

# Clash And Compromise Of Mother And Daughter In Mahesh Dattani's Thirty Days In September

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**ABSTRACT:** *Mahesh Dattani is one of the versatile writers that India has ever produced. He is known for his capacity to choose the intangible themes with bold representations. Dattani, unlike the other dramatists whose emphasis is usually on history, myths and scriptures, focuses more on the contemporary societal realities. He makes use of the comic characters to enclose the bitterness of the reality that he wants to present to his audience. One of the noticeable qualities of Dattani's plays is the variegated themes that he discusses. His themes majorly highlight the societal taboos which are prevalent in our society. In some of his plays, he frankly opposes the societal norms which impede the freedom of individuals and show adverse impact on their lives. He strongly objects the rules formed by the dominating class of the society which force the people to hide their original interests and pretend to be happy to lead the same life lead by others. Most of his characters question their own identity with which they are not really happy and feel ostracized. This paper is an attempt to analyze the psychological struggle of a daughter and mother who suffer from sexual molestation at an early stage of their life in Dattani's 'Thirty days in September'.*

**Key words:** *Psychological Struggle, Sexual Abuse, Molestation, Social taboos*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of the writers who strongly believe that theatre is not just to entertain the audiences but to instigate the sense of social awareness. He strongly believes that "Theatre survives only when we see our aspirations, our struggles, our hopes and values reflected in it and when we don't see ourselves in the theatre, we'll see stop believing in theatre...Theatre is a reflection of what you observe, to do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre. (Prasad, 2007: 262). All through his career, from his first play to the most successful dramas, he has shown indefatigable spirit to become a successful playwright. His dramas aim at 'holding the mirror up to society' so that the people can see and introspect themselves. He wants his audiences to change their approach towards the invisible issues of our society which are generally considered to be crimes by the majority. Dattani's contribution of presenting the everyday problems of urban society and

invisible issues into the realms of drama is quite remarkable. He opines, “I write for my milieu, for my time and place middle class and urban Indian...My dramatic tensions arise from people who aspire to freedom from society...I am not looking for something sensational, which audiences have never seen before...some subjects, which are under-explored, deserve their space. It’s no use brushing them under the carpet. We have to understand the marginalized, including the gays. Each of us has a sense of isolation within given contexts. That’s what makes us individual. (The Hindu: March 9, 2003).

By reading his plays, one can understand that his plays reflect his words. He makes an absolutely frank and open description of the issues such as homosexuality, gender discrimination, incest love, child abuse and communalism. This marks that his interest purely lies in the contemporary social issues and it is this interest which prompts delineate these issues with candid description. This strong bold attitude and artistic creativity are the integral characteristics of his personality that make him unique in the world of writing.

He makes use of the comic characters to enclose the bitterness of the reality that he wants to present to his audience. It can be easily understood that his plays are not just meant for reading but for being performed. He has waited so long to see Indian English plays performed and he started writing plays with an aim of performing them rather being remained as artistic masterpieces. “That has perhaps made all the difference to the manner in which Dattani has managed so fluently to communicate with such audiences, as well as the reason, ultimately, for the literary quality of his output (Kumar and Arora 44)”.

### **Dattani’s Plays**

One of the salient features of Dattani’s dramas is the variegated themes that he discusses. His themes majorly highlight the societal taboos which are prevalent in our society. In some of his dramas, he openly opposes the societal norms which impede the freedom of individuals and show adverse impact on their lives. He strongly objects the rules formed by the dominating class of the society which force the people to hide their original interests and pretend to be happy to lead the same life lead by others. Most of his characters question their own identity with which they are not really happy and feel ostracized. For him, the plays are not just meant for entertainment. John McRae comments, “For the plays of Mahesh Dattani are not and never have been merely entertainment, although first and foremost he knows a play has to keep an audience engrossed, caring about the characters, following the twists and turns of the plot, until that final cathartic, uplifting, moving resolution.” (Multani 54)

Another important feature of his plays is he deals purely with the local concerns. He tries to speak more about the modern Indian urban society. He has dealt with a wide range of themes like homosexuality, gay, lesbian, feminism and socialism. All these themes are discussed from the local perspective. He writes about the problems being faced by us, our family members, our friends, relatives and neighbors. He is extremely good at dramatizing those issues which are usually not spoken or discussed publicly and are considered to be sins. As McRae rightly points, “If Mahesh’s plays ever perplex or disturb an audience, it is part of the effect of their taking audiences forward, to face questions, scenes, and issues they might prefer not to see in the theatre. They plays are not comfortable, nor were they ever meant to be.” (Multani 59)

Dattani also tries to give voice to the unexpressed, unspoken and hidden emotional pains of urban middle-class families. He has put all possible efforts to represent the hard realities of life and he has succeeded in bringing forth the invisible issues on screen. All his plays are replete with his observations and one of the best examples of this is ‘Thirty Days in September’. Dattani has been approached by NGO-Rahi who is counselor for the people who

get affected by sexual abuse to write on the subject of child abuse and sexual molestation. Dattani readily expressed his consent to deal with this subject and with great elegance he has explored the dark side of our daily life.

This play is a perfect example of a society where human values and morality are ignored and how human relations are losing their values in the name of globalization. Dattani interacted with seven to eight members before he started drafting this play. All of them revealed to Dattani their darker experiences which caused inexplicable pains to them. They were all sexually molested during their childhood by their own family members and relatives. Dattani, using their revelations and his own imaginative prowess, wrote the play *'Thirty Days in September'* which portrays how badly sexual abuse can affect the psychological growth of the child. This play is apparently one of the best presentations of Dattani as this elevates the unspoken and unexpressed pain of most of the children. The beginning of the play is unique as this starts with the interaction of Mala, the female lead of the play, with an imagined counselor where she speaks the psychological struggle she undergoes. She does not hesitate to reveal her full name, Mala Khatri and strongly asserts that it is not the victim who should hide herself but the criminal who must be ashamed of himself for doing such a malicious mistake. She says, "[...] don't know how to begin.... Today is the 30<sup>th</sup> 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. (Dattani Collected Plays II, 2005: 9)".

### **Psychoanalysis of Mala and her mother Shanti**

Mala can be interpreted as a different personality who is more confused and not so strong enough to face the world for the experiences that she had. It can be inferred that she feels guilty of and responsible for what has happened to her and sometimes she blames her mother for the destruction of her life. Dattani has used the counseling sessions between Mala and her counselor as a self-revelation tool through which Dattani tries to expose the darker side of the family relations. These counseling sessions have been used to disclose the battle between the conscious and unconscious mind. The conversations of Mala make it very clear that she has been very badly haunted by her abused past. As the play goes on, the readers will understand that Mala has been sexually exploited by her maternal uncle. He is the one who spoils Mala's life for satisfying the sexual needs. Mala finds it difficult to overcome her past experiences which she had with her uncle during her childhood as these experiences are stored in her subconscious memory and they keep on coming into her conscious causing her mental turbulence. This impedes her from having any relationship with other male person for more than thirty days. Her inability to spend time with a male person beyond thirty days makes her free from every young man that she has a relation with.

Mala tries very hard to share her struggle with her mother throughout her childhood and after, but she does not get the warmth from her mother which she expects. She has always been ignored by her mother. It is noticed that her mother instead of helping Mala overcomes her pain, Shanta always tries to speak with Lord Krishna and seeks consolation by singing the song- Mere to Girdhar Gopal, doosro no koi, Mere to Girdhar Gopal. Shanta has never spent her time listening to her daughter's suffering. Whenever Mala tries to express her woes and problems to Shanta, she simply avoids listening to Mala and advises her not to worry about simple things. Shanta never shows any interest in understanding Mala or listening to her completely instead she feeds Mala with her favorite dish Alu Parathas which to some extent helps Mala to feel relaxed temporarily. Although it is not a cure to her problems and pains, this is just a technique used by Shanta to pacify her daughter.

Shanta is fully aware of the horrible condition of her daughter and the reason for her suffering but unfortunately, she is not in a position to help her daughter to overcome her suffering. Whenever Mala tries to seek her mother's support, Shanta prays for the help from Lord Krishna. This attitude of her mother irritates Mala and does not understand what makes her mother avoid her. Mala says, "I cannot believe. I simply cannot believe that ...Do you really think that that is what I am talking about? Ask yourself honestly. Tell me. No don't look at your God, look at me, look me in the eye and tell me-yes, that is all that you are talking about. (Dattani 25)". These words of Mala highlight not just the pain caused by sexual assault but also by her mother's silence against her suffering resulting from sexual molestation which has been very strongly fixed in her unconscious mind. This attitude of her mother towards her suffering causes more pain than anything and increases her suffering. Mala finds it extremely difficult to accept her mother's stoicism. She is unable to deal with her mother's silence and ignorance. She detests her mother's attitude of approaching God and taking his support every time when Mala tries to express her agony with her. Her condition becomes worse as she grows. The physical exploitation that she has been undergoing and her mother's negligence towards her results in a permanent clash between them. This psychological struggle decreases when Mala develops hatred against men and also the society which she finds purely male-dominated. This depressed condition of Mala forces her to reject the proposal of Deepak who honestly loves her and wants to marry her. She gives two reasons which have caused severe damage to her life and made her suffer. The first one is the Western values which encourage sexual freedom and the second reason for her fall is her mother's inability to console her in crisis. She says, "I don't know why, I just don't understand...Please don't ask me why I do it. It's just a game...What I am doing is terribly wrong! But... I like it. I suppose it's these Western Values, I wish I were more traditional then I wouldn't behave like this... The only person who can, ho could have prevented all this is my mother (Dattani 18)".

Mala's depressed tone of ambiguity and dilemma clearly throw light on her inner struggle which she undergoes. She expresses openly to the counselor her inner suffering and shares with him the reason of her abnormal behavior which is not in her control. She even expresses that she herself feels that she is a bad woman who does not have character which the society expects from an Indian girl. She further states that her attitude of betraying men and not able to continue relationship beyond thirty days makes it clear that she is fully dominated by the Western values. She also expresses that she loves to be traditional and she finally bursts before the counselor that she is fully disappointed with her mother's attitude and blames that she should have taken proper care of her.

Mala does not have any interest in marriage but she wants to have many relationships with more men to satisfy her desire. Once she encourages a married man Ravi to dance with her in a party in the presence of his wife and she even allows him to do whatever he wants to do with her. She says to him. "Do whatever you want with me but take me with you now" (Dattani 21). She keeps on analyzing all her experiences and how they have lead to her crisis. Due to these bitter experiences, she develops self-hatred and considers herself as a woman with no character. The second Act of the play further reveals that Mala has physical relations with many men at her office besides her uncle and cousin. Her anger with her mother gradually increases as she starts suffering from the emotional crisis for which she feels that her mother is the sole reason.

Mala's psychological imbalance is revealed slowly. She knows that she has not taken the right path and even played with the lives of a few men who truly love her. She is totally guilt ridden and makes herself and mother responsible for her tarnished behavior. She asks 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 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. (Dattani 53)”.

Mala questions her mother where she has hidden herself while her maternal uncle was destroying her soul by molesting her. The sheer negligence of her mother in taking enough care of her daughter is the primary reason as this has given a chance to her uncle to take liberty with her. Mala has a strong belief that if her mother had been with her, she would not have been easily molested by her uncle. Dattani, by portraying the relationship between Mala and her mother has made a wonderful attempt to underscore the fact that betrayal in a relationship is more painful than any abuse. In one of his conversations, 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 (Dattani 133)”.

Mala blames her mother openly for taking financial support from her uncle as she believes that it is this financial assistance that made her mother remain silent. Mala says that her uncle has not helped her family but bought her mother’s silence. He gave her money to stop her revealing to anyone what he has done to her daughter. He has not just spoiled her body, but her innocent soul, her future, her mental stability and above all her life. It is Mala’s realization of her mother’s betrayal that gives her extreme pain as she is unable to bear with the fact that her mother neglected her desperately. Mala even goes to the extent of blaming her mother that she is purely responsible for her father leaving them.

“All night 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. 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 ( Dattani 35-36)”.

The above words of Mala make her mother speak the hard reality she has been keeping in the deepest clutches of her heart for years. Shanta shares with Mala the reason why she has been so silent though she knows that her daughter has been molested by her uncle. She reveals the shocking and bitter fact that she was also sexually and psychologically exploited by the same man (her brother) when she was just a six years girl. He continued exploiting her for ten more years until she becomes sixteen. This has made her detest men and because of this she was even not comfortable to sleep with her husband. Shanta with broken heart filled with inexplicable pain, accepts her mistake and bursts before her daughter, “I was six, Mala I was six. And he (her brother) was thirteen...and it wasn’t only summer holidays. For ten years [...] (pointing to the picture of god) I looked to him [...] I lost myself in Him. 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 (Dattani 55) “.

Mala’s mother expresses that her tongue has stopped speaking long back. It has lost its natural ability of expressing and sharing the feelings and emotional pains with others as it has lost the sensibility of recognizing the taste. For her, there are no emotions. She has lost all her emotions in her childhood itself. She has grown without any feelings. She even tells Mala how she could save her when she herself could not protect herself. By considering the psychological disturbance of Mala and Shanta, it can be stated that this play aims at exploring

the exploitation of women by men. In a society where women are treated inferior to men and subordinated, they are easily exploited and treated like sex objects meant to give physical pleasures to men. The power that men show over women does not allow most of women to come out and speak about their exploitation openly. This can be noticed in both Shanta and Mala's life as they have remained helpless and blamed themselves instead of fighting against the evil forces.

After knowing the bitter past of her mother, Mala becomes empathetic and realizes that her mother had worse past than that of hers. She understands that their fate is same. They are torn literally and their lives represent the male-chauvinistic morality of Indian men who consider women to be objects of sexual gratification. Vinay, uncle of Mala and brother of Shanti, is the best example that most of the men do not regret for molesting and deriving sexual pleasure. When Mala becomes 13 years old, he calls her a whore who is now enjoying the sexual deed. Vinay feels no shame at all for her hideous act and for even being called by Shanti as bhayya (brother). He further acts like a fatherly figure when Shanti speaks to him of Mala's marriage. He takes the responsibility of Mala's marriage and assures Shanti that he will find a nice gentleman for Mala. The dual shades of the character, Vinay, is very elegantly presented in the play by Dattani. On one hand, Vinay spoils Mala's soul and life by molesting her and on the other, he acts like her father. It seems that Dattani is trying to mock at the concept of traditional marriage system where father has to play a key role in finding a groom for her daughter. Dattani also warns the women that they have to be very careful as people like Vinay do exist in society and they must take extreme care to protect themselves from the ugly desires of men who do not hesitate to take advantage of the weakness of an innocent girl. The revelation of Shanti about her bitter past that resembles with Mala is a blot on the relation between brother and sister. Shanti's suffering of ten years moves Mala and she feels more painful than her, "“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 (Dattani58)”".

The major concern of Dattani is not the sexual exploitation but the inability to speak about and fight against it. He wants the women to be brave and strong enough to fight against the male domination and exploitation. As long as the women continue to accept this patriarchy, they may have to undergo malignant experiences where they are used and treated as objects. This inability to strongly oppose and object the domination of male is more harmful and dangerous than the sexual exploitation of women. He remarks, "“It's the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects me the most. Like into his case, the mother knew that her daughter was being sexually abused by her uncle, but still chose to keep quiet. It's the silence that makes the abused feel betrayed(Santhanam, 2001)”".

## **2. CONCLUSION**

Dattani points that the psychological struggle of both mother and daughter is same. Mala feels guilty of blaming her mother without knowing her past and also for never trying to understand the reason why she has been so silent. Shanta for being a helpless mother who could not stop her own brother spoiling her daughter's life. It is clearly understood that the pain of Shanta is more than that of Mala and Mala realizes the same and begs her mother for forgiveness. Shanta could not fight against it as she is restricted by the social pressure and taboos. On the other hand, Mala could at least resist to it and tried to overcome her pain by blaming her mother and the society she lives in. Dattani never tries to give instant solutions to the problems that he deals with but instead focuses on making the people understand the

scenario better. He wants his audience and people to realize that we live in a society where all these issues are part of. He often tries to reiterate the fact that women are sexually molested from an early stage of their life. It is the reality not a fantasy which can be simply ignored. He focuses on bringing the change in the perspective of people. In this play, instead of punishing Vinay, he tries to bring peace between the relation of Mother and Daughter which signifies the fact that showing proper concern towards the affected or victims help them overcome their pain and heal it. The play makes it clear that incest causes severe damage and loss to the family and may spoil the relationships but love between the family members helps them win over the psychological struggle and pain. The play highlights the power of love which can triumph over depression and disintegration of family.

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