

Writing Wrongs: Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* as a Trauma Narrative

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Abstract

Mahesh Dattani's play *Thirty Days in September* highlights the issue of child sexual abuse and its post traumatic effect on female body and psyche. This paper highlights the issue of incest and the consequent trauma due to child sexual abuse. The paper analyses the play as a case study to understand the psychological perspective of trauma due to sexual abuse. Drama reflects life and this play brings such serious topic in the form of stage performance in itself is commendable. The play also questions and highlights the stigma that is associated with victim instead of perpetrator. This paper evaluates all these issues to discuss the play as Trauma Narrative.

Keywords: *Trauma, trauma narrative, incest, PTSD, dattani.*

Introduction

Trauma can be understood as a stress that results in disordered change in feeling and behaviour according to Eric Erikson it as a "state or condition produced by such a stress or blow" (184). In other words, trauma refers to the state of mind which results from a devastating and damaging experience of mishap. In Freudian terms, Trauma, can be defined as the root cause of psychological disorders, as a wound inflicted upon the mind (Caruth 3). It is an experience lived belatedly at the level of its unspeakable truth which is revealed in psychoanalytic theory. So that psychoanalysis can consider the "textual anxieties" surrounding the representation of trauma. It is also about women who want to express the painful and personal experiences in the society.

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* was commissioned by RAHI (Recovering And Healing from Incest), a Delhi based NGO for women survivors of incest. Since its first production in 2001 RAHI has used this play to spread awareness about the prevalence of incest in Indian households and to help women overcome the trauma inflicted on them by one of their own family members. It brings to the fore the real picture of the contemporary urban crime on women particularly on children. Child sexual abuse is not only an urban phenomenon yet the higher rates are in the city due to many reasons such as higher divorce cases, single

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parenting, nuclear families and many more. The play was first staged at the Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, on 31 May 2001.

In literature any work that showcases the profound loss or intense fear of characters on individual or collective level are put in the category of Trauma writings. The essential feature of trauma literature is the transformational aspect of self that is driven by an external, terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory. The external event that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to a collective human or natural disaster such as war or tsunamis but may include personal experience of sexual violence or the unexpected death of a loved ones.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth refers to literature—and literary forms of interpretation—to emphasize the structure of traumatic events and belated experience. She accentuates the substantial role of literature which enables us to eyewitness the experiences that otherwise might not have spoken or heard. Caruth writes: “[T]he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time”. The belated event is a trauma which is “absence” or “missed encounter” (9).

Thirty Days in September presents the stark reality of child sexual abuse in contemporary society. Incest is a taboo not only in India but the world over and if a child is the victim, people avoid acknowledging the episode. Dattani articulates this volatile, but suppressed, issue of our times by presenting the psychological and emotional state of the victims. As Lillete Dubey in a note on the play writes “Sensitive and powerful without ever offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship” (Dattani 4). The title of the play embodies the inherent innocence of childhood as it is drawn from a nursery rhyme.

Thirty days hath September
April, June and November;
February has twenty-eight alone;
All the rest have Thirty-one.
Excepting leap-year - that's the time
When February's days are twenty-nine.

The title *Thirty days in September*, therefore, makes the rhyme reverberates in the mind. It connects one with the innocence of early childhood when one begins to understand the world. Ironically, if at this point of life somebody forces a child into the adult world of sexuality, it can hinder the child's physical, mental and psychological growth. The play powerfully delineates the anxiety and pain faced by victims of incest. Particularly by highlighting the psychological disturbance and the escape mechanism of these survivors, Dattani gives voice to the unheard cries of the victims of child sexual abuse. While envisioning this play Dattani worked on 12 case histories and found that in most of the cases the perpetrator was someone very close to the child.

Dattani weaves the play around a small, scattered family enduring the trauma of child sexual abuse throughout their life. There are always two ways of reacting to the situation, either by voicing opposition through violent reaction or by accepting the pain silently. Both these aspects are very well exposed through Mala Khatri and her mother Shanta. Though Mala's mother has found escape and evasion in silence and prayer, Mala becomes extremely violent and blames her divorced mother for spoiling her life by ignoring her cries. Mala lives in the shadow of the haunting memory of her abuser— her maternal uncle— in her subconscious all the time. Her love interest is confined to a period of thirty days only as she is unable to endure a steady relation with any man for a period longer than that.

Deepak, Mala's latest boyfriend comes as a silver lining in her life. He makes efforts to convince her that she should consult a psychologist about her unusual behaviour. He also meets Mala's mother to unravel the suppressed past and to ascertain the cause of Mala's distress. All his efforts go in vain until he meets Mala's maternal uncle and suspects him to be the root cause of Mala's disturbance. Though Mala and her mother are not ready to speak but finally, due to love and support, Mala is able to point to her victimizing uncle. The culmination of this exposure results in the horrifying knowledge that Shanta had turned towards prayer and silence, as at a tender age she also had been molested by her elder brother.

The play begins with a meeting between Mala and her psychologist. The first two speeches show the confident and self-assured Mala while the third speech transports us three years back, where we meet an altogether different Mala, who is meek and self-conscious and blames herself for everything.

Meanwhile Deepak arranges a secret meeting with Mala's mother for exploring and extracting the hidden truths of Mala's past. Through his insistent probing he gets a glimpse of a few facts about Mala life, such as "thirty days affairs", the embittered relation of Mala with her mother and her behavioural abnormalities. The long monologues of Mala that oscillate between the past and the present show the recurrent images of the past torment, simultaneously emphasizing the poignant memories that haunt her forever.

Though society prefers to remain silent on these issues, incest is a common form of abuse in many families. About thirty percent of all perpetrators of sexual abuse are related to their victim either by blood or other connections. Such a form of incest is described as intrafamilial child sexual abuse. Mala too is a victim of such sexual abuse as her protector turned out to be her abuser. When Mala was quite young her father left Mala and her mother Shanta for some other woman as he was not physically satisfied with Shanta. Before leaving he shrieked at her by saying:

I married a frozen woman. (Dattani 36)

After so many years Mala learns the fact that it was not her father but her uncle who used to provide financial support to the family. In most cases of abuse, a single mother in financial need and consequent dependence on a male elder, sets the scene for child sexual abuse. Pinki Virani in her book *Bitter Chocolate* states that "Patriarchy, power, penetration—these are all the factors that assist greatly in allowing a child to be sexually, and physically, abused..." (Virani XX).

Mala blames her mother for every wrong in her life. Mala has this feeling that her mother knew of the evil design of her brother who sexually exploited her daughter, still she never bothered to resist or question the abuser. Whenever Mala went to tell her mother about the incident she just fed her something. On the one hand Mala was sexually abused by her uncle and on the other, Mala's mother asked her to consider everything as a bad dream and forget it. For Mala it was certainly more than a bad dream as not only her body but her soul was scarred too by the repetitive molestation. Year after year she suffered but her silent screams remained unheard and gradually she learnt to live with the pain and started "enjoying" it:

MALA. It doesn't matter now. I just have to learn to live with the pain. (Dattani 27)

Many years of forced sexual activity made Mala's body habituated to the sex act and gradually she started craving for it. Then it was not only her uncle or cousin who molests her giving her uncle's reference but anybody and everybody that she comes in contact with. More than an "abuse" now it became her body's "necessity." But this "pleasure" is misunderstood by Mala's mother. Shanta never blamed her brother for inflicting pain upon her daughter, yet she blamed Mala for extracting pleasure from this pain.

SHANTA. Not just the pain. I remember, much as I was trying to forget, what I saw. Not when you were seven but when you were thirteen. (*Gently.*) Please don't misunderstand me, Mala. I remember, seeing you with my brother during the summer holidays. You were pushing yourself on him in the bedroom. (Dattani 27)

SHANTA. That is why I forget. I went to the kitchen to vomit. Then I prayed. I prayed for you Mala. (*Pointing to the portrait.*) That is what I was praying to. To our God, so He could send his Sudarshan Chakra to defend you, to defend us from the demon inside you, not outside you. But you wouldn't let me. You don't let me. (Dattani 28)

"Demon inside you" clearly objectifies the attitude of society. Dattani makes Shanta the mouthpiece of society that most of the time blames the victim for the molestation and not the molester. The woman is said to be deliberately attracting attention. She doesn't want to take any relationship for more than thirty days.

Though Shanta herself was an incest victim, she is unable to understand the trauma of her daughter. This apathy on the part of Shanta demolishes the so called image of a mother-daughter relationship as being a supportive bond. Dattani through his plays always tries to challenge the stereotypical gender notions. The cultural construct of a close, warm relation between a mother and her daughter disintegrates into smithereens of Shanta and Mala. Both seem to be dissatisfied with their relationship and response towards each other. This causes a deep breach between them:

SHANTA. It is so easy to slip into bad ways. I wish she would listen to me.

MALA. I wish she wouldn't be so lost in her religion. I wish she had been there for me! (Dattani 41)

Uncomfortable though it may sound, 70% of urban Indian women are, in some manner or the other, been subjected to sexual abuse as children. What is worse is that the aberration, contrary to what it appears, cuts across all sections of society, sparing no one whatsoever (*Tribune* 2005). Cases of incest largely go unreported because of the family prestige involved. People generally see such incidents maligning the name of the family. Thus, nobody comes out to confront such heinous activity. That is the reason why many more Malas and Shantas' silent screams are still unheard. Mahesh Dattani's play is an eye-opener in that it brings to the surface the unavoidable dark truths of the seemingly calm and civilised exterior of society job by coming up with this such a issue of incest.

Mala has terrible memories of having been abused by her uncle. The counselling sessions with the psychologist seem to have their basis in Freudian psychoanalysis according to which childhood memories are the key to adult life. Since childhood is regarded as a significant stage in the creation of ego, leading to a balanced or unbalanced personality in adult life, much hinges upon the experiences of this early period. In the Freudian method healing might be affected through the recall of repressed childhood memories (Morgan, King, Weirz & Schopler 580-581).

In some ways, Mahesh Dattani presents this play as a memory play. Just as in our memory, a series of events are presented not as they actually took place but as they might be remembered, so the scenes are enacted in the play. The juxtaposition of the past and the present in the dialogues, especially of abuse and reconciliation makes for more effective theatre. In the scenes below, the "MAN" is a creation of Mala's imagination and the voice of her forbidden pleasure:

[The man quickly enters their area. There is something very furtive in his eye movement and a sense of conspiracy in his tone of voice....He exists only for Mala and not for Deepak.]

DEEPAK. You see? It wasn't that difficult.

MAN. Touch me here.

[Mala withdraws her hand sharply, frightened.]

MAN. You don't love your uncle?

DEEPAK. What's wrong?

MAN. You don't love your uncle, hmmm?

DEEPAK. Try it one more time.

MAN. Quickly before someone sees you. Touch.

DEEPAK. Please for my sake.

MAN. You said you loved me in front of mummy and daddy. Come on! Show it!

...

MAN. If they hear you they will say you are a bad girl. This is our secret.

(Like an order but in a whisper.) Don't Cry! (Dattani 42- 43)

Strindberg in the preface of his play *A Dream Play* wrote "Time and space do not exist...one consciousness is superior to them all..." (Strindberg 175). This is quite applicable to Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*. Although the play raises many issues such as human understanding towards the victims of incest, gender divide, man as protector and abuser, mother-daughter relationship, shame attached to incest, these are portrayed under the overall context of child sexual abuse. The carefully chosen words and even the stage setting help in emphasizing this strategy of dwelling upon "consciousness." On the very first page of the play, instructions for the stage setting are given:

[During Mala's taped conversation, we see the back of a life-sized doll of a seven-year-old girl propped on the chair. During the first conversation we only see the back of the head. With every subsequent taped conversation we see more of the profile. We only see the doll's full face after Deepak's taped conversation.] (Dattani 7)

This impressionistic technique intends to point towards important elements of characterization and the theme. Mahesh Dattani also uses the word MAN instead of uncle to universalize all the abusers. At the same time he applies the word MAN for the newspaper boy as he too, like the uncle, knows how to take advantage of the helplessness of a woman.

MAN.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 a man.*) Hahn. Have you kept the money ready? Quickly.

[Shanta has been looking down while the paper wallah made his comments on her situation. The man easily towers over her, pelvis thrust out in an imposing manner, making Shanta very uneasy.] (Dattani 11)

Dattani points to the fact that women who are single and economically dependent are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse. Patriarchal society always looks at an unattached woman as a physical body for sexual pleasure and not as a wholesome human being. At the same time Dattani also dismantles the image of the patriarchal male as abuser by presenting Deepak, Mala's boyfriend, as the person who actually helps her to come out of her trauma. He helps her "to wake up after...coma" (Dattani 33).

Almost all the plays of Dattani are word sensitive, giving clues to the final revelation:

MAN. Think nothing of it. I shall play the dutiful uncle tomorrow at dinner. Infact, I should interview the boy and see if he is suitable for our Mala. Isn't that right?

[No response from Shanta. The man waves his hand in front of her face.]

MAN. You are off again. Ever since I can recall you simply start dreaming whenever...(*Making light of it.*) Remember when we were small, you would simply vanish into your world...like when we were having dinner and you nearly choked. If I didn't know the Heinrich Manoeuvre from school, God alone knows...(Dattani 38)

In the above passage, one may note the vocabulary that reveals the self proclaimed hypocrisy of the uncle who must “play” certain roles in public but violating the mother and the daughter in private. The references also bring in the memories of the uncle in contrast to those of Mala.

In the present play Dattani uses symbolic names for the characters. While both Uncle and Paperwallah were named Man to unify their patriarchal identity as well as perverse mentality; Shanta meaning peace or calm signifies the silence that she adopted after abuse; Deepak, meaning the lamp, signifies the light or the hope in the play which actually brings the victims out of the dark past and Mala, like a garland, signifies her again joining mainstream society after a breakdown. Mala may also signify another kind of circle, a repetition of the history of sexual abuse suffered by her mother. The vicious circle of abuse may be a chain binding many vulnerable women.

The end of the play brings a relief with the reconciliation between the mother and daughter:

MALA.We were both struggling to survive but - I never acknowledged your struggle.

....I just want to... I want to ask you whether you need my help. Please let me be of help. (*gently turning her mother's face towards her.*) 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. (*Collected Plays Vol. II 58*)

Mahesh Dattani highlights the invisible psychic wounds of Mala and her mother by using Maria Root's concept of 'insidious trauma'. Though not always blatant or violent, these effects threaten the basic well-being of the person who suffers them. Root's conceptualization provides a useful framework for understanding certain long-term consequences of the institutionalized sexism, racism, and classism that systematically denigrate the self-worth of the socially othered who are rendered voiceless.

Dattani through this play touches a very sensitive and yet powerful subject of sexual abuse without offending sensibilities. The play brings out the horror and pain that incest causes and also the connotation of shame and disgrace to the family honour that prohibits its public declaration. It also makes the readers think about the kind of treatment society accords to the victims of such molestation. In particular it draws attention to the plight of the dependent woman or a hapless child in a familial environment where the male protector has power, including sexual power, over the women. It can rightly be stated by Aditi De in her review of Dattani's *Collected Plays*:

Dattani's plays deal with the real scenarios that are tough to turn away from. They are couched in Indian urban speak. They shy away from myth and make-believe to tackle reality head-on, no matter what the impact of the collision. They have worked onstage when directed sensitively, or read over BBC, or - somewhat less powerfully - when rendered as cinema. They prove indisputably that Dattani is in sync with millions of urbanities to whom English is an Indian language. We are his audience, his characters, his source of sustained feedback. (*The Hindu* 2005)

Conclusion

Thirty Days in September bring to the fore the importance of counselling as one of the most effective way to deal with PTSD symptoms. The therapist can help a trauma survivor to recognise their resources and skills to build their self. The characters are consciously created by Mahesh Dattani to address the issue of stigma that is associated with the psychological ailments Like the act of Mala's mother seems unnatural when she discloses the thirty-day cycle with Deepak but it that is the only solution to help any Trauma Patient. Hiding or distorting the truth only harms the patient. In this particular play it's not only Mala but her mother Shanta who was a victim and both of them have handled the same issue with different ways so the play gives us a lot to ponder and analyse about the issue to child sexual abuse and the post-traumatic stress disorder.

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