

Thirty days in september: a probe into the problems of child sexual abuse

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Abstract - It is an established fact that as a dramatist, the attitude of Mahesh Dattani is always daring. He attempts to deal with the issues through his plays that demand our immediate attention on the plea that they may be treated as the ulcers of society. Different forms of sexuality seem to haunt Dattani in plays after plays. In other words, on many occasions, Dattani becomes vocal regarding the problems faced by L.G.B.T.I.A community.

Index Terms - Mahesh Dattani, Sexuality Abuse, Society, L.G.B.T.I.A

Introduction

For instance, he explores the 'Gay' theme in his play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. Dattani dares to speak of the hijra (Hijra) or the eunuch a sexual minority in the play, *Seven Steps around the Fire*. Likewise, he speaks of the pathetic plight of the sexually abused child in the play *Thirty Days in September*. Dattani composed this play being requested by R.A.H.I and N.G.O in the year 2001. The play was first performed at the Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai on 30th May, 2001. The play categorically deals with the inner sufferings of Mala who is molested by her own uncle. Mala's mother maintains absolute silence in order to keep the so-called "peace" of the family intact. Lillete Dubey (Lillete Dubey) observes, *Thirty Days in September* has touched hearts and consciences everywhere. Sensitive and powerful without ever offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship" (Dubey, 2004, p.4).

Contemporary Graphic of Dattani about Society

Suffice to say that through the present play, Dattani proceeds to speak of Mala who is in every sense, marginalised (marginalised). Even, in the analysis of the play, it will indeed be discovered that there are multiple layers of marginality as well. At one level, being a woman, Mala becomes a victim of patriarchy. At another level, as Mala faces terrible consequences of sexual molestation during her childhood days, she may safely be placed to the class of the subalterns (subalterns).

Dynamic and innovative theatrical art of Dattani captures the stark reality of life. He is famous for presenting taboo issues like homosexuality, child's sexual abuse, maltreatment to the eunuch, prostitution etc. In the present play, Dattani reflects on the problem of sexual molestation of the child and for reaching intact thereof. It is clear at the same time that Mala, the protagonist of the play is indeed marginalised. Her problems are manifold. Firstly, her mental and spiritual "destroyer" is one of her closest relations. It has been pointed out already that Mala has constantly been molested by her own uncle, Vinay. Secondly, initially, Mala does not get support even from her own mother to protest against the inhuman deed of her family member. Thirdly, as a child, Mala was in no position to speak of her mental and physical torments in the open view of society.

Dattani has used segmented stage (segmented stage.) The stage is divided into four acting areas. All the actions move without any set changes between scenes. The play begins with Mala's talking to the imagined counsellor in the single seater opposite to her. She does not talk to the audience. Her conversation is being tapped, but she is not aware of it. Mala Khatri is a young girl protagonist of the play. She is victimised through sexual colonialism (Foucault, 1978). She tolerates sexual molestation silently during her childhood period. She realises the pain and agony of this after coming into adolescent period. She feels that her existence is caught into hostile surrounding. It is a disgusting tale of incest-illicit sexual relationship between the nearest kindred. She feels that human relationship is a betrayal and weighs down under the pressure of such horrible realisation. Mala becomes the victim of the sensuous desires of her uncle Vinay who traps Mala into sexual web for gratifying his filthy passion and lust for sexuality. What is more shocking and heart-rending to Mala is that her own mother, Shanta who observes silence against injustice done to her. Gradually, Dattani's employment of the theme of marginality becomes visible. Firstly, deliberately, Dattani sets this play within the traditional family-life. The problem is that initially, Mala feels hesitation to share her complications with others excluding her mother. Thus, to Mala, the process of being marginalised begins. Secondly, the readers become confused knowing the fact that Mala's mother, Shanta does nothing to save her daughter from mental and physical torments. Why does she do that? Is she herself marginalised? These questions torment the readers and the spectators alike.

Social Thought of Dattani

With the passage of time, Dattani employs the technique of a memory play (Memory play). Mala, the protagonist of the play recollects traumatic experiences of her childhood as a victim of incest. It is innovative on the part of Dattani that Mala is the sole narrator, she herself is the protagonist of the play. Mala's mind is haunted by the past memories of her molestation. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is an umbrella term which covers any sexual activity with the child by an adult. It is observed that incest creates the worst horror and prolonged psychological trauma. Sometimes, it leads to further victimisation when the child grows adult. Mala's cause is like this. Sometimes, we feel that fault lies with Mala who attracts other men and invite them for sexual gratifications. She acts as a girl of loose character, but the perversion in her present behaviour is caused by her molestation during childhood. She understands reasons working behind her mental disorder and hostility towards socio-cultural context. Therefore, she tells Deepak that he can't just understand her as he is unaware of her wounded psyche propensity for such sexual colonialism in future. Both Mala and her mother Shanta are gasping under the uncompromising guilt. Shanta has sought consolation in singing "Mere to Giridhar Gopal, Doosrona koi, Mere to Giridhar Gopal..." (Dattani, 2005, p. 9). Through the projection of the pathetic plight of Mala, Dattani aims at showing the psychological imbalance of the marginalised people. Besides, it has been suggested that on many occasions, "Marginality" leads to "Escapism".

Dattani has the fascination to set his plays using urban setting. He always engages his efforts to choose the family locale for his plays. *Thirty Days in September* cannot be an exception to this observation. Dattani himself writes, "I would see the setting of *Thirty Days* in upper middle class. I choose this setting because I did not want them to dismiss sexual abuse as something that does not happen to people like them" (Vardan, 2004).

The most of the actions of the play are performed in the living room of Shanta and Mala's home in suburb of Delhi. It occupies the central portion of stage. The dominant feature is a large picture of Shri Krishna. Moreover, a life sized doll of seven years old girl is placed on the chair in the background. With lights fade on her, Mala is seen seated at the counsellor's desk. She is disconnected from the society and is more at peace with herself. She has taken a journey and has arrived somewhere, psychologically. It is visible in her bodily gestures. The play begins with confessional tone. It is self-realisation of the sin born out of incest—her molestation by her uncle, Vinay. The play opens with Mala's furious, but painful assertions, "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 recognised. In people's homes, at parties, hopefully even on the streets. He should look other way when someone spots him anywhere on this planet. And I can make that happen...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..." (Dattani, 2005, p.8).

The above assertion of Mala demands multiple explanations. Firstly, Mala is daring enough to confess before all, the wrongs that have been done to her during her childhood days. Secondly, despite her mental and physical torment, Mala is strong enough to face the world of reality. In no way, she suffers from "Identity Crisis" (Identity Crisis). Thirdly, reaching to the age of thirty, Mala succeeds to gather courage to identify her enemy before the society. In the real sense, through the eyes of Mala, the spectators succeed to perceive the prevailing state of decadence that exists in urbanised, civilised society. Again, here, in an indirect way, efforts have been made to project the society as the real culprit. Thus, Dattani puts forward the theory of naturalism (naturalism) in his own way. It will not be exaggeration if it is assumed that at this juncture, Mala takes after the mouthpiece of the dramatist. It is true at the same time that despite her status of marginalisation, Mala succeeds to raise her voice of protest. The spectators have sufficient reasons to treat Mala's voice as "The voice of the subalterns".

Mala is frustrated and grieved after the realisation of the awfulness of the thing. She feels acute pain and trauma that her life is ruined and she stands nowhere. She carries the burden of the incest. She was falsely persuaded and tempted to do it by her uncle. Mala as a child, unaware of the consequences of the relation, was seduced and molested. She might or might not enjoy it, but, she acutely experiences now the horror and hideousness of the thing. She derives self-consolation that she was innocent and ignorant. She did not know anything. It was not her fault. She should not feel shame and guilt. She blames her demon uncle, Vinay who preyed her into that sinister behaviour. It is observed, "In dealing with the dynamics of human relationship within the range of theatre, Dattani expresses his concern for taboo relationship, discrimination of the values on the basis of gender, prejudices, uncertain liaisons and the disgust for sexual colonialism" (Agrawal, 2008, p.117). It is a matter of shame that owing to the inhuman act of the demon like people like Vinay, Mala is deprived of childish, simplicity and innocence. Mentally, even in her advanced age, Mala becomes isolated. It is categorical that "Isolation" and "Marginality" are closely associated with each other.

Mala analyses the whole events and the way it proceeds. She hates herself and calls herself characterless person. Gradually, her wrath and anger diverts towards her mother. The reality is that she is quilt ridden. She feels anguish and agony at the idea of her illicit affairs. She is convinced that it could have been averted if her mother cared for her. This is the real cause behind acute anguish and agony of Mala's mind. Dattani seems to assert that betrayal within the framework of the familiar relationship generates unbearable anguish and

frustration. Shanta's betrayal causes the worst horror in Mala's life. As Mala painfully puts, "I don't know. I can't explain it. The only person who can, who could have prevented all this is my mother. Sometimes I wish she would just tell me to stop. She could have prevented a lot..." (Dattani, 2005, p.18). At this juncture, like a psychiatrist, Dattani tends to explore the psychological complications relating to the problem of marginality. Mala's problems are manifold. At one level, Mala's spiritual destroyer is one of her nearest relations. At another level, the absolute silence (silence) on the part of Shanta almost unnerves Mala. The basic assumption is that marginalisation leads to psychological complications. It is important to note that on many occasions, incestuous relationship leads to the breakdown of the traditional relationship. For instance, Shanta's act of silence is about to ensure a permanent crack in her relationship with her only daughter, Mala.

Shanta turns to the portrait of Shri Krishna whenever she doesn't want to respond the question asked by Mala. So, in a fit of anger, Mala gives a threat of throwing that picture out of the house. There is some sort of relation between Deepak, a young boy of a colonel named Bhatia and Mala. The boy is ready to marry Mala, but she avoids marrying him. Shanta also wants her marriage with Deepak. Moreover, Shanta has known his family. She is anxious to get Mala settled as early as possible. The main motif behind her marriage is to enable Mala to forget all that have happened. However, Mala is not keen to marry him. She is highly enraged and angered upon her mother. Mala expresses her anger and wrath towards her mother in the following way, "...because that's what I got whenever I came to you, hurt and crying. Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food... and I won't ever let you forget that!" (Dattani, 2005, p.24) Indeed, this is one of the common problems of the marginalised people. Not only Mala, but other marginalised sections of society like the Gays, the Lesbians, the Eunuch, also suffer from "Guilty Conscience".

In every sense, Shanta appears as an escapist. She knows well that the state of her daughter or the relationship between Mala and Vinay, her own brother is far from being satisfactory. But, Shanta is too passive to raise a voice of protest. For some unknown reason, she is also marginalised. Shanta is rather an escapist. At the hour of crisis, she always looks upon Lord Krishna as her ultimate destination. The relationship between Mala and Deepak may be interpreted as "Occasions for Inspiration". But Mala knows well that she is in no position to marry Deepak from her guilty conscience. Broadly speaking, from her subconscious mind, Mala looks upon every man as a betrayer. Truly speaking, owing to her horrible experiences of childhood, Mala has lost the orderliness of her mind, to some extent. Reaching to this point it becomes categorical that on many occasions, "Excessive Oppression" leads to the outburst of extreme anger and frustration. The role and functions of Mala may be cited as a glaring instance in point. It is also suggested that Mala will no longer exist in her isolated mental compartment. She will rather come out in the public domain to identify the people who should be regarded as the ulcers of human society.

Shanta tries to escape from the reality—the molestation of her daughter, by her uncle, Vinay. After reading rape case in newspaper, she told her what had happened to her. Her mother instead of taking it seriously, changed the topic. Mala blames her saying that she has never listened to her problem and pain. Even today, Shanta asks Mala to forget it as a nightmare. In reply, Mala 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 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!" (Dattani, 2005, p.25-26)

Shanta lied to Mala that Shanta's husband left the family and stayed with other women. However, he continued to send money every month paid the rent. He had never visited in fifteen years. Mala blamed her for this tragedy. Presently, Mala is thirty plus and wants to be a little girl—devoid of all the scars that causes the anguish and agony. Later on, Mala realises that he left because of her mother. Shanta's brother, Vinay bought her a flat. Mala didn't like it. So, she blames her mother she had asked him for that.

Shanta. I didn't ask for this, Mala. I did not.

Mala. Yes you did. He didn't just buy a flat. He bought you!

Shanta. That's not true! Oh God!

Mala. He bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter! (Dattani, 2005, p.25-26). At this point, suddenly, the attention is shifted from Mala to Shanta. The spectators can easily apprehend that from all corners, like Mala, Shanta is also marginalised. Being a deserted woman, the society has possibly very unfavourable impression about her. Besides the passivity, the pause and silence on the part of Shanta, bring about the mental isolation between Mala and Shanta though for the time being. The mental agony of Shanta as a marginalised individual is indescribable.

Mingling of Ontology and Epistemology

Several cracks have come to the forefront meanwhile. The audience come to learn that Shanta is a deserted woman. For the last fifteen years, Mala's father has not kept any connection with Shanta without providing her with financial assistance. For this, somehow, Shanta becomes dependent upon her brother, Vinay. He takes full advantage of the situation. Vinay even buys a flat for Shanta. By mistake, for the time being, Mala feels that Vinay has bought the silence of Shanta. But, gradually Mala is disillusioned of her false notion regarding her mother. Broadly speaking, the above observation makes it clear that Mala's complications are solely mental and owing to her status of being marginalised, she is hardly in a position to get rid of her traumatic experiences.

Mala suffers from the pain resulting from her sense of guilt and shame. The molestation by her uncle and silence against this crime, maintained by her mother keeps Mala constantly at unrest and anxiety. Karen Horney viewed, "Neuroses are generated by cultural disturbances and conflicts which the person has experienced in accentuated from mainly in childhood, in which he didn't receive love, guidance, respect, opportunities for growth. She described the neurotic character structure as a dynamic process with basic anxiety, conflict and solutions to conflict as its essential elements" (Horney, n.d.). Here, the quoted remark of Dattani is sufficient enough to show the pathetic plight of the marginalised woman like Mala. The exploration of the conditions of the tragic predicament of a sexually abused child indicates that human civilisation has been regressing day by day, at least, morally despite technological advancement.

Mala's self is fragmented and disordered. Therefore, Dattani makes use of incomplete sentences, monologues, recorded voice and other symbols. The doll's symbol is very effective. It corresponds with the idea of numbness or silence which Shanta maintains against victimisation of her daughter for sexual gratification. It also symbolises that Mala is not permitted to express reality by society. Generally, Dattani takes up serious issues for contemplation. As an abled artist, he fuses comic or funny scenes with the serious ones. *Thirty Days*

in September is completely a sombre drama. The seriousness and horror is so powerful that doesn't allow him to be funny. He admits, "I sometimes see the funny side of even the tragic events that I am conceived with. But in *Thirty Days*, I did not have that scope. There's no way you can see the funny side" (Vardan, 2004). As a dramatist, Dattani hardly allows the spectators to feel good. In the present play, the audience are forced to listen to the voice of the subaltern in terms of the outrage and anger of Mala. Apparently, Mala is in the periphery though her emergence to the centre is only a matter of time. In other words, Mala has every intention to disregard the status of marginalisation in order to be mixed in the crowd of the masses.

Outcome of Thought

Dattani is famous for employing flashback or time shift device. In this play also, he depicts the past and the present with the shift of memory. His plays focus on the margin both issues and the people. Like marginalisation of the certain sections of society, some issues are also thrown at the periphery. Dattani locates these issues and presents them through his theatrical art. Child sexual abuse is the issue thrown at the periphery dismissing it associated with the labour class. Dattani breaks this conventional notion by depicting it in the middle class family of Delhi in this play. Dattani doesn't look at the thing wearing conventional spectacle of society. He looks at the theme other way and takes a plunge beneath the surface for searching truth, which is shocking and challenging. He first puts the truth on the page in form of script and presents on the stage in his own innovative and daring way afterwards. He facilitates direct communication between his victimised characters and audience offering brain storming exercise to the audience about the problem dramatised so. In this way, he opens up channels of communications between the suppressed and the members of society.

In a vain attempt of defending herself, Shanta holds Mala responsible for the tragedy arguing that she has willingly participated in the molestation for she fails to perceive Mala's ignorance and immaturity for understanding such things. Her seeming pleasure is not real pleasure, but it is her ignorance. She wasn't old enough to understand horror of the things. So, when she grows and understands the stark reality, her bliss becomes perpetual damnation of her soul and identity. Her pleasure becomes the protest against the betrayal especially towards her mother who betrays her maintaining silence. The result is uprising and aggression.

It is a matter of hope that towards the end of the play, the mental reunion takes place between Mala and Shanta. Eventually, after her long period of silence, Shanta succeeds to break it. She no longer attempts to put the blame on Mala for her unwanted molestation. At last, Shanta unlocks her heart to Mala. Shanta says, "I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak. I—I cannot speak. I cannot say anything... How could I save her when I could not save myself?" (Dattani, 2005, p.54-55) At this point, the confession of Shanta demands admiration. After long years of silence, Shanta admits that like Mala, she was also molested constantly by Vinay in her younger days. Now, the circle is completed. Two marginalised women Shanta and Mala have been attempting desperately to come from the periphery to the centre in order to raise their voice of protest.

An Overview

His dramatic art has humanitarian touch. It enables the characters to overcome from the permanent feeling of the sin or evil. At the end, Mala is realised greater truth—the reasons working behind her mother’s silence and her own negligence towards her mother’s plight. Therefore, she tells her mother at the close of the play, “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, 2005, p.58). The reunion between Mala and Shanta proves that the marginalised people should not remain silent. They exchange of their views, the sharing of the secrets etc. may solve severe psychological complications.

To recapitulate, in this age of moral lapses, the childhood is no longer sacred and pure. Blake’s concept of childish “Innocence” (Songs of Innocence) is rapidly replaced by terrible “Experiences” of the world. Once, William Wordsworth remarked, “Heaven lies about us in our infancy” (Wordsworth, 1807). But, with the passage of time, the Heavenliness of childhood is lost by Hellish experiences. It is a matter of degradation that even the children are not freed from the seducers. Molestation, seduction etc. have become the evil practices of the day. The modern audience are thankful to Mahesh Dattani for his daring attitude to be an iconoclast, in the realm of drama. Again, the indications are given that the sexually abused children will no longer remain as marginalised. In an advanced age, they should come forward to give up their social stigma and to fight with the demons like Vinay to make this world a better and safer place to live for the generations of people to come.

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