

Representation Of Child Sexual Abuse and Dysfunctionality of Indian Upper Middle-Class Families in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

Dr. Shauli Mukherjee

Director - School of Education &
Dean - Students Affairs
Adamas University
India

Abstract: One of his significant plays which deals with the complex issue of child sexual abuse in the Indian society is *Thirty Days in September*. The play treats the sensitive, and generally taboo issue of child sexual abuse, and most importantly, the wrapped-up subject of incest. It endeavours to lift the veil of silence which surrounds child sexual abuse and addresses the issue unflinchingly. It builds on the trauma of a woman protagonist, Mala Khatri, who lives with the haunting memories of her abused past. Her abuser - her uncle - subconsciously lives with her all the time, as a part of her dirty reflections.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, child sexual abuse

Mahesh Dattani is an authentic and realistic voice in the arena of contemporary Indian plays written in English. One of his significant plays which deals with the complex issue of child sexual abuse in the Indian society is *Thirty Days in September*. The play treats the sensitive, and generally taboo issue of child sexual abuse, and most importantly, the wrapped-up subject of incest. It endeavours to lift the veil of silence which surrounds child sexual abuse and addresses the issue unflinchingly. It builds on the trauma of a woman protagonist, Mala Khatri, who lives with the haunting memories of her abused past. Her abuser - her uncle - subconsciously lives with her all the time, as a part of her dirty reflections. He damages her natural growth, deters her from pursuing her love interests beyond the ominous thirty-day period and scars her soul, and this finally transforms her into a woman who enjoys being taken advantage of. According to Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, Dattani

recurrently uses subjects that touch upon the zones of experience that the 'normal' middle class society would rather sweep under the carpet and happily imagine did not exist. This is exactly how Dattani would penetrate below the surface, subvert the complacent beliefs that everyday reality is constructed with, and make visible the invisible issues that haunt so many of his plays (Chaudhuri 74).

Dattani, thus, sets his milieu in the Indian upper middle class, despite the general perception about the prevalence of child abuse predominantly in the working classes. He specifically chooses this setting because he did not want the upper middle class people to shrug off child sexual abuse as something that did not happen to people like them. Dattani himself said:

I would see the setting of *Thirty Days* as upper middle class. I chose this setting because I did not want to give people the easy way out. I did not want them to dismiss sexual abuse as something that did not happen to people like them (Vardhan n.p.).

Mahesh Dattani is also on record as having said that *Thirty Days in September* is his most severe and sombre play till date:

... I sometimes see the funny side of even the tragic events that I am concerned with. But in this, [*Thirty Days*], I did not have that scope. There's no way you can see the funny side ... (Vardhan n.p.).

The play opens with Mala Khatri speaking to an imagined counsellor, about her traumatic experience in the past:

MALA. Mala Khatri. February 2004 ... (Listening to the counselor.) Why not? ... 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. It is he who must avoid being recognized. In people's homes, at parties, hopefully even on the streets. He should look the other way when someone spots him anywhere on this planet. And I can make that happen. I have the power to do that now. If I use my real name ... (Sighing, thinking about it almost as if it were a pleasant memory.) 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. (Dattani Vol 2 8)

This more confident Mala of February 2004 is immediately juxtaposed in the play with the nervous Mala of September 2001.

MALA. 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 hope that is okay with you ... I am unsure about this ... and a lot of other things. But this ... This is the first time you see that I ... (After a long pause, where we do hear her breathing.) 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. Maybe I was born that way, maybe ... This is what I am meant for. It's not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish that my mother ... (It gets to be difficult for her.) I am sorry but ... I can only tell you more if you turn this thing off. (Dattani Vol 2 9)

Mala is so ashamed of her childhood experience that she is even hesitant to disclose her identity. Not only that, she has been living for all these years by blaming herself solely for what had happened to her. Her self-confidence and self-esteem have been destroyed completely and she has been left bereft of faith in the sanctity of any relationship. She has been thus rendered incapable of distinguishing between love and lust. Therefore, when Deepak, out of his own sheer love for Mala, tries to establish a relationship with her, Mala shuns Deepak's company and tries her utmost to avoid him.

MALA. You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND! I cannot love you.

DEEPAK. Why?

MALA (looking at the Man). Because – because – How can I even begin to explain to you? I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am not so sure I want to be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone ... else. (Dattani Vol 2 54)

The haunting memories of her childhood have been enough to ruin the rest of Mala's life forever. Despite all her successes and accomplishments in her later life, she wilfully accepts the objectification to which she is subjected to by the men around her. This comes out clearly in the interaction between Mala and the Man in the party.

MAN. You deserved the IAAFA award. One of the best campaigns I have come across in my years in advertising. You are a genius.

MALA (almost as if he has offended her). Shall we talk about something else apart from work? ...

MAN. Would you -- like to dance?

MALA. I am not so sure, whether ... If it is okay with you Radhika ...

MAN. You dance very well.

MALA. No, I don't. You are saying that just to please me.

MAN. No. Not at all – I – Oh yeah sure. I could teach you the salsa some time ... So I hear a lot of things about you.

MALA. Oh.

MAN. From the office. Rahul was telling me ... You have been with him for sometime I think ...

The man moves closer to her, his arm slipping from her back closer to her waist.

MAN. Yes ... You have a nice body.

MALA. Thank you.

They look at each other.

MALA. Hold me closer.

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.

MAN. Look why don't I take Radhika home and you could – you know – come over to my hotel tomorrow? For a drink. Hmmm?

MALA. Take me to your room with you now.

MAN. No. No ... I – I can't. I am with her tonight.

MALA (pleading, looking up at him to be kissed). Do whatever you want with me, but take me with you now.

MAN. No, don't get too close. Later okay. Oh my God! She is coming here.

The man breaks away abruptly as Radhika presumably pulls them apart.

MAN. Radhika, no! I was just being polite and dancing with her.

Mala stands to one side humiliated.

MAN. I am sorry I ... Look, don't be angry with me. She was leading me on. I swear it was her fault. What could I do? (Dattani Vol 2 20-22)

The overt appreciation about Mala's professional accomplishments at work with which the conversation begins, is used by the Man as a sheer excuse to get physically closer to her. The underlying reason is however, the prior information that the Man has acquired about Mala's link-up with another man named Rahul. This has automatically led to an opinion being formed about the sexual availability of Mala, which the man readily uses to show Mala where she stands:

MAN. Look why don't I take Radhika home and you could – you know – come over to my hotel tomorrow? For a drink. Hmmm? (Dattani Vol 2 21)

The bias here is obvious: Radhika, the Man's fiancé is fit to be taken home whereas Mala's company can only be enjoyed in a hotel.

The paper wallah's high-handed attitude shown to Shanta is also a pointer to the disrespected and inferior status accorded by our society to women who manage to live all by themselves in the absence of a man.

DEEPAK. I thought he is the paper wallah.

MAN. That is right. 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 a man.) Hahn. Have you kept the money ready? Quickly.

Shanta has been looking down while the paper wallah made his comment on her situation. The man easily towers over her, pelvis thrust out in an imposing manner, making Shanta very uneasy.

SHANTA (reading from the book). Six hundred and twenty rupees.

She offers the money to him which is between the pages of the book.

MAN (giving her a bill). No. It is six hundred and eighty.

SHANTA. But I have written it down! Every day's account!

MAN (snatching the book from her). Show.

The man shakes his head while reading. He returns the book back to her.

MAN. Some entry must be forgotten. Here is the bill.

SHANTA. But I write it as soon as I get the magazine or paper.

MAN (very sure of himself, not at all threatening). You are wrong. It is six hundred and ninety. Look at the bill.

SHANTA. But I never forget to write it in the book!

MAN. I will come back later and take it from your daughter.

Pause.

SHANTA. No. No. Why trouble her? (Rising.) I will give you the balance money. (Dattani Vol 2 11-12)

A legitimate way of understanding the implications of the above is by reference to Jacquelyn White and Robin Kowalski's (1996) proposed model integrating a wide range of factors that underlie male attitudes towards women and which also puts individual behaviour in context. The model describes five levels of interacting factors: socio-cultural, social, dyadic, situational, and interpersonal. The socio-cultural level includes historical and cultural values, both of which are patriarchal values which give men a higher value than women and assume that men should dominate in politics, financial affairs, and the social world. The model assumes that patriarchy operating at the historical/ socio-cultural level affects the power dynamics in all relationships. Next, shared patterns of ideas and beliefs passed down from generation to generation define social networks, the second level of the framework. Historical and socio-cultural factors create an environment in which children learn rules and expectations, first in the family network, and later on in peer, intimate, and work relationships. Early experiences define the context for later experiences (White and Bondurant 203). Power is embedded in these gendered contexts and becomes activated at the interpersonal level and result in the internalization of gendered values, expectations, and behaviours. Thus, cultural norms combine with gender inequalities to create a climate conducive to discrimination against women. The subjugation of women by men is an expression of patriarchal power and control that operates simultaneously at all five levels of the model (Jackson 441).

One of the most devastating consequences of gender inequality is, what has been called 'intimate violence' toward women, instances of which include child abuse, incest, stalking, acquaintance rape, and battering. The reality is that although strangers victimize women, women are much more likely to be victimized by someone they know. Studies have also shown that assaults committed by someone known to the woman are often more violent and result in more physical and psychological trauma than those committed by strangers. L. Stermac in *Violence in Known – Assailant Sexual Assaults* (1998) writes that,

Although most intimate violence qualifies as crime, historical tradition that has condoned violence within the family has created strong forces toward secrecy ... The small proportions of victims who informed authorities attests that victims were silent. In fact, only 2% of intra familial child sexual abuse, 6% of extra familial sexual abuse, and 5% to 8% of adult sexual assault cases were reported to police according to recent victimization studies (Stermac et al 409).

It is also advantageous to read *Thirty Days in September* in the light of the World Health Organization's report of 1999 which defined "child sexual abuse" as:

the involvement of a child or youth in sexual activity (1) that the young person does not fully comprehend, (2) that he or she is unable to give informed consent to, (3) that he or she is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to, or (4) that violates the laws or social taboos of society. The perpetrator is an adult or another child who by development or age (typically considered 5 or more years older) is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, and the sexual activity is intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the perpetrator (WHO n.p.).

According to the noted psychologist C. Henry Kempe,

Sexual abuse is the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and young people in sexual activities that cannot fully understand, to which they cannot give informed consent and which violates the social taboos of the culture and are against the law (Goodyear-Smith 467).

In *Thirty Days in September*, we see that Mala had been sexually abused by her own uncle when she was only seven years old. Thereafter, she had been repeatedly abused by him during her summer holidays.

MALA. ... 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. (Dattani Vol 2 26)

This representation by Dattani is based on fact, for D. Finkelhor in *Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse* (1994) has observed that boys and girls between ages seven and thirteen years are at the greatest risk for child sexual abuse (Finkelhor 33). The most common sexual abuser is an acquaintance or someone known to the child or the family (Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Turner 406).

Families with a child who has been sexually abused have been identified as having certain typical characteristics. Detailed studies show that families of both incest and non-incest sexual abuse victims are less cohesive, more disorganized, and generally more dysfunctional than families of non-abused children (Mannarino and Cohen 168). The areas most often identified as problematic in incest cases are difficulties with communication, a lack of emotional closeness and flexibility, and social isolation. In Dattani's play too, we see that Mala belongs to a dysfunctional and non-cohesive family. She lives only with her mother for her father had left them long back for another woman. Mala was extremely disturbed and affected by such a situation and blamed her mother for her father's irresponsible action. And it was Mala's helpless and solitary condition that had been used by her uncle to further his own sexual machinations.

MALA. ... He left you [Shanta] not me. I know he didn't care about me, but he didn't leave because of me. 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. 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. You even moved that horrible picture of your god into my room saying he will protect us ... I remember daddy's last words to me. You know what he said. 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. (Dattani Vol 2 35-6)

This is consistent with the findings of D. Finkelhor and L. Baron in their work *High-Risk Children* (1986) who write that both male and female children are at increased risk of sexual abuse if they live without one of their natural parents, or even perceive their family life as unhappy (Finkelhor and Baron 72).

Insecure child attachment to the parent and poor parental bonding may set the stage for maltreatment by fostering role-reversal, rejection, fear of closeness, low emotional investment, and unresolved conflict. In his play, Dattani clearly shows how this relational context provides significant emotional weight to the abuse experience. But not only this, for Dattani's vision is borne out by what R. Schreiber and W. Lyddon in their work *Parental Bonding and Current Psychological Functioning among Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors* (1998), observe that children who are victimized often feel powerless to stop the abuse and feel they have nowhere to turn for help, comfort and support (Schreiber and Lyddon 359). In the play we see that although Mala wanted to express her helpless condition to her mother, Shanta remained strangely silent about the entire thing:

MALA (to Shanta). 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. That's how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life! Surely you must have known, Ma.

Silence.

MALA. You know, I couldn't say anything to you. You never gave me a chance to. If only you had looked into my eyes and seen the hurt, or asked me 'beta, what's wrong?' Then maybe, I would have told you ... But ma, I did look to you for help, while you were praying, your eyes avoiding mine, and I knew, deep down I must have known, that you will never ask me that question. Because you already knew the answer. (Dattani Vol 2 53)

In illustration of this, Dattani in an interview said to Anitha Santhanam:

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 this silence that makes the abused

feel betrayed (Santhanam n.p.).

After the incident of sexual abuse, Mala also went to her father. But he refused to listen to her:

“... 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.” (Dattani Vol 2 26)

Emotional trauma arising out of chronic rejection, betrayal, loss of affection and feelings of helplessness that may accompany chronic maltreatment by trusted adults may be responsible for the behavioural and emotional disturbances shown among child, adolescents and adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. If symptoms of mood disturbance and depression are overlooked among these sexually or physically abused victims, they are likely to increase during late adolescence and adulthood (Kolko 248). This is exactly what happens in case of Mala, who is rendered incapable of establishing a relationship with Deepak because of the recurrent haunting memories of her abused past:

MALA. You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND! I cannot love you.

DEEPAK. Why?

MALA (looking at the Man). Because – because – How can I even begin to explain to you? I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am not so sure I want to be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone ... else. (Dattani Vol 2 54)

In *Thirty Days in September*, we see that after being sexually abused, Mala is hurt not only by her mother's silence but also by Shanta's reaction of disbelief:

MALA. Ma, I am talking about what I had told you five years ago, but you said it wasn't true, it couldn't be true. But now I know that you want to believe it is not true. (Dattani Vol 2 25)

In fact, for parents whose children have been sexually abused suffer a myriad of emotions including anger, self-blame and depression. It has also been found out that mothers with a personal history of sexual abuse may be particularly vulnerable to distress and feeling alone in managing the crisis of discovering that their child has been sexually abused (Deblinger et al 68). Thus in Dattani's play we see that though Shanta knew that Mala was repeatedly being sexually abused, she felt helpless and was completely incapable of stopping the abuse. But Dattani makes the further point that Shanta's incapability in stopping the abuse can be traced back to her own personal history of sexual abuse:

SHANTA. ... I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak. I – I cannot speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off ... My tongue was cut off years ago ... (To Deepak.) Please save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself? ... (To Mala.) You say I did not help you? 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. Only (pointing to the Man) he spoke. Only he said, only he saw and he did.

The man backs away looking at Shanta with a warning.

SHANTA. 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 feeling. 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 (Dattani Vol 2 54-55).

The play therefore ends with Mala's realization of her mother's agony and the reconciliation of the long estranged mother – daughter relationship on the common ground of a shared experience of abuse in childhood:

MALA. Dear mother ... 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. Ma, no matter where I

am, I always think of you. I want you to know that I am listening. Waiting for you to speak. I promise you I will listen. I am waiting for a sign from you ... to say that you have forgiven me ... 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 (Dattani Vol 2 58).

Dattani's comment on *Thirty Days in September* in an interview with Lakshmi Subramanyam, clearly highlights his major concern and focus:

In this play I wished to show that the impact of child sexual abuse is long term but not permanent. This is a play about healing and is positive in its ending ... 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. The betrayal, as she sees it, is as painful as the abuse. Though the play draws from real life, the focus is on the inner world (Subramanyam 133).

Works Cited

1. Chaudhuri, Asha Kuthari. Mahesh Dattani. New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt Ltd, 2005.
2. Dattani, Mahesh. *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000 - *Collected Plays, Volume Two*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005
3. Deblinger, E., L. Stauffer., and C. Landsberg. "The Impact of a History of Child Sexual Abuse on Maternal Response to Allegations of Sexual Abuse Concerning her Child." *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 3, 1994.
4. Finkelhor, D., and L. Baron. "High-Risk Children". In D. Finkelhor (Ed.), *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986.
5. Finkelhor, D., R. Ormrod, and H.A. Turner. "Lifetime Assessment of Polyvictimization in a National Sample of Children and Youth." *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 33, 2009.
6. Goodyear-Smith, F. *First Do No Harm: The Sexual Abuse Industry*. New Zealand: Benton-Guy Publishing, 1993.
7. Jackson, Stevi, and Sue Scott. *Gender: A Sociological Reader*. London: Routledge, 2002.
8. Kolko, D.J. "Characteristics of Child victims of Physical Violence: Research Findings and Clinical Implications". *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7, 1992.
9. Mannarino, A. P, and J.A. Cohen. "Abuse-Related Attributions and Perceptions, General Attributions, and Locus of Control in Sexually Abused Girls." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 11, 1996.
10. Santhanam, Anitha. "It's the Silence that affects me most." 2001. <http://www.maheshdattani.com>
11. Schreiber, R., and W. Lyddon. "Parental Bonding and Current Psychological Functioning among Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors." *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 45, 1998.<http://oneness.indiatimes.com>
12. Stermac, L., J. Du Mont., and S. Dunn. "Violence in Known – Assailant Sexual Assaults." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 13, 1998.
13. Subramanyam, Lakshmi. *Muffled Voices: Women in Modern Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Shakti. 2002.
14. Vardhan Manisha. "I'm No Crusader; I'm a Theatre Person: Mahesh Dattani." June 2004. <http://www.3to6.com>
15. White, J.W., and B. Bondurant. "Gendered Violence". In J.T. Wood (Ed.), *Gendered Relationships*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1996.
16. World Health Organization (WHO). *Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention*. Geneva, March, 1999.