

THE TRAUMA OF INTRAFAMILIAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN *THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER*

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Abstract:

Child sexual abuse is a criminal act that entails inappropriate and exploitative sexual behaviour with a child. Thirty Days in September is the first play in India to have dealt with the issue of intrafamilial child sexual abuse as its central theme. Through this poignant drama, Mahesh Dattani has successfully disrupted the deafening silence over this problem by bringing the characters as child sexual abuse survivors on stage. He has depicted this social taboo with exemplary veracity and utmost sensitivity. This paper analyses the representation of the trauma of the survivors, their struggle for survival as well as their journey towards healing in the play.

Keywords: *Incest, child sexual abuse, trauma, taboo, survivor.*

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one of the most heinous crimes that plagues society. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child sexual abuse as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society.” A study on child abuse in 2007 conducted by the Indian Ministry of Child and Women Development (MWCD) notes that young children between 5-10 years are at the highest risk of abuse and exploitation. According to the finding of that study, over 53 per cent of the children reported having suffered sexual abuse. What is even more alarming is that 50 per cent “abuses are persons known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility” (Kacker vii).

Mahesh Dattani, known for raising social issues through his writing, was commissioned by RAHI Foundation, an Indian organization focused on women survivors of incest and CSA, to write a play on intrafamilial sexual abuse survivors. This resulted in the first play on incest in India, *Thirty Days in September*, which was first performed in 2001 and has completed over seventy-five shows since then.

This play creates awareness and sensitises its readers and audience about the trauma suffered by the survivors of incestuous abuse, which is a taboo in the society. Dattani said in an interview, “Some neglected social evils like child abuse demanded address and I wrote *Thirty Days in September*” (Mukherjee 29). The drama depicts with the traumatic condition of two women- Mala and her mother, Shanta- both of whom had been sexually exploited by a trustworthy elder family member during their childhood. The opening scene of the first Act is set at a counsellor's office. Mala has been consulting a counsellor regularly to seek a possible solution or closure to her painful childhood experiences and memories, which continue to haunt her and adversely affect her even in the present. Mala works for an advertising company and lives with her mother in a rented accommodation, owned by her uncle Vinay. The relationship between Shanta and Mala is not at all like a normal mother-daughter relationship. Their conversations show lack of warmth, trust and a clear interpersonal gap. Mala has clearly instructed her mother not to allow Deepak to enter their house, even though the young woman was in a one-month long relationship with him. It is evident that Deepak is in love with Mala and wants to marry her, much to the relief of Shanta. But when Mala comes to know about Deepak's presence in her house, she blasts her mother:

MALA (on the phone). How could you let him in the house? What did I tell you? Why can't you do what I tell you to do? I am not coming home! If I go away somewhere it will be your fault!

This threat scares Shanta to her core and she hurriedly sends Deepak out of the house. However, by then Deepak has seen Mala's calendar and understood its significance in Mala's life, although he is unable to fathom the underlying reason. Mala has developed the habit of getting into month-long physical relationships with men and ending each affair abruptly after thirty days. The root cause behind this is the repeated sexual abuse that she went through in childhood. It causes a deep psychological effect on her and continues to traumatise her presently as well. According to a research by Lorentzen et al. on narratives of incest victims on the termination of sexual abuse, the feeling of being a victim lasted even after the abuse stopped, and the "lack of support from family, friends, and healthcare personnel and the psychological power exercised by the offender were important issues in the narratives" in this regard.

Mala holds a deep-set grudge against Shanta for her lack of support in times of need and always thereafter. She condemns her for trying to "forget" what she does not want to deal with. She blames Shanta for knowing about her daughter's repeated molestation, yet not helping her out, and instead substituting her lack of support with "alu parathas."

MALA. ... Whenever I came to you, hurt and crying... Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food... You knew. Otherwise you wouldn't have been so prepared. You knew all along what was happening to me, and I won't ever let you forget that.

Mala does not trust Deepak either, although he is genuinely concerned about her and is keen to help her. Her lack of trust is again because of her childhood trauma, and over time she has learnt not to trust anyone at all. She does not trust even herself, and that is one reason why she chooses to end every physical relationship in thirty days. The taped conversations show that she blames herself for the sexual abuses. This is a social construct- a tendency of the patriarchal society to lay the blame of sexual abuse on the women who have been victims, or rather, survivors. Mausert-Mooney found out in a research on CSA survivors that

With increasing age, the abused girls exhibit fewer dominant, self-protecting or assertive behaviors, and more submissive and dissociative behaviors than the control group... Flirtatious behaviors, as defined by the combination of attracting/affiliative cues and submissive/vulnerable gestures, are significantly higher among the group of abused girls than their control counterparts. (89)

While the study affirms that sexually abused girls appeared more flirtatious than non-abused girls, it notes that the "appeal of sexually abused children is as much a demand for attention and a cry for help as it is a signal intended to attract and engage another for purposes of bonding for nurturance and survival," as they are desperate to form a connection, but struggle to build and maintain "trusting, intimate and lasting relationships" (88-89).

However, Deepak persuades Mala to consult a psychiatrist, realising she needs professional help. He is the one who has "a strong hunch" against Mala's uncle and takes the risk of accosting Vinay in front of Mala and Shanta. However, the latter defends her brother despite the fact that he had molested Shanta, too, for ten long years. She had kept this fact buried in her mind probably because of the social taboo attached with it, thus suffering in silence throughout her life. She spills the dark secret only when Mala reveals publicly that she was molested by Vinay in her childhood and adolescence, and openly pins the blame on her mother for her complicity through her "silence" which only encouraged the culprit and further isolated the survivor.

Shanta, in an emotional outburst, acknowledges her sin of silence, but explains that she remained silent not because she wanted to, but because she did not know how to speak and how to save her daughter

when she had been unable to save herself from sexual abuse at the hands of her brother. Revealing her traumatic condition, she tells Mala:

SHANTA. I was six, Mala... And he was thirteen. For ten years! ... I did not feel anything. I didn't feel pain, I didn't feel pleasure... No pain no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti... But my tongue is cut off. No. No. It just fell somewhere. I didn't use it, no. I cannot shout for help. I cannot say words of comfort, I cannot even speak about it. No I can't. I am dumb.

This revelation comes as a shock for Mala, who, having been through similar trauma, understands the depth of her mother's pain, frustration and hopelessness, and expresses her solidarity with Shanta.

MALA. ... We were both struggling to survive but- I never acknowledged your struggle... I want to ask you whether you need my help. Please let me be of help. It's not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn't my fault. Please, tell me that you've forgotten me for blaming you.

Mala heals from her trauma, realising that it was never her fault, and therefore, she has nothing to hide. She acknowledges her power over the abuser, saying that he is the one who should hide his face and identity. Although she knows that "it just isn't easy to forget," she does not let the traumatic memories affect her anymore, resting assured that she can live with the shadow of her past because it does not matter to her, as her abuser "as a person is not important" to her anymore. Getting past her fears of getting into a serious relationship and being unable to love anyone, she is a happily married person now.

Dattani contrasts Mala's hesitations, lack of confidence and self-blaming tendencies in 2001 to her positive behaviour and confident mannerism in 2004, to show the importance of the support system provided by family or friends and profession counselling in the holistic healing of a child sexual abuse survivor. He also depicts that there is not a fixed pattern of reaction of survivors to intrafamilial sexual abuse. In her quest to survive through trauma, Mala, obviously disturbed and distressed, takes a vulnerable approach of indiscriminate flirting and unstable bonding, a problematic behaviour that tends to cause revictimization (Mausert-Mooney 90). Shanta, older than Mala probably by more than two decades and thus the product of a more patriarchal, a more conservative society, struggles to survive by maintaining stoic silence and finding solace in her prayers to God.

As intended by Dattani and the RAHI Foundation, *Thirty Days in September* has managed to break the barriers of silence on the issue of child sexual abuse and incest and has also been a cathartic experience for many amongst the audience. Lillete Dubey, director of the play, notes how this play, "sensitive and powerful without every offending sensibilities," has managed to touch hearts and consciences wherever it has been performed, bringing home "the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship" (4).

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