

Traumatised Childhood in Mahesh Dattani's Play *Thirty Days in September*

P. Suresh, Suchismita Bhattacharya

Abstract--- *Childhood is the most important phase in the life of any human being. The future of an individual depends upon the type of childhood, he or she leads in. The character and the behaviour of a child depend upon the type of people he or she comes across in the childhood. The childhood can either make or break the future of an individual. Childhood days are usually the most pleasant days in the life of any human being, because, those days are usually free from tension, pressure, stress or any such thing that takes away the peace and happiness from life. These days must be enjoyed to the fullest as one can never get these days back in life. Childhood is a boon for any child, but it can turn as a bane if one doesn't have a proper and healthy atmosphere to grow. The child is bound to get afraid or unsecured if his or her life gets surrounded with freaky and wicked people. The childhood days of a child can even get destroyed if monsters with friendly faces arrive in life. The play *Thirty Days in September* revolves around the life of a girl, Mala, the protagonist of the play, who leads a traumatised childhood. The traumatised childhood affects her adulthood and her life on a whole. Mahesh Dattani, the dramatist, has depicted the life of a child who is the victim of child sexual abuse, in a very subtle manner. The play proves that sometimes the pain and the betrayal come from the closed ones in life and not from the outsiders. The play focusses on many things but the present research paper focusses mainly on the traumatised childhood of the protagonist.*

Keywords--- *Childhood, Future, Life, Traumatised childhood, Pain, Betrayal, Child, Afraid, Monsters, Friendly faces, Victim, Child Sexual Abuse, Subtle, Boon, Bane, Pleasant, Human Being.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood days can be pleasant if they are spent in the right way with the right people. But they can turn bitter and to a nightmare, if they are spent with the wrong people, rather with the monsters who disguise themselves under friendly faces. The play *Thirty Days in September*, describes the traumatised childhood of a girl, Mala, the protagonist of the play, who is sexually abused by her own maternal uncle, Vinay. Mala was first abused when she was a small girl of six. Vinay starts raping her at her childhood and continues doing so until she attends her adolescence. Childhood is such a phase of life when children usually play and live their life merrily. But, Mala is treated as an object to be played with by her uncle Vinay, at the age when she was supposed to play with toys. Mala's toy, mentioned in the play, is actually a symbol of the child sexual abuse. The toy is the symbol of her childhood rather her traumatised childhood.

The protagonist of the play gets a trauma of her life in the child when her own maternal uncle rapes her. Vinay not only plays with her body but also plays with her emotions, feelings and her mind. Mala trusts him, but he deceives her and breaks her trust and belief. Mala gets raped by her uncle continuously for certain years and as a result, she becomes a sex-maniac when she attains her adulthood. Human sufferings are usually determined during childhood development and this is mentioned in particular by Dr Sigmund Freud in his Psychosexual Theory. Freud says that the personality of an adult human being arises as a compound of early childhood experiences.

Freud believes that the present character of an individual is actually the reflection of the past, especially the childhood days. In the play, *Thirty Days in September*, the protagonist and her mother Shanta both are the victims of child sexual abuse and the criminal is common, Vinay. Both the daughter and the mother, lead a traumatised childhood. Shanta did not have anyone in her childhood days to share her feelings with, but she does a blunder when she avoids her daughter rather avoids to listen to her problems.

Mala tries to express her feelings to her mother Shanta, she (Mala) tries to talk about her agony to her mother, but her mother Shanta doesn't pay any attention to her daughter. As discussed earlier, Shanta was also a victim of child sexual abuse and she was also raped by her own brother Vinay and she was aware of the fact that he is the rapist of her daughter as well. But despite knowing the truth, she doesn't deprive her brother of repeating the same crime and she also doesn't take any initiative to protect her daughter from him. All these things pave the way to Vinay to continue with his crime.

Mala doesn't lead a healthy and proper childhood. Vinay scars her childhood, her mental frame and her life on a whole. Mala lose faith from people in due course of time. She fails to believe and love people especially men. She literally decides to ruin her life and that is the reason she chooses to get involved with men, physically. She doesn't choose to get physically intimate with men out of pleasure, but she chooses to do so in order to ruin her life and punish her mother, Shanta, who never protested against the crime done to her by Vinay. Mala holds both Shanta and Vinay responsible, for spoiling her childhood.

Shanta could have gifted a normal childhood to her daughter, had she really wanted to do so. She realizes much later, almost at the end of the play that staying silent is like supporting the crime to grow and spread everywhere.

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In the play, the dramatist not only shows the traumatised childhood of the character(s) but also points out the helplessness of women in the society. Dattani, also points out that, parents must give attention to their children and they must be heard with utmost importance when they try to speak something, to their parents.

Shanta fails to become a friend of her daughter. She did allow her brother, to abuse her daughter, both physically and mentally. She never really tried to listen to her daughter. Mala did try several times to share her feelings with her mother, but whenever she tried to open her mouth, Shanta stuffed her mouth with food, so that she can't speak anything to her mother. The dramatist has shown the pathetic condition of a victim of child sexual abuse and he has also portrayed the mother-daughter relationship, where the mother shows negligence towards her daughter. Whenever Mala, tried to speak to her mother Shanta, she avoided her, either in the name of prayer or work in the kitchen.

Mala: That is the trouble! That has always been the trouble! You were never there for me. You were too busy praying! (Thirty Days on September, 20)

Shanta literally avoids her daughter. Instead of supporting her and soothing her mentally, she increases the pain of her daughter, knowingly. Shanta spoils her own life, with her everlasting silence and she also ruins the life of her daughter, with the same silence. She teaches her daughter as well to remain silent and tolerate everything without questioning anything. Committing crime is a sin, but tolerating the crime is also a sin and that is what Shanta does, in her life. She spoils not only her own life and the life of her daughter, but she also spoils the relationship of a mother with her daughter, because of her silence. The negligence and the ignorance of Shanta, towards her daughter, breaks the heart of Mala into pieces. She gets trauma in life not only from her maternal uncle but from her mother as well.

Dattani focusses on the psychological mindset of Mala, the protagonist of the play. Mala's mother, Shanta doesn't protest against her brother Vinay, the culprit. Mala, since her early childhood, tolerate the physical abuse from her maternal uncle and she fails to protest because she was too young to protest against the torment. Vinay ruins not only her childhood but her psychological mindset as well. The play is considered as a sensitive play, and it unveils the pain, hidden behind the silence of the protagonist(s).

Mala feels that her mother is responsible for the pain from which she suffers and to a good extent it is true. Shanta observes everything silently and she doesn't utter a single word against her brother.

Mala: 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? (Thirty Days in September,49)

Shanta's husband left her because he felt that his wife is a frozen woman. Though her husband left her, he used to give money to his wife and daughter and the money was handed over by Vinay to Shanta. Despite Vinay's torcher, Mala's mother remains silent because she feels that he is the only one who helps them if any help is needed. Mala feels bad and gets upset when she gets to know that her mother doesn't believe her. Shanta thinks, all the years, that it is

Mala who has provoked her uncle Vinay, to have physical intimacy with her. But that's not the truth. Mala fails to make her mother believes that, the culprit is Vinay and she is just the victim.

Shanta: Mala, my daughter. What all you have been thinking all these years? You have always been so bold and frank. But sometimes, you tell stories. (Thirty Days in September,22)

II. ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN HUMAN LIFE

Psychology has a big role to play in the life of a human being. If the psycho domain gets affected, some way or the other, it can affect the human life to a great extent. Dr Sigmund Freud has come up with several theories, which are related to the psychology of human beings. The theories are known as Psychoanalytical Theory, mainly, where he talks mainly about the elements, id, ego and superego; that drive the human psychology mainly. Freud also gives to Psychosexual Theory, where he mainly talks about the growth of an individual, mentally. As discussed earlier, the personality and the present life of an individual, depending upon the type of childhood which the individual has experienced. Freud gives importance to child sexual abuse and the incest and he believes Neurosis can occur, even from abuse done in the past, precisely in the childhood days.

The play *Thirty Days in September*, is the story of the incest, the story of child sexual abuse and above all it is the story of traumatised childhood. The play clearly defines that, sexual abuse done in the childhood days, can be really dangerous to the child. It can spoil the normal growth of the child, it can affect the mental frame of the child severely, it can scar the childhood of the child, on a whole it can ruin the whole life of a child. People like the protagonist of the play Mala and her mother Shanta, often take wrong decisions and the society is partially responsible for that. Shanta was quiet because she had the notion that no one would believe her words since she is a girl.

Writer Dr Dipti Agrawal, says that the story of Mala, is not just the story of the protagonist, but it is the story of all those, who are the victims of child sexual abuse. She points out that,

Mala, the protagonist of the play *Thirty Days in September*, is disturbed, discontented, complaining, unreasonably demanding, aggressive and shows it directly or indirectly. She was first raped by her maternal uncle when she was only seven and suffers repeated sexual abuse by him which affects her mind and life even after fifteen years of that incident. Mala's life of the 'silent scream' is not only her own story but can be based on real lives of victims of sexual abuse. (The Plays of Mahesh Dattani, A Study In Thematic Diversity And Dramatic Technique, 119-120)

Shanta's silence destroys not only her childhood but her daughter's childhood as well. Vinay, the culprit of the play warns both Shanta and Mala, in their childhood days, not to open their mouths against him.



As a matter of fear, Shanta becomes silent and she becomes silent forever. She forgets that she is also a human being; she forgets that she is the victim, the sufferer and not the culprit. Both the daughter and the mother are the victims of child sexual abuse and both of them spend a traumatised childhood.

III. THE VICTIM AND THE CULPRIT

In Indian society, it the victim of an abuse who suffers the most and the victim have to answer the questions, which the society raises. But no one says a word to the culprit or the criminal, who does the crime. In fact, the criminals or the culprits, show their red eyes to the victims. Even in the play, the rapist Vinay, warns both Mala and her mother Shanta, in their childhood days, so that they don't open their mouth or raise their voices against him. Somewhere in the mind, he had the fear that his image should not get tarnished and that is the reason he asks both the women to remain silent. The criminals are not afraid or ashamed of their deeds, but the victims always suffer from fear and guilt, even though they are innocent.

The sexual abuse hits the psychological mindset of both the women, directly. As a result of the abuse, Shanta becomes dumb (not literally) and Mala becomes a sex-maniac. Both of them suffer not only physically but mentally as well. The agony was in the heart, which they fail to share with each other, initially. But towards the end of the play, with the help of Deepak, Mala's friend, who later becomes her husband, both the women open their mouths against the injustice done to them, by Vinay, the brother of Shanta and the maternal uncle of Mala.

The play, *Thirty Days in September*, also deals with the theme of fear. Fear is such an aspect, which is present in the play from the beginning, until almost the end of the play. The lives of the two women, especially the life of Shanta are bound in the shackles of fear. It is the sense of fear that deprives her of raising her voice against her brother. Vinay, Shanta's brother torments her in her childhood and he continues to torcher her sexually for ten continuous years. The sense of fear ruins the life of Shanta and the same fear ruins the life of Mala as well, because neither Shanta opens her mouth, nor she allows her daughter to do so. The fear of the society, the fear of Vinay, makes Shanta a mute person.

The traumatised childhood of Mala, not only destroys her childhood and life but also destroys her relationship with her mother, because Shanta is partially responsible for the trauma in her daughter's life. Mala, because of the continuous sexual abuse of her uncle and the ignorance and negligence of her mother, towards her, get irritated and upset. Mala loses her self-confidence and faith from herself and she also starts hating people around her. But, finally, with the help of Deepak, she unveils the truth of her uncle, Vinay. She would have protested long ago, had she received some support and courage, from the side of her mother, Shanta.

Dr Bipinkumar Parmar, the writer, says that,

Mala Khatri is a young girl protagonist of the play. She is victimised through the sexual colonialism. She tolerates sexual molestation silently during her childhood period. She realizes the pain and agony of this after coming into the

adolescent period. She feels that her existence is caught into the hostile surrounding. It is a disgusting tale of incest---illicit sexual relationship between the nearest relative. (Dramatic World of Mahesh Dattani: Voices and Visions, 115-116)

Dr Parmar also tells that, Mala, the protagonist, feels that the human relationship is nothing but full of betrayal and agony. She gets into the pressure horrible realization of life. She fails to realize and believe that, life can be good and beautiful. As per the notion of Mala, life is full of negative aspects like betrayal, agony and fear. She fails to believe the fact that life can be full of happiness also. She sees the life from the vision of her childhood days, which were full of agony, horror and torture. The sexual torture from her maternal uncle makes sex, a habit for her.

Child sexual abuse is a sign of the perverted mind of a human being. The child sexual abuse is also a burden from the side of the patriarchy. The sexual abuse on a child, results in the mental disorder of a person, which can be deeper, sometimes, as it happens with the protagonist of the play *Thirty Days in September*, Mala Khatri and her mother Shanta. The particular play shows the impact of child sexual abuse on a child of seven years, and the effect of the abuse continues till the adult age.

Dattani feels that the victim suffers not only on a physical and mental level but on a social level as well because the sufferer or the victim has to tolerate the agony of the abuse or the torture silently, which is the most painful thing. The suffering of a person increases, when he or she fails to share the thoughts and feelings with someone, because of the fear of the society and the thought, 'what people would say'?

The greatest impact of the child sexual abuse is the endless silence, of the victim. The same thing happens with the protagonist of the play Mala and her mother Shanta, because they fail to share their thoughts with someone close. They neither share their thoughts, nor do others try to understand their agony.

Asha Kuthari, the writer, points out that, *Thirty Days in September*, is the play of the scarred psyche of the protagonist, Mala Khatri. Kuthari, states that the protagonist receives betrayal from her maternal uncle in her childhood and she carries the effect of the betrayal till her adult age. As a result of the betrayal, Mala fails to trust or love people in her life. She could see the reflection of her maternal uncle, especially in men, which deprives her of expressing her thoughts and feelings to others.

Mala, desire to have sex with men when she enters into her adulthood, but her urge for sex is not a sign of pleasure. Rather it is a sign of expressing her agony and anger to her mother and the society, who pointed finger at her and not on her maternal uncle Vinay, who is the actual culprit. Mala turns into a sex-maniac, not out of happiness, but out of anguish, in order to destroy her life, because she already feels that her life has been ruined by her maternal uncle, Vinay.

The dramatist, Dattani, has shown that people like Vinay, do exist in the society.



They have a filthy mind and they take advantage of the innocence of the child and destroy and scar their childhood. They are aware of the fact that the society will not blame a man and the innocence and fear of the child, will not allow her to speak out the truth. Both Mala and her mother Shanta were tormented sexually by Vinay in their childhood and both of them did not know what should be done because they were too small and innocent as well to think or do anything.

IV. CONCLUSION

Childhood trauma is the most dangerous thing in the life of a child. A child is usually innocent in nature, who doesn't really know how to deal with the problems and difficulties in life. A child must be handled with utmost importance, care and affection. Even a small amount of negligence can destroy the life of a child, as it happens with the protagonist of the play, *Thirty Days in September*. It is the duty of the parents to listen to their child or children when they come to them to speak or tell something. People often ignore the kids or the children when they speak something or try to speak something. If the problems of the children remain unheard, it may bring catastrophe to their life.

On the other side, the people especially the victims must change their perspectives. They must realize that they should not feel bad or guilty to share their problems or sufferings. Rather, they must open their mouths and raise their voices against the injustice done not only to them but to others as well. The people especially the victims must understand that their silence, can bring problems, not only in their life but also in the lives of others. The silence is not the solution of any problem or crime, rather it paves the way for a better crime, it actually helps the criminals or the culprits to do whatever they want because they feel like there is no one to tell them anything.

Trauma in any way, is the most dangerous thing in the life of an individual, especially if the individual is a child. Parents must see to it that the child doesn't become the prey of any sort of trauma. In the worst case, if the child gets any sort of shock or trauma, it is the duty of the parents or the other elders in the family then, to talk to the child and make every possible effort to take the child out of the shock or the trauma, because if the child doesn't get proper care and attention, it might lead him or her towards catastrophe, as it happens with the protagonist of the play, Mala.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mahesh Dattani is one of the eminent playwrights in the world of Indian English Drama. He has the first dramatist, who has been awarded by the Sahitya Akademi Award, for his *Final Solutions* and *Other Plays*. Dattani did not start his career as a writer, but destiny brings him to the field of writing. Apart from writing, Dattani directs the plays as well, which is not that easy task. Dattani has his own theatre house, namely Playpen. The dramatist has worked with several eminent personalities like Alyque Padamsee, Lillette Dubey, Jeremy Mortimer and so on.

Some of the famous works of Mahesh Dattani are, *Final Solutions*, *Tara*, *Dance Like a Man*, *Thirty Days in September*, *Where There's a Will*, *Mango Souffle* and *soon*.

The first full-length play which the dramatist has written is, *Where There's a Will*. After writing this play, he never turned back again and today he is the most dramatists in Indian English Drama. The plays of Dattani mainly deal with the urban issues of the society of India. The issues are mainly, gender bias, patriarchal hegemony, child sexual abuse, issues of the transgender and so on.

Dattani is the true observer of the Indian society and as discussed earlier, he writes what he comes across in life, he writes rather portrays the reality of the urban life. He doesn't write what he merely sees, knows or what should be or supposed to. He investigates, goes deep down to the problems of the people and then depicts those in his own words, which we see in the form of his plays.

Dattani, in the preface or introduction of his book, *Collected Plays*, says that he is aware of the fact that he is a writer. But the dramatist feels that he need not mention that separately that he is a writer. He mentions it clearly that, he need not underline it under his works. In the preface of the book, he says many important things about himself and his works, out of which one important point which he mentions is about the characters of his plays.

The dramatist feels that he has many things to say but he fails to say that directly to people and thus he speaks through his characters. He says that the characters of his plays have a lot to say like him and they are capable of doing their job, better than him. In the book *Collected Plays*, the dramatist says,

I have a lot to say and am probably not saying it well enough. But my characters have a lot to say too and they seem to be doing rather well at having their say. (CP, Preface)

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