

**A Picture of Scarred Psyche: Forced Incestuous Relationships via a Play of Mahesh
Dattani “Thirty Days in September”**

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Abstract: The present paper reveals about the Forced Incestuous Relationships. Dattani in *Thirty Days in September* traces the roots of scarred psyche in the antagonism existing between mother and daughter relationship. The traditional image of motherhood as the embodiment of 'love' and 'sacrifice' is essentially a myth. If a daughter is the extension of female identity, there are also ample evidences of hostility, apathy and antagonism existing in this uncompromising relationship.

Keywords: Forced and Uncompromising relationship, Female Identity, Love, Sacrifice, Motherhood.

Introduction: The Modern Indian Theatre inspired by urban tradition is predominantly influenced by western traditions with the persistent quest to seek an identity of its own. It has little to do with the tradition of classical Sanskrit drama. Even inside cultural milieu, it was the synthesis of the various traditions- the rural and traditional theatrical performances like Ramlila and Raslila, the religious performances like dances of Devdasis, the tradition of Puppet Plays and the tradition of Yatra Plays in Bengal. With the migration of English community and their urban settlements in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, Indian elitists started exposing themselves to the western literature and drama. By the end of nineteenth century, drama designed on the lines of western models began to be performed, catering to the interests of the upper classes. Sacrificing the traditional classical and religious spirit, drama started its regeneration as a powerful political tool, by making an attempt to subvert the existing oppressive political order. Besides political order, it also began to look inwards and exposed the issues of social injustice and corruption within the greater Indian society.

Along with native tradition, the western impact inspired, “the dormant, critical impulse in the country to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and literature and to open the way for fruitful cross fertilization of ideas and forms of expression.” (Iyengar, Drama in Modern India, 4). The awareness of a new theatrical tradition inspired the creative efforts for translations and adaptations from Sanskrit to English drama.

The dramatic canvas of Dattani is coloured with real life conditions and the vivid experiences related with urban cosmopolitan and middle class Indians. Most of the issues taken up by Dattani in his plays, are radical, unconventional, contemporary and free from taboos. Homosexuality, lesbianism, child sexual abuse, communalism and gender discrimination are some of the favorite subjects with him. He prepared the stage for a specific realism on the lines of Isben and Shaw. For him man is an integral part of society and consciously or unconsciously the creeping influences of societal set up, determine the fabric of relationship around him. The play Thirty Days in September can be acknowledged as an argument in defence of the impact of child sexual abuse.

Dattani is certainly a new and unconventional voice in Indian theatre. The echo of his theatrical art both in terms of form and content anticipates his prominence in the theatrical world at a global level. The flexibility and ease of expression, breaking the barriers of tight fisted dramaturgy and initiating a penetrating insight into the psycho philosophical spectrum of human behaviour affecting human relationship at personal and interpersonal level, would add new dimensions to the area of theatrical canons. In Dattani’s dramatic world, drama instead of being an expression of art, has become a realization of life and it is a preface to the tradition of unconventional popular Indian theatre.

Mahesh Dattani’s plays usually deal with middle class life in urban India. The major issues he deals with are homosexuality, gender identity and child sexual abuse, communalism, the hollowness of middle class life and family as a battlefield. He uses all the

resources of theatre at his command, from creative different ends on the stage giving double roles to actors to make an effective use of lighting and music. All this allows him to collapse the past and the present as well as geographical locations. He is also able to achieve fluidity of movement, which gives his plays a cinematic quality. He also uses Indian English with great flow and captures the rhythms of the spoken language.

The play *Thirty Days in September* is focused on the issue of childhood sexual abuse. 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 the human relationship is based on betrayal. She bears the pain of humiliation of her body but is not permitted to reveal the truth before the society. Her anguish becomes more painful on the realization that even her mother maintains silence.

The forced sexual molestation and the wilful suppression becomes the cause of physical and mental disorder. Dattani unfolds the layers of the butchered psyche of Mala who suffers at two levels –her struggle with her own inner self and secondly her discontent with her mother who maintains oppressive silence to escape horrors of the reality. The dramatic tension develops through the unorganized and fractured consciousness of Mala. She is hostile to her socio-cultural environment and finds herself alienated from her locations. The locale of the play is a middle class family. He selects this specific setting to project the reality existing behind these issues.

For Mala, life becomes intolerable both inside and outside the family. The silence of the mother works as a stimulus in her life and she gradually becomes hostile and aggressive. Mala behaves like a trapped animal who seems to have no possibility to escape. In the play issue is serious and even the conflict is more serious.

In *Thirty Days in September*, all the three major characters Mala, Shanta and her Uncle, suffer with their own uncompromising guilts. Dattani like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has

a realization that the betrayal of human relationship is a greater sin and it induces a greater nothingness than incest. Mala has a greater resentment against the behaviour of her mother. Her external erratic behaviour is a sign of the turmoil going on within her inner self. It is not a silence but a betrayal. Dattani categorically points out that the negligence in familial relationship is responsible for the growing discontent in the children. It was a journey through her conscience, the suppressed sin born of guilt and sex, wrapped in perpetual silence. The very first speech of the play extends the impression of self realization instead of self revelation. The disjointed images and telegraphic suggestions are quite forceful to drag audience to share the anguish of the fractured psyche of Mala. Like other plays, in *Thirty Days in September* also Dattani maintains balance of different events with the shift of memory in the past and present. On the external surface, Shanta, the mother, is anxious for the marriage of Mala with Deepak. Beyond it, Shanta, Mala and Uncle Vinya have their own 'guilts' and make desperate attempt to cope up with their present. Mala expresses her indignation for the marriage. She struggles to avoid the success of this relationship. Her nervousness assumes the proportion of revolt and contempt. Her withdrawal from her household seems to be a defence mechanism to avoid the guilt of betrayal in personal relationships that he had already suffered with her mother. In contrast to her anxiety, Shanta is impatient to settle this relationship because it seems to be the only possible remedy to bring Mala out of the shadows of sin and guilt.

Dattani in *Thirty Days in September* traces the roots of scarred psyche in the antagonism existing between mother and daughter relationship. The traditional image of motherhood as the embodiment of 'love' and 'sacrifice' is essentially a myth. If a daughter is the extension of female identity, there are also ample evidences of hostility, apathy and antagonism existing in this uncompromising relationship.

Shanta every time avoids communication with her daughter, Mala and consequently she becomes contemptuous and accuses her mother, “I don’t know whether you are telling the truth or simply, trying to escape as always...”.(CP, 22) Shanta as method of defence, seeks a shelter in the picture of Lord Krishna or compels her to eat stuffed food. Mala has an awareness of the secretiveness of her mother but she finds herself helpless and this helplessness gradually leads to rebellion, an uncontrollable passion against humiliation, neglect and injustice. Dattani defends that the lack of communication between parents and children generate unparallel suffering and it leaves permanent impressions on human consciousness.

The suppressed passion starts accumulating force and uncontrollable energy of Mala, seeks its outlet in the form of rebellion. Mala’s restlessness to express herself in the company of her mother against the cover of silence is terrible and it is an evidence of Dattani’s skill in controlling human passion for a more vibrant theatrical experience. It might not be ethical but it is essential and more true to the basic human nature. She cries out, “I won’t let you get off so easily. There is only one way I can make you listen to me”. (CP,26) Dattani is confident that the experience like that of sexual abuse of childhood can’t liberate human consciousness from their destructive impact.

Mala’s real pain consists in her realization that her mother could have helped her to bring her out of the filth of self guilt. Mala denies to interact with the psychiatrist. She is not insane but a helpless victim of her own ‘guilt conscience’. It is her moral consciousness that does not permit her to compromise with her own aberration. Her disintegrated and violent images, incoherent speech, unorganised and meaningless statements and persistent self accusation are the index of her own mental state.

For Dattani, moral preaching was not a motive of his dramatic art, still often he seeks grounds to defend human frailties. His character passes through the stage of self guilt and he also affords opportunity for the redemption of them. Shanta is ultimately to expose the

circumstances under which she was forced to tolerate the injustice done to Mala. It was the financial assistance offered by Uncle Vinay, that made her to keep her lips closed. She reveals the harsh reality, “he bought your silence so that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter”. (CP,52) It was not only the humiliation of her body but also the rape of her spirit, her innocence and her privacy. Dattani pathetically investigates how the forced physical relations signify the triumph of masculinity, is the worst horror in the life of a woman. What such victims need is love and faith, Mala expresses her pain.

The crisis of Mala reflects that the damage to the psyche of a woman with forced sexual relations is of a far reaching consequences. It is not a deprivation of ethical values but a realization of spiritual value. Mala is not interested in marriage but wants to mix with many a man to gratify her desire. She goes to a party and dances with a man (Ravi) who came with his fiance, Radhika. Mala encourages the man to take liberty with her. (“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”.) Then Mala 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).

Shanta on the other hand, was of the impression that it was Mala who forced her uncle to do so. That is why, she was silent all these years. In Act II, Mala reveals that she has slept with many a men—not just the men in the office but his uncle and cousin as well.

This is the last straw in the camel’s back. Shanta reveals her secrets by saying how the same man (her brother) exploited her physically and psychologically when she was six and continued for ten years. Her tongue was tied because of this. Now Mala melts down and consoles the mother. When the secrets are revealed the mother and the daughter come closer to each other. Mala feels guilty of psychologically torturing her mother and begs her forgiveness.

The wheel has turned a full circle and the daughter and the mother are united in love through grief and repentance. This is a family play in which incestuous relationship ruins the lives of girls in their puberty and young women at tender age. Mala and Shanta are victims of such outrageous relationship. Morality is thrown to the wind. Dattani explores a dark area in our social and family life with insight. His play reminds us of a changing society under the impact of globalisation.

The agony in Mala's life grew because of Shanta's silence but she was helpless. She too was a victim of incest. Both mother and daughter are portrayed as pathetic characters and victims of a patriarchal society. Shanta's agony could melt stones if stones could be melted and her guilt conscience haunts her without end.

DISUSSION:In this research paper it was analysed that Dattani deals with wide range of themes in his writings. Dattani takes issues that afflict societies the world over. In *Thirty Days in September*, Dattani presents the stage divided in four acting area. The first area has a comfortable concillor's chair, the second area represent the 'living room' of Mala and Shanta, the third area is the pooja room and the fourth area is the most flexible, representing several locations --- 'a party house', two restaurant and Deepak's home. In the background of Mala's taped conversation, there is a back of a life sized doll of seven year old girl. There is a video projection of Mala but her image is disjointed from her conversation. The collective impression of these four areas assimilated in common conscience is that Dattani conceives the image of life, woven out of contradictions and inevitable opposites to project the split self of the different characters.

About Dattani it is said, "most of his plays are constructed around social issues, not on any specific message. Dattani maintains the stance of a non-judgemental observer and never intrude into the plays he writes nor attempt to sermonize." (Asha Kuthari Chaudhary,

26). It suggests that Dattani with the skill of his theatrical art captures the situations that involves the clash of ideologies but seldom ventures to draw definite conclusions about ethical and social issues. He rarely conceives his dramatic situations in isolation. For him, man's persistent endeavour to seek a harmony with hostile social forces, is the only suitable creed for Indian theatre. He mentions, "the individual versus society, I guess it is the theme that's in all my plays."(RanuUniyal, 21)

The dialogues are broken, incomplete and often meaningless and this pattern assumes a symbol order to cope up with the emotional crisis of characters. Dattani is convinced that formal embellishment of language is likely to distort the unorganized flow of consciousness. The dialogues of Mala are most unclear because she is the worst sufferer in the play. Dattani's idea of not to break the play in sub plots signifies the compactness of the idea woven in the fabric of the play. The surface layers are managed with underneath suggestions, unveiling the mystery of the conscience of several characters. In *Thirty Days in September*, in spite of the stress of emotions, Dattani presents the whole issue with specific peace. In spite of the rage and resentment of the characters, they maintain a silence.

Dattani for whom theatre is rooted in his blood, proceeds with the mission to give Indian English drama a distinctive Indian identity to represent native sensibility and rich heritage of conventional Sanskrit drama. He conceives the position of theatre not in 'isolation' but as a 'whole' in which the distinction of page and stage diminishes. The conversion of abstract vision in concrete images, requires a greater balance of performance and stage mechanism. The text of drama, gets its life in theatre through the appropriate tools of performance.

Dattani exhibits his favour for this liberalism of language to write effective plays in English on contemporary Indian issues. Judging the stage productions, Dattani's plays appeal

to us as a performing art. The realities of life presented in his plays stare us on our face and we respond to them in empathy. Therein lies Dattani's success as a playwright.

Dattani brings unusual themes like hijra marriage, lesbianism, homosexuality, bisexuality, dreaded disease sufferers like HIV positive persons into the orbit of Indian English drama. Previously, it was unthinkable to write a play on hijras, but Dattani makes it possible in his well known play, Seven Steps Around the Fire. He dives deep into the psyche of hijras to portray characters like Kamala, Champa and a few other hijras. Added to it is the theme of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Traditional conformists will run away from the play on the plea that it violates our traditional norms and offends our sensibility. Dattani has the courage of conviction to call a spade a spade. One can't run away from reality, howsoever painful it might be. Dattani not only faces reality but depicts it with all sincerity and devotion.

Taboo subjects and words find a place in Dattani's works because he writes topical plays. Dattani knows that Indian mind does not accept such kind of thing as same-sex love (homosexuality and lesbianism) either in life or in literature. But the fact remains that many people are born like that—they have inclination for same-sex love. And what is more, they want to be united in wed lock as is the case with hetero-sexual persons. Recently we find well-known writers like Vikram Seth and Shobha De supporting the cause of the same-sex marriage.

To realize the aim of social expectations in the context of human motives, he makes incessant experiments with stage mechanism and dramatic skills. The probable assumption behind this approach is that art being moulded with the rhythm of human consciousness, attains universality.

In dealing with the dynamics of human relationships within the range of theatre, Dattani expresses his concern for the taboo relationship, discrimination of values on the basis of gender prejudices. Psychologists have expressed their consensus on the issue that sex is the

prime determinant of human behaviour and it positively determines man's innate relationship with his own self.

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