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Incest in Indian Theatre: Sexual profligacy and Flippancy in Dattani's Thirty Days in September.

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Abstract: Mahesh Dattani's Thirty Days in September brings to light the painful realities of incest, child sexual abuse, and the silence that often surrounds such experiences within Indian families. The play focuses on Mala, who is sexually abused by her maternal uncle, Vinay, and explores how this traumatic experience affects her emotional well-being, sexuality, and relationships with others. Through Mala's painful memories and personal struggles, Dattani highlights the stigma associated with sexual abuse and the tendency of families to hide such incidents to protect their social reputation. Mala's mother, Shanta, represents the consequences of denial and silence, as her failure to respond to her daughter's suffering deepens Mala's trauma. The revelation of Shanta's own experience of sexual abuse further brings out the intergenerational nature of trauma. This paper examines how Dattani uses memory, silence, and characterisation to portray the lasting psychological effects of sexual abuse. It also explores Mala's struggle to overcome her painful past, speak openly about her experiences, and free herself from the shame imposed upon her by society. Through Mala and Shanta, the play exposes the devastating consequences of familial neglect and the social attitudes that allow abuse to remain hidden. Ultimately, Thirty Days in September calls for greater awareness of child sexual abuse and emphasises the importance of breaking the silence, acknowledging survivors' experiences, and creating a society in which victims can speak without fear, shame, or stigma.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, Thirty Days in September, incest, child sexual abuse, psychological trauma, familial silence, memory, intergenerational trauma, Indian theatre.

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Dattani is a philosopher among many other play writes of India. His philosophical plays concern themselves with the idea of existence and man's position in this cosmos after being severed off its roots. He therefore takes drama as a tool to fight the evils of the society that torture and plague the individuals. He wants to represent his age and also transform the society he lives in to a more composite and comprehensible place for life.

Thirty Days in September is a memory play broadcast in the radio which tells the unflinching tale of incest which surrounds the Indian society in general and the Indian family in particular. The highlight of the play is the Indian mindset which contends to conceal sex as a taboo and the repercussions which follow. The play is also a cautionary tale to the parents about sexual abuse and intends to assert the statistical idea that most of the child sexual or incest abuse is carried down by the close aid, or close relatives of any child put to sexual molestations. Silence is the ambivalent expression used by Dattani in the play. To him, silence is both a destroyer and an excuse. The play is therefore a plea to the public asking them to voice out the pain than bear it with unethical silence.

Thirty Days in September, is a constructive collaboration with Little Dubey, a renowned theatre personality who staged the unspeakable horrors of incestual relationships taking cues from Dattani. The play is a collective effort of Dubey and Dattani, the director and the writer of the play respectively. In the book an Introduction to Dattani, exclaims on the overwhelming response by the audience as "After every performance, women have

come backstage with their own traumatic stories writ large on their faces, grateful for the catharsis the play offers" (Dubey 5).

In this play, Dattani drives home the horrors of incest and child sexual abuse. Mala, the central character in the play is physically abused by her maternal uncle, Vinay. Mala would always try to bring to notice the horrific experience to her mother. Her mother would conceal the incident and stuff Mala's favourite alu-parathas into her mouth. Mala would also be taken to the idol of Lord Krishna to seek solace from the molestation.

Mahesh Dattani does not foray into the story by exposing the reality but presents two different versions of the interview. These two interviews reveal psychic trauma of Mala and Shanta. The first is recorded in the past and the second is in the process of recording. The playwright places these two versions of interview parallel to each other in order to provide clear picture of the context. The first interview is in February, 2004 after the death of Vinay, her maternal uncle and ends with Mala's rejection of male figure. The second interview was three years before the first, i.e. in September, 2011 when Mala consults a counsellor for her psychological needs.

Incest is termed as the sexual relationship between blood relationship. Incest can be between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren or even between siblings. Incest and queer sexuality in India is not openly discussed because they are considered taboos and hence are concealed. Sexual abuse in the primitive stages of child development devastates the child psyche and hinders its normal growth. Roger Scruton in his book Sexual Desire comments on incest that,

… it is a perversion, not of the sexual act, but of the *familial* relationship. For incest builds upon a pre-established interpersonal relation that is in fact incompatible with it. It can be expressed only by destroying the most sacred of all the responsibilities that encumber the life of the rational being. Its impact on the personal life of these who engage in it is therefore essentially negative. It destroys the interpersonal relation that exists between them, while offering no commitment in its place. It works essentially *against* the development of personal feeling, and to the extent that it flourishes, it both poisons the home and impedes its dissolution…(247).

Dattani has depicted Mala as the victim of incest with intense sexual desire. Indian readers deem it pejorative because women with a high degree of sexual hunger are considered abnormal. Ironically the uncontrollable desires of Mala are devoid of any feelings of love. They seem to have been triggered from mere physical instincts. Mala does not want to get married but wants to be in many a relationship with men. Sexual abuse becomes more casual and more taken for granted during unexpected encounters. Mala is shown to have had a lot of one night stands and during one of these meetings at a party, she bumps into a man called Ravi, they dance together and form the relationship chord."They dance for a while, with the man exploring her back more with his hand when it is away from Radhika's line of vision". And she tells him, 'pleading, looking up at him to be kissed', "Do whatever you want with me, but take me with you now" (CP II 21).

Mala visits a counselor to resolve her agony. It is revealed through the readings of the play that her deep sexual desires emanate from her memories of incest. She struggles to establish relationship with other men by blaming her mother and Deepak, her friend. Being a memory play dealing with a less talked about more sensitive issue, the plot of the play goes on to have an imagined conversing with Mala by a counsellor whom is literally non-existent. The reason for introducing a therapist is to make the play more lively and realistic. The play shows that issues of sexual abuse are not discussed in open but rather explored as an introspection. On the flip side, the play also outlines the ways by which people get mentally sick for having been unable to speak out their problems. The hesitation to openly discuss or disclose abuse in sexuality has become one of the most acute problems of the contemporary social system. The conversation is more muffled and mostly stammered to show the volume of affectations she has had in the relationship.

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 … It's not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish that my mother …. (CP II 9).

Deepak, a character in the play infuses confidence in Mala by attempting remove her psychological fear and later marry her. He reveals the depth of his relationship with Shanta, Mala's mother so that Shanta could convince her for marriage. Mala is coerced in the play to marry Deepak without being given a definitive reason for the marriage. Shanta insists on knowing the reason and Mala reveals her past with anguish and also blames her mother for her dreadful past. She says:

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 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 – 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 forever! (CP II 25-26).

The inner- conflicts of Mala is presented through her taped conversations with her psychiatrist. She is presented as a ,timid and a soft- spoken girl and goes on to reveal her true self through the play. The climax of the play reveals an incessant sexual abuse which went over for a period of six years non stop by the maternal uncle of the girl for the sake of mere male sexual gratification.

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…. 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. (8)

Mala is not mentally strengthened to comprehend the causes for her suffering. Mala brings to the notice of her mother that she is sexually victimized. Shanta on the other hand pretends that she remembers nothing and Mala makes up stories to seek attention of men around her. She also tries to pray and chant before the portrait of Krishna to avoid Mala's questions.

Shanta always prayed to Lord Krishna requesting him to send his Sudarshan Chakara to defend Mala. It would have been more feasible had Shanta acted or reacted to Mala's pleas. The title of the play is unique in itself. Vinay a sexual abuser of Mala asks her to sing the song learnt at school when in relationship with her. It is Thirty days has September. April, June and November. February has twenty eight. All the rest, thirty one. The song becomes an instigator for her sexual instincts and insights. This makes her fix people whom she likes the best for thirty days. On seeing a man she becomes excited, remembers her uncle and also the song Thirty days has September.

Shanta as the name indicates means silence. She knows everything but remains silent through the play. Through these ceaseless sufferings her silence is revealed. S.B. Barure in his work, Reflection on Mahesh Dattani cites an article on Anitha Santhanam that talks about Shanta's silence as: "It is 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 quite. It's this silence that makes the abused feel betrayed" (154). Shanta was also under the impression that Vinay, Mala's uncle was forced by Mala herself for the sexual experiences. That could have been the reason why, Shanta remained silent. Mala balmes her mother, for the impending fate and unbearable pain. She holds her mother's loose character as the sole reason for the abuse and torture. She also adds that her father left them because of her mother who was not a woman of virtues or values. The play reflects the reason for ruins in a family in case one of the partners is unfaithful.She says:

He left because of you. You didn't love him. The only reason you shared my room was because you didn't want to sleep with him…. He said to me 'I married a frozen woman'. A frozen woman. So don't try to tell me that you were concerned about me by hiding the truth. The only truth you want to hide is your failure as a wife and a mother (CP II 35-36).

. "I have been so bad. I can't tell you where to begin! It's not just the men in the office I told you about, but before… much before! I – Oh God! I – I seduced my uncle when I was thirteen… No, there is nothing to tell about my uncle, forget all that…" (33)

Sex has become more of a revenge in the life of Mala in the play. To her, the various relationships she has had were neither casual nor accidental but more of a planned and meditated act. To her, all the sexual encounters she had had till date were a reminder of revenge which she had help for her mother and her uncle respectively. Only when the play ends, does one come to know of the fact that Shanta was a victim of sexual abuse too. The play is an eye opener and a constant caution to the readers to be reminded of the horrors of sexual abuse by close relations and also a shameful reminder of the legacy of incest which we have been carrying across generations without refuting or exposing them. Shanta and Mala are types rather than victims or individuals who become mute victims to the pangs of sexual discord.

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