

ISSN:0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Strangled Voices: A Study of Sexual Victimization in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September***

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### **Abstract:**

The matter of sexual victimization of women has long been considered a taboo. Despite continued violation of women's modesty, little has been done to ensure their safe existence. Women prefer to suffer silently even if it is the loathsome act of their sexual brutalization. It would not be wrong to say that their voices are choked since the time they take birth and assume life. They fall prey to gender constraints that societies across the globe have vigilantly created that limit their roles and positions. This paper purposes to take up and address the captious issue of sexual abuse on women through the study of Mahesh Dattani's play, *Thirty Days in September*.

### **Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Gender constraints, Patriarchy, Redemption**

The title of this paper at once impinges on and pinpoints to the fact that the premier concern of this initiated study is – w o m e n - the way they are forcefully silenced and sexually victimized. Women are being sexually abused for ages. It's been very rare that the issue of sexual exploitation of women is addressed adequately. The scourge of rape continues to devastate women physically, mentally and emotionally.

Violence against women is an age old phenomenon that has its roots in patriarchy. Patriarchy establishes and affirms superiority of men over women. It works to sustain the subjugation of women at the hands of men. Sexual exploitation is the worst form of violence perpetrated against women. "Men have used rape and the threat of rape throughout the history to exert control over women," (390) says Newman. Mahesh Dattani with this invective play has done his bit to expose the most obnoxious form of violence perpetrated against women and its evil aftermaths that haunt women afterwards. Lillete Dubey writes in "A Note to Play":

After every performance, women have come backstage with their own traumatic stories writ large on their faces, grateful for the catharsis the play offers, but even more, I think, for the expiation of their guilt which they have carried as a long burden for so long. Meeting them alone has made the play worthwhile. For through it they believe their silent screams have been heard...*Thirty Days in September* has touched hearts and consciences everywhere. Sensitive and powerful without offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother, daughter relationship.  
(4)

The play *Thirty Days in September* is a reality check on the existing situation of physical brutalities committed against women and its unchecked and undaunted amplification. The play brings out the horrors of child sexual abuse and incest prevalent in Indian families and others around the world. Dattani's attempt has been to unveil the silence that envelops child sexual abuse. He has triumphantly succeeded in voicing the pains of innumerable women who have/had been the victims of child sexual abuse and been suffering mutely.

Playwright, actor, director, screenplay writer, filmmaker and teacher, Mahesh Dattani is a man of multiple aspects and creativities. His plays are rife with issues concerning religion, gender and sexuality. His passionate and unique theatre capabilities have won him multiple awards and scholarships. He's been the distinguished recipient of the most coveted honour given to any Indian playwright writing in English: Sahitya Akademi Award. Though his plays are grounded firmly in Indian settings, they appeal to all and sundry breaking all societal and linguistic barriers. The unconventional nature of his plays and its treatment derive their essence from the ailments that paralyze societies. The dialogue that he holds with his audience through his plays underscores his tamperproof honesty about the subject matter he treats.

Published in 2001, the play *Thirty Days in September* probes the issue of child sexual abuse and incest rampant in our societies. The crime is explicitly demonstrated through the life of a young woman, Mala. The present life of Mala carries the reverberations of her dark past- of her terrible childhood when she was used as an object of sexual gratification by her maternal uncle. Her sexual exploitation continued for six long years. Beginning at a tender age of seven, sexual exploitation has stifled her normal growth. This sowed the seeds of hatred in her, embittering her in and out. The play deftly highlights the psychological implications of child sexual abuse. The uncertainty reflexive in all aspects of Maya's life bear testimony to this. Mala is haunted every now and then by the murderous memories of her childhood. Her soul is scarred. This has trapped her in the maze of indecision and distrust. She accuses her mother's silence for all the wrongs done to her. She feels betrayed by her own mother who chose to be a silent spectator to her gruesome molestation. The horror of the tragedy surmounts when her mother, Shanta has a dark revelation to blurt out after a life lived in steadfast silence. Shanta confesses about her own relentless and rigorous sexual abuse. Much to their and our horridness, the victimizer of the mother and the daughter is the same man who has vandalized their calm existence.

For *Thirty Days in September* Dattani was approached and commissioned by an NGO- RAHI (Rehabilitation and Healing from Incest). RAHI used the play to spread awareness about the commonness and frequentness of incest in putatively righteous Indian families. Dattani has employed his utmost wit in treating the fragile issue with committed sincerity. Commenting on the play in an interview with Lakshmi Surbramanyan, Dattani said:

In this play I wished to show the impact of child sexual abuse is long term but not permanent. This is a play about healing and is positive in its ending. The play was based on my meeting with seven or eight survivors who were adult women talking about their childhood experiences. Though sexual abuse is at the core of my play, the mother daughter relationship is equally important. The main protagonist Mala, 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 a protector. We see the journey of the protagonist from her mid 20s to her early 30s.

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)

The title of the play is compelling. The term ‘thirty-days’ inkles at the cycle of thirty days in which Mala is vulnerably trapped. Her life is stuck into this distressing cycle. She is lame to even try and break it. The sexual dysfunction disorder which is the direct outcome of her abuse prevents her from continuing a relationship with any man for more than thirty days. She has developed a curious habit of marking calendars to mark the thirty days time period. After this she *has* to move on. This thirty days time period is the time she reserves for her own sexual exploitation at the hands of men. She has acquired a self-annihilating attitude and she wishfully suffers in it.

As an audience, we witness the journey of Mala through four years. When the play opens it is February 2004. It then takes us back to September, 2001. The present is actually a present (gift) for Mala as her convalescence has already begun. This is apparent from her confident stature before the imagined counselor when the curtains of the play unveil. Mala of 2001 is diffident, jittery, capricious and traumatized. For the entire play we continue to oscillate between past and present to have a progressed understanding of Mala’s journey: her relationship with her mother, her abused childhood, her inconsistent relationships with men, her ingrained belligerence, her confrontation with her abuser, her ultimate redemption with Deepak’s aid and reaching an understanding with her mother after cognizance of her (mother’s) intimidating past. The set-up on the stage facilitates slithery transitions between different time periods. To attain this purpose the stage is demarcated into four sections to make up distinct places and time.

Act I is fragmented into six different episodes. It begins in February 2004 where we encounter a revived and self-assured Mala. Then it switches to year 2001 where we hear Mala’s taped conversation. This conversation pictures Mala as indecisive and recessive in the beginning of the therapy that she has started undertaking. The contrast between these two scenes is stark, “February 2004... (*Listening to the Counselor*) why not? I don’t hesitate to use my name now. Let people know.” (TDIS 8) “I-I don’t know how to begin... Today is 30<sup>th</sup> of September...2001, and my name is... I don’t think I want to say my name...I am unsure about this...and a lot of other things.” (TDIS 9) This cross fades to another scene which also takes place in the past. We now see Shanta, Mala’s mother. She offers prayer but with discernible uneasiness and disquietude. Her worship is intercepted by a doorbell. She has her first interface with Deepak, Mala’s present boyfriend. We find Deepak urging Shanta to convince Mala not to put a full stop to their meetings, their relationship. His interest in Mala is not backed by any selfish motive. While still in conversation, Shanta receives a phone call from Mala. Mala is furious to know about Deepak’s presence in the house. We glide to yet another scene where Mala dressed provocatively at a party in a bar tries to hook up a man. However, she is left utterly embarrassed when the man leaves with his girlfriend. The next scene transports us back to the living room of Mala’s house. It’s the scene where Mala accosts Shanta (perhaps such accusations recur at intervals) for her childhood abuse and molestation:

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 or the kitchen. (TDIS 26)

The travesty heightens when Shanta reprimands Mala for her loose ways, “You have been a bad girl, you have gone astray. But Krishna will show you the way.” (29) Mala is bereft of speech. The next scene shifts to a restaurant. Here we see Deepak persuading Mala not to stall the relationship. Mala on the other hand cooks up a story of how a man in the restaurant was staring at her chest which instantly receives Deepak’s reaction. Deepak is oddly exasperated. He advises Mala to seek some psychiatric assistance and he leaves. Once again we could hear Mala’s taped conversation that is attestation to her turbulent personality. Act I brings to fore the strained relationship that Mala shares with people around her and her own self.

The opening of Act II pulls us back to 2004 where we again see a restored and rehabilitated self of Mala. Now that her healing is blossoming she can taste the flavours of the childhood now: Mala rejoices, “I can smile again. I can be a little girl, again. Not again, for the first time. at thirty plus I am the little girl I never was.” (36) This lively self is replaced by the dismal one when the taped conversation of the past is played again. The played conversation reveals her agony and anguish. We can hear that she holds herself culpable for the absence of her father from her mother’s life. The scene steps to next level where we see Shanta and Mala in conversation in their living room. Shanta informs Mala about the expected arrival of her abuser, Vinay Uncle (Shanta’s brother). She sheds light that he has been the source of their economic survival after the desertion by her husband. Mala is incensed and heart-broken. She rebukes and implicates her mother for her father’s absence. The act closes with the entry of the rapist on the stage.

The third act is confrontational and revelatory. With Deepak’s help she acknowledges that she was abused as a child. Shanta confesses of her own exploitation that had “cut-off her tongue” long ago:

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. By taking away all feeling. No pain, no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti Shanti. (55)

Shanta finally unburdens her heart of all torments. Mala could now understand her mother’s silence. Both the ladies are able to deal courageously with the specters of their past. The present time introduces us to reveling Mala who is blissful to know about her abuser’s death. On the other side we can find Shanta who now offers prayers with inner calm and purity unlike the desperation of Act I.

The play is sanguine. The play ultimately turns to strengthen the mother-daughter bond. It offers hopes of rehabilitation, resuscitation and revival for the abused souls. The play is gripping even though it is not huddled with too many characters. Shanta stands true to her name by being a passive and silent character. But she undergoes transformation and regains ability to voice herself. Deepak which in Hindi language means light becomes the light of Mala’s dark life and illuminates it. He symbolizes hope and such men in the societies who assist women in their emancipation. Mala is able to compile together her scattered self (like dispersed beads) to become whole again, becoming an embellished necklace or garland to adorn her own life.

Dattani in *Thirty Days* has not only purported to introduce us to the commonness of incest in our societies through the story in the play, but he has also enumerated its long term psychological effects on the victims. Besides, he has been assertive about the fact that the trauma suffered can be got rid of if accurate and timely counseling sessions are made available to the victim. The play begins on the positive note and ends on it too. We see Mala's healed self in the beginning and at the end as a result of her ongoing therapy.

Sexual dysfunction is the obvious and direct outcome of abuse. Sexual dysfunction has made her sexually whimsical. Mala struggles with the treacherous and torturous past. She says, "It has to end in a month's time...I even mark it on my calendar." (18) She entices men by exposing herself so that men could exploit her sexually. She derives sadistic pleasure in hurting herself. Deb and Mukherjee authenticate this kind of sexual behaviour and write:

Disturbances in sexual behaviour are among the most striking and dramatic symptoms observed in sexually abused children. Sexual hyper-arousal (such as compulsive masturbation and promiscuity) and sexually aggressive behaviour, with a tendency to repeat and re-enact the sexual victimization have been frequently described in literature. (115)

Dattani shows that her exploiter has invaded her mind and lives with her subliminally, "I see this man everywhere. I can never be free of him." (58) The extent of her bodily violation is communicated to the audience and the readers when she at Deepak's house re-treads in mind the lane to past where she was being molested. By placing us in middle of her subconscious, Dattani discloses to us her tribulations and misery. The acute pain is noticeable:

Man. Shhh! Don't cry... This is your seventh birthday, no? You are seven now. Ready for a real birthday present. Lie down. Come on, quietly... hold your frock up. Up over your face! Shut up!... If they hear you they will say you are a bad girl. This is our secret... You like it. You enjoy it. After four years, you have become a whore! At thirteen you are a whore! (43-44)

Another barbaric outcome of childhood molestation is shattering silence. Shanta has resorted to silence as a way to compromise with the wrongs of her life. She has even lost interest in sex and her marital life is assaulted as a result. She is forsaken by her husband. She even reasons silence to be the best remedy for all ills. She is crippled even to help her daughter. When being impeached repeatedly by Mala for her muteness, she cannot contain within herself the pangs of silence anymore. Flushing out the years long silence, she outbursts:

Shanta. 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!... (*to the man, speaking like a mute person making intelligible sounds*) uh, eh, oo, oo, aa, aa, aaaaaaaaaa. (*Gesturing with the hands to say she will not tell anyone while making the sounds*) aaaaa, ooo eee oooo aaeeeeeee, aaaaaaaaaaaaa eeeeeeeee! (55)

The embroilments of sexual assault range far, wide and deep. From depression to personality and stress disorders, self-abusive behaviour to impaired relationships, the after

effects of sexual brutalization are deathly. Sexual abuse extirpates the life of victims. It places then on line that divides life and death, creating death-in-life situation for them. Mala's abrupt behaviour, her habit of telling lies, "marking calendars with ticks and crosses" and other abnormalities certify this. Sexual violence has defiled her psyche beyond repair.

There have been umpteen instances across literature that treat the subject matter of sexual abuse with unbridled ferocity. Dina Mehta's character Sonali in *Getting Away with Murder* has been a sexual abuse survivor just like Mala. As her psychological disorder she frequently regresses into her childhood and assumes the voice of a little girl. She is subjected to constant neurosis and hysteria. Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is sexually victimized by her father, "The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap green days, walking up and down, up and down, and her head jerking to the beat of drummer so distant only she could hear." (Morrison 162) Eliot in *The Wasteland* has referred to the story of Philomela from Greek mythology whose modesty was outraged by her brother-in-law Teres. Teres had cut off her tongue after violating her to forestall any public knowledge of the crime. Eliot writes, "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced; yet there nightingale/ Filled the desert with inviolable voice/ And still she cried, and still the world pursues/ Jug Jug to dirty ears." (Eliot "A Game of Chess", Line 99-103) These examples justify that sexual abuse is a phenomenon that sprawls across cultures, races and societies engulfing and quaffing innumerable innocents.

There are many psychological workings inside the mind of abusers that impel them to violate their victim sexually. D'Amora, Brandhurst and Wallace have confabulated furnished psychodynamic, socio-political/dominance, socio-learning, biological, cognitive/behavioural theories that guide the actions of sexual offenders in *Forensic Nursing*. One of the workings inside the mind of male abusers is the sense of superiority. This is the reward of patriarchy that controls the functioning of most of the society. Establishing male order is the agenda of patriarchal societies. This patriarchal system is violence-generating. As a consequence, physical, mental and emotional oppression of women make headlines everywhere. Poile Sengupta in her play *Mangalam* attempts to give poetic touch to patriarchal domination and writes, "In a woman's mind, small is significant/ The life is made up of threads,/ When a man knows this, her fragile its secret/ He holds the power to tear it to shreds." (Sengupta 107) Mala's mother in *Thirty Days* prefers silence. She is mute when her daughter's modesty is being vandalized and she was mute when she herself was the victim. More than the abuser himself, her silence can be called the actual molester. Had she had the courage to voice out her victimization, her daughter would have been saved the tragedy. Silence is the real victimizer of women. As Tehmina Durrani writes in *My Feudal Lord*, "Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience, and fosters a malignant hypocrisy." (375)

*Thirty Days in September* is a dynamic play. The play is suffused with galvanizing episodes that never fail give us goose bumps. It derives its force and power from Dattani's vigorous words and wary and empathetic sensibility. Dattani has brought to vanguard the frequentness of incest and episodes of child abuse in our societies. He has not missed to highlight the damaging and dreadful consequences of sexual offence. He also educates us on the prospects of healing which result from timely therapy and counseling sessions. Mala's revivification testifies it. As Mala mentions, "...to wake up after many many years, as if from a coma...and to

let the bandages come off...and to suddenly discover a whole new face again. All of a sudden you feel you are-entitled to life.” (*TDIS* 33)

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