of Mala's conscious and unconscious is full of psychological depth and meaning. Mala candidly tells her real name, Mala Khatri and boldly asserts about the person, whom she thinks as responsible for all the troubles in her life which begins with his molestation of her. Her voice clearly shows how a child becomes the victim of the beastly passions of a man who should have behaved and pampered like true father. With this voice of Mala on tape we find her reminiscence of September 30th, 2001 and which make her almost a very perplexed and anxious person. She thinks that it is she and no one else who is accountable for all the disaster which has fully changed her view of life. She is also very upset about her mother who shows no sign of responsibility to save her innocent child from sexual exploitation even before her puberty. It is the wavering decision of her mother which deceives and destruct the whole life her own child as she painfully expresses:

"I—I don't know how to begin . . . Today is the 30th of September . . . 2001, and my name is ... I don't think I want to say my name ... I am sorry ... I know it is all my fault really ... It must be. I must have asked for it, . . . i;'s not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish that my mother . . ." [CP II 9). Later she 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 . . ." (CP 11,9).

Now the very big question that the dramatist raises before his readers is why the children are not safe in their own houses? Why the house the safest place for the children becomes the place of exploitation? How can a mother or any parent keep their eyes closed on such issues? The small children blindly believe their parents and feel that in the hands of their father and mother they are fully protected from all kinds of miseries in their life. But in this play we see the case of Mala, who is just only seven, a very delicate age of child to play with dolls and to sing nursery rhymes like "Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November." She is really so small to understand the bad intentions of her own father like Uncle Vinay. Being a small child she is helpless and easily falls victim to the beastly passions of her own uncle. She feels it very odd but could do nothing to keep herself away from such miserable hellish condition. This condition becomes rather painful when she tries to inform her mother but she turned deaf ear to her and tried to divert the topic for unknown reason. Even her father did not pay attention to the delicate feelings of his small daughter as it comes before us in the following words:

"I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle 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 in either the puja 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. (CP, II 25-26)

The silence of her mother and father on her molestation deeply hurts her emotional structure which is permanently rooted in the unconscious level of mind. Gradually with her growing age this unconscious experience becomes the conscious traumatic suffering of physical exploitation which ultimately resulted in a bitter conflict between mother and daughter as manifested in the following questions of Mala:

Where were you when he locked the door to your bed room 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 or whatever. That's how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life! (CP 11 53)

Dattani's this play reminds about Shakespeare's Hamlet who also adopts a conflicting relation with his mother when he comes to know about her father's death and his mother's marriage to his uncle. For him the whole world looks antagonistic and all human relationship as the tragedy of deception. Dattani also fills almost the same tragic colours in his Portrayal of the relationship between mother and daughter. Dattani leaves no stone unturned to prove fact that betrayal in any close relationship only gives birth to intolerable anguish as we see in case of Mala's painful sexual abuse. Dattani's conversation with Lakshmi Subramanyam, makes his dramatic intent very clear:

"Though sexual abuse is at the core of my play, the mother-daughter relationship is equally important. The main protagonist, who has suffered at the hands of her uncle, feels a deep sense of betrayal that her mother did not stop the abuse and failed in her role as protector" (133).

Mala's scornful and conflicting behaviour with her mother becomes more bitter because of her feeling that her mother was deliberately ignoring her. She bitterly accuses and criticizes her mother for silencing her voice by putting *alu parathas* in her mouth instead listening her pain. Mala is really shocked at insensitive response of her mother as she says:

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 . . . (CP II 24) Ultimately the continuous bitter remarks about her mother make Shanta to expose that it was the financial assistance which kept her silent. Thus, Mala's torment is greatly deepened from her comprehension of her mother's betrayal. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri aptly remarks: "Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the abused" (73).

At the end of the play we come to know the reason of Shanta's silence and her suffering of guilt consciousness as she feels herself guilty of Mala's pitiable plight and accepts: "It is always my fault. . . I-I forget things. I am the one to blame. But she is a very nice girl at heart" (CP II 15). Moved by Mala's pain, Shanta reveals the reality of her life and the reason for her keeping her lips shut:

"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. (CP II 55) The revelation of the fact flabbergasts not only Mala but also the spectators. The holiest relation in the world was shattered. Now we have sympathy for Shanta. Shanta having broken her long silence, Mala regrets: "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" (CP II 58).

The broken silence of Shanta reveals that both of them suffer the same agony one with silence and other with complaints. The repenting words of Mala for torturing her mother really touch our hearts: "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 t h a t . . . I know you will, mother. I know you have" (CP II 58).

Speaking about this silence in an interview with Anitha Santhanam, Mahesh Dattani remarks: "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." Thus the play revolves around the fact how both mother and daughter become the victim the same beastly passions in their childhood which badly affects to both but in different ways. Shanta becomes dumb without sensing any pain and pleasure while Mala suffers the addiction of sexual gratification. The silence of mother eclipses the lives of both of herself and her own daughter. Her silence against the exploitation makes it clear that we may boast of greatness of our country and the developing Indian society but the bitter reality is that woman is nothing but an object of pleasure for male eyes. And the second bitter reality is that in this 21st century the children are not even safe in their houses. If it is true then we may easily judge the veracity of our so called modern development. What will do of that developed society that cannot provide a safe shelter for innocent child? This the question which at the centre of the play. Mala is girl with modern sensibility. But all the glory of modern sensibility comes to nothing when Mala becomes nymphomaniac and rebellion because of being molested by her uncle again and again. The rebellion Mala not only targets her mother's silence but also defies the male supremacy She feels uncomfortable when she is not able to draw the attention of any male. She becomes hyper. Later on with proper counseling with psychiatrist and with the help of Deepak, she gets rid of emotional and psychic trauma and lives a happy life with him. Dr. Sanjay Chugh says, "The psychological harm on the victim is massive as it evokes doubts, raises questions for which answers are not easy to get. The victim may suppress emotions or be filled with feelings of rage, guilt and shame. It is difficult for

such victims to trust others later on in life. The victim needs to stand up for himself/herself and not to allow the trauma to make them psychologically and socially weak. Active social support from family, friends, guidance centres and counsellors can bring the victim's faith in the goodness of human beings back," He further says, "Child sexual abuse often comes to light when childhood histories are explored and in most cases the perpetrator is a known person who is close to the family or inside the family." In an interview with Utple K. Banerjee, Mahesh D innai tells, "In some cases, there was a sense of betrayal if it involved the father and there was a transferred resentment against the mother who perhaps could have intervened, but didn't. Often it was a hapless mother who had just no power in society, to speak against the father as the perpetrator."

The message of the play is very clear that the boasting of the glorious history of our country, the so called social, economic and scientific development do not mean anything if the people do not have the courage to face and accept the bitter reality of incest which, unfortunately, has become the hidden part of our so called modern society. Any problem can be solved if the problem is accepted and addressed honestly The denial mode and complacency can only worsen he problem to its most. The problem of child abuse needs to be addressed very sincerely with top priority because children are the future of any nation and society. If they are not protected to bloom then even God cannot and must not save the nation. It is the need of hour to teach our children that silence against and surrender before any exploitation is the greatest sin. The message for parent is also crystal clear. Parenthood does not merely mean to produce children, earn money for them and manage their needs. It means something more than that. It means giving enough time to kids, to understand and listen patiently their feelings and give them confidence and full support to disclose every feeling good or bad before their parents without any hesitation. The last but not least is the message for the state's institutions whose responsibility is to prepare such an ambience where should be zero tolerance for child sexual exploitation. All their heavy expenditures in the name of development, education, law and order is just the meaningless croaking if they cannot provide the safe society and cannot save the smiles of children.

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