

# Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*: Psychoanalytic Study

Dr. Kishan Swaroop Rana\*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, LKC Govt. PG College Gangoh, Saharanpur

**Abstract - The play begins with Mala, the protagonist is talking to the counselor, because she is suffering from a mental stress, her behavior is not normal. She wants to come out from her horrible past; Mahesh Dattani discloses the inner conflict of her mind. She wants to disclose the truth to her parents and wants to tell what happened to her but no one was there to listen her. Mala has her traumatic past experiences. She is sexually abused by her maternal uncle Vinay. Vinay is a man who has beastly passion and always tries to search such victims those can be easily preyed and can not disclose the truth to anybody. If such victim disclose in front of someone no one believe on her /him. In the play Dattani unveils the burning issues of society such as child sexual abuse, molestation and patriarchy, etc.**

**Keywords - Child abuse, molestation, sex, incest, trauma, Mala, Shanta, Dattani**

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Mahesh Dattani, an eminent writer, actor, director, and a successful playwright was born in Bangalore on August 7, 1958. He is the first playwright in English who is honored with the Sahitya Akademi Award for *Final Solutions*. Dattani did his bachelor's degree with History, Economics and Political Science. Later he completed his post graduation in Marketing and Advertising Management, he started his career as a copywriter but his interest diverted in writing play. He has many critically acclaimed plays to his credit as *The Big Fat City* (2013), *Where Did I Leave My Purdha?* (2012), *Brief Candle* (2009), *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* (2007), *Ek Alag Mausam* (2005), *Morning Raga* (2004), *Uma and The Fairy Queen* (2003), *Clearing the Rubble* (2002), *Mango Soufflé* (2002), *Thirty Days in September* (2001), *The Swami and Winston* (2000), *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* (2000), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Do the Needful* (1997), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Tara* (1990), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Where There's a Will* (1988).

His plays are divided into Stage Plays, Screen Plays, and Radio Plays, which explore the burning issues of the contemporary society. Mahesh Dattani always explores the burning issues such as gender discrimination, patriarchy, homosexuality, LGBT etc. Bijay Kumar Das remarks, "He is a playwright on contemporary urban India and his plays are tropical dramas. The questions he addresses in his plays are those of gender, sex, religion, communal tensions, feminine identity, same Sex marriage and above all gay and lesbian issues (04).

Mahesh Dattani is a man of ideas, his ideas taken from contemporary society. In his plays a character from marginal society can be the hero such as eunuchs and a child abuse sufferer. The present research paper will explore the burning issues of society such as child abuse and harassment in *Thirty Days in September* (2001). In the play Dattani try to show plight of a girl child who faced the trauma of sexual abuse in her own family. In the play *Mala*, the protagonist is a child who is a victim of sexual abuse by her uncle in her childhood. Shanta, her mother was a silent spectator witness to the whole suffering was herself a victim. In the very beginning of the play we come to know the suffocating environment Mala lives in. Being a victim of incest, she is on the verge of losing her sanity. Despite her complaints to her mother, Mala doesn't get validation of her unbearable pain and suffering. The worst feeling for her is that her mother tries to avoid the discussion. She needs a counselor to come out of that agony and trauma. She is so disturbed that she thinks that it is all her fault:

*"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... it's not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish for my mother (CP Two 09).*

In the play Dattani throws light on the authority of man, a man (paper wala) says to Deepak, "I also help madam with small things. There is no man in the house, that is why. If there is a man in the house, what is my problem whether her gas is leaking or her terrace is leaking. (*Turning to Shanta and speaking with the authority of man*). Hahn. Have you kept the money ready? Quickly (CP Two 11). So Shanta has

been looking down while paper wala was commenting on her plight. She was feeling uneasy. There is some confusion between Shanta and the man on the Bill payment so the man strictly says that "... you are wrong. It's six hundred and ninety" (CP Two 11).

In the play Dattani explores the effect on the psychology of the girl child. She feels herself that she is shattered into many small pieces, she becomes very disturbed:

*"I don't know why. I just don't understand ... Please don't ask me why I do it. It's just a game...not a game. No...it's...I know it's wrong. What I am doing is terribly wrong! But it means a lot to me. I like it. That is why I am a bad person. I have no character..." (CP Two 18).*

We come to know that her psyche is totally disturbed and in the situation she thinks that she is a bad person, she hates herself. Her agony cannot be described in words. The imprints of child sexual abuse can be seen everywhere in the play. She thinks that this incestuous relationship is a part of western culture. She thinks that my mother could have saved me from all this.

In the play Dattani shows that her mother knows about sexual abuse with her daughter but she never revolted against the heinous crime done by her own brother. Whenever her daughter tried to disclose the reality, the mother always diverted the situation, Mala said, "it's true. It did happen, but you never believed me (CP Two 24) "Shanta always tries to divert her mind and she says, "I don't know what you are talking about. I will prepare alu paratha for you tomorrow; you always like that for breakfast" (CP Two 24). Another act by her mother was that she always knew that her daughter was sexually abused. In the play, Dattani points out that Shanta, a passive and submissive character, never tried to come out from the situation and never tried to save her daughter even though she already knew her brother's character. If she wanted, she could save her daughter from the clutches of her brother. Mala becomes a victim because of her mother's silence. She always seems to escape from the reality:

*"I don't care if you are not feeling well mummy. Because I don't know whether you are telling the truth or simply trying to escape as always" (CP Two 22).*

In the words of Santosh Kumar Sonkar:

*"Mala not only bears the pain of sexual assault in her childhood but also equally suffers the emotional hurt caused by her mother's silence against her molestation which subsists in her unconscious mind. As she grows, her traumatic experience of physical exploitation and her mother's*

*indifferent attitude towards it starts coming at the surface level resulting in a lifelong clash between mother and daughter.*

Shanta never tried to face Mala because she knew that Shanta was wrong. Whenever Mala asks the questions Shanta never replies but she turns to the portrait of lord Shri Krishna and does not respond to Mala's questions. Here Dattani tries to convey that if you want to escape from the situation, start worshipping God no one will ask you for that but here Mala becomes furious at such behavior of her mother and reacts, " always staring at that picture whenever you want to avoid something...One of these days I will throw that picture out of the house" (CP Two 23).

Shanta never listened to her daughter and avoided her to listen, whenever Mala came to her mother crying and hurt mother never tried to listen to her instead of listening to what she said her mother stuffed her with food every time. In the play Mala says that she has told her mother five years ago but her mother said that it was not true and couldn't be true but now Mala knows that her mother doesn't want to believe that she is right. In his conversation with Lakshmi Subramanyam, Dattani says: "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).

Dattani also shows that gender is constructed which means social and cultural expected behavior that is based on particular gender such as playing cricket by women is not supported by male dominated society. Even today the women's cricket team doesn't have the same importance as the men's team has. Earlier we used to think if it's a doctor or engineer it must be a man, here is the long list of work that is still a domain of women such as taking care of babies, care of *household even if they are doing jobs*:

*"To start with, I don't think she should be skipping rope with her daughter. That is not real freedom. It is still very gender constructed...if you ask me she should be playing cricket with her daughter and husband. You have to say it all in fifteen seconds. The important point is her physical ease and freedom (CP Two 19).*

Freedom must be given to every marginalized section of society and we should treat them equally.

In the play Dattani points out that Mala has relationships with so many men. In one incident, a man called Ravi is wearing a business suit and gold rimmed glasses, they dance and Ravi appreciates the dance and body of Mala. They are talking about being physical, when they are dancing Radhika,

fiance of Ravi, pulls them apart. At this Mala feels herself humiliated. Here we see that Ravi try to blame Mala,

*"I was just being polite and dancing with her.*

*Mala stands to one side humiliated.*

*I am sorry I... Look, don't be angry with me. She was leaning me on. I swear it was her fault.*

*What could I do? Radhika! (CP Two 21-22).*

Here we see the changing behavior of a man just before he was appreciating Mala's dance and body and he thinks that it was her fault. Mala feels humiliated and she follows head held down like a schoolgirl caught in the act.

In the play Dattani points out the girls are not safe in society. The rape cases are increasing day by day in India. There is irony that on one hand female are worshipped in the Navaratri and on other auspicious occasions and simultaneously, they are raped and brutally murdered by the people with distorted mentality in male dominated society. They are jeopardized by society on the one hand by their relatives and other males. In the play girl children are sexually assaulted and abused, they are molested. Incestuous behavior towards children is the main concern of the play. The main problem of parents is that they don't believe that their children have been sexually abused in the family. Shanta and Mala talk about rape cases and insecurity of children,

*"We were talking about the 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 (CP Two 25)".*

Further Mala told her mother that uncle Vinay molested her when she was seven, eight, nine, ten, every vacation when she visited him or when he came to stay with them. But every time she was sexually abused by uncle Vinay. She tried to tell her father but her father said to go to her mother. In the play Dattani figures out her parents didn't give attention and the children faced the agony:

*"You were busy in 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 you never said it but I knew what you were saying to me without words... go to sleep and the pain will go away... and it did go away. But it comes back. It did not go away forever" (CP Two 26).*

Shanta knew the truth but still she tried to avoid the situation and she suggested to Mala to forget everything, "please don't talk about trying to forget the pain...I forget. I forget everything. Be like me" (CP Two 28-29).

Another important aspect in the play is the financial dependency of a female on male in a patriarchal social system. In the play Dattani tries to point out that Shanta is a non earning person and she has a daughter. In India it's not an easy task to raise a girl child in a patriarchal society by a single mother. A girl is not supposed to be treated equally in the society, so she needs economic help from other members because her husband already had left them. Consequently, she has very limited resources of money and ultimately she has to depend on her brother. The brother who molested her when she was six and he was thirteen, "he has helped us so much after your father left us... Mala, I am sorry I should have told you but... The money that we kept receiving after your father left us was from your uncle " (CP Two 35). In the next part of the play it is told why her husband left the family. Mala told that he left the family not because of her but because of her mother. She further said that her mother didn't like her father even though she didn't like to sleep with her father:

*"You didn't want to sleep with him. All night long I had to listen to your mumbling saying you didn't want him near you. You didn't want him touching you ... I remember daddy's last words to me. ..' I married a frozen woman'. A frozen woman "(CP Two 36).*

In the play Mahesh Dattani shows that Shanta becomes a passive or emotionless character who is dependent on her brother despite the fact that she herself was sexually abused by the same person, her brother. She chooses to become silent even when her daughter is also sexually abused by him, but she never tried to confront or expose him. She could never revolt against him; she just became a silent sufferer to forget everything and tried to forget that happened to her. Mala says to her mother that she is a failure not only as a wife but also as a mother. The author explores the identity of the adolescent of the female child which was never explored before.

The author, through his poignant narration, reveals that children are sexually assaulted and abused when they are most vulnerable. In childhood, one is not able to understand what happened to her/ him. But the imprint of the same is indelible. Such incidents change the children's psychology forever, they are unable to erase from their memory. The pain becomes constant and alive. In the play Mala is sexually abused, and the irony is that on one hand her uncle is involved physically with her and on the other hand he calls her ugly, "I love you even though

you are ugly. Keep singing... Nobody will tell you how ugly you are. But you are good only for this... only for this "(CP Two 44). His beastly behavior reveals what he thinks about women. For him, a female is a source of gratification, to satisfy his hunger irrespective of age and relationship with her. The flesh is so heavy on his mind that he exploited his own sister and niece subsequently. She is called a whore and bitch. In the play, ultimately the man is responsible for the dreadful present of Mala but still she is degraded by male dominated society. According to Beena Agrawal: Mala, the protagonist, is the victim of this abuse but she maintains silence against injustice. As soon as she comes to the stage of adolescence, she finds that the world is hostile and human relationship is a betrayal" (118).

Such incestuous behavior raises a question mark on the sacredness of relationships. Moreover, the suffering of the child exposes the hollowness of unhappy marriages. Mala is brave enough to realize that she's been exploited; therefore she goes to both to tell what she was going through. But parents don't even have enough time to listen. What was the fault of Mala? Her parents didn't give proper attention to her. Her mother didn't not try to save her from her own brother. A child feels so many traumatic things and is not able to forget what happened to her in her/his childhood and the man who is responsible for this, "I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am not so sure I want to be free of him" (CP Two 54). Mala is a brave and strong girl who faced everything with bravery and revolt against such things. In the beginning of the play Mala was thinking that she only is responsible for the present condition but she is not. Shanta didn't not tell anyone what happened in her childhood, because the circumstances for a girl child are not always easy. She knew that nobody will understand her, believe in her and blame will be on her. At last Shanta breaks her silence:

*"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 say anything. My tongue was cut off... My tongue was cut off years ago... Please save her. I did not save her. I did not know how to save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself? ... You say I did not help me. I could not help you. Same as you could not help me. Did you ever see the pain in my eyes? No. Nobody saw anything. Nobody said anything. Not my brothers, not my parents... I was six, Mala I was six. And he was thirteen ... and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!!"* (CP Two 54-55).

Dattani wrote about the powerless, mother and daughter relationship and the long lasting resentment against oppression. So the same thing happened with Mala. She didn't revolt because she said that

nobody would understand her. One thing is clear that Shanta was not aware of their role in the upbringing of her daughter. As she was not aware of her rights in the family as well as in the society. Mala always seeks the help from her mother, she told her mother everything but her mother tried to divert her mind to other things and her mother avoided everything. Her brother abused her daughter in front of her but she didn't do anything. Mala asked her mother, "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 or whatever" (CP Two 53).

According to Om Prakash Ratnakar, "Child sexual abuse is an unwelcomed intimate and unspeakable reality of society, in which a girl or a boy is encouraged to take part in this heinous crime bribing or forcing by abuser. It is an old problem, which has been traced throughout history; in reality, it is a criminal offence (167).

Shanta seems to be insensitive at several occasions in the play, but her soul is tormented. She has accepted the fact long ago in her childhood that nobody is going to believe on incest, imposed by her brother. She couldn't find someone to reveal the truth. She represents the women who are voiceless and powerless. Her horrible childhood led her to an unhappy marriage. Her lack of awareness of her rights becomes the cause of repetition in the form of sexual exploitation of her only child. For nation building, a healthy social value system is required. To eradicate the evils like this, parents should impart their children with the right awareness, confidence and ensure a safe environment to bloom. Only then such heinous crimes inside or outside the family can be prevented.

## ABBREVIATIONS

*Collected Plays volume two – CP Two*

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**Corresponding Author**

**Dr. Kishan Swaroop Rana\***

Assistant Professor, Department of English, LKC Govt.  
PG College Gangoh, Saharanpur