Agitated Memories: A Passage from Childhood to Adulthood - An Analysis of Mahesh Dattani's Thirty Days in September

D.L. Giftlin Paul, Dr. E. Sugantha Ezhil Mary

*PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

+Associate Professor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract: India is a country where people are expected to follow certain disciplines to prove their life virtuous. Without any partiality, the codes are significant for all classes, religions, gender, language, and all types of people living here. Children, too, couldn't escape from this web of codes called patriarchy. Sexual abuse is apart from the children's knowledge but still cut them from their soul once they are exposed to society. The memories of sexual abuse collapse the victims' behaviour and emotions and struggle to live an emotionally healthy life in Indian society. Mahesh Dattani, an Indian playwright, has considered this sensitive issue and gives voice to treat children as innocent rather than exploited. His play Thirty Days in September showcase the inner consciousness of the child sexual abuse victims who struggled to survive in the Indian context of patriarchy due to their ruined emotions. The entire life of those victims turns into a question mark that they suppress under the haunted memories. This paper focuses on how the memories of child sexual abuse pull children into anguish throughout their life from childhood to late adulthood.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse, Perpetration, Oppression, Patriarchy, Violence, Trauma, Molestation, Guilt, Depression, Exploitation, Obsession, Cultural Hegemony.

1. Introduction

Childhood is a crucial phase where children are expected to be innocent, fragile and pampered. Without any burden or responsibilities over their head, they spend their colourful days under the care and affection of their parents. Children's destiny is not in their own hands because they do not have any right to decide their own lives until eighteen. So, their roles are like puppets in the hands of parents and function as sheer dependents under the domination of the elders. Parents, too, make hard efforts to make their children physically and financially sound during childhood and for the prosperity of their entire future. Even though the children have the physical strength and financial background, their emotional strength is highly valuable for socially acceptable behaviour. Preventing children from any form of abused memory is the principal motive to avoid mental degradation throughout their existence.

2. Child Sexual Abuse and its Effects

Child Sexual abuse is an emerging threat in India that silently pierce the victims' souls in many aspects. It may happen for a child in various places like home, schools and neighbourhood. Sexual perversion is forced on a child. Its aftermath will be consequential, resulting in stress, anxiety, and psychological disorders because they cannot forget the incident till the last breath. The children exposed to molestation, abuse and trauma during childhood will be obsessed with depression and emotional agony. Loss of self-respect and identity affects the children's temper and ends with behavioural disorders. The WHO consultation on Child Abuse Prevention states that,

*Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploration, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (8).*

3. Dattani and Child Sexual Abuse

In his play, Thirty Days in September, Mahesh Dattani, the modern Indian playwright, visualizes the darker side of child sexual abuse inside Indian families. By knowing India's esteemed tradition, culture, values, and customs, Dattani tries to give voice to the children suffering under India's highly regarded societal norms. As an Indian, he knows the stereotypes of the familial system and exposes the crime, incest, and abuse in the familial relationship. The children undergo abuse inside their families and are restricted to raise voices against the trauma even by their parents to survive in Indian society. The hidden pain of the children ensues them to be abnormal in
behaviour, loss of morals, ethics and values in their entire lives. Santosh Kumar Sonker says, "The play deals with the most heinous issue, incestuous relationship, which not only shakes humanity but also damages the equilibrium of an individual's mind when it is forced to a child. (1)". Though the play depicts various themes like abuse, violence and incest, Dattani explains the horror of child sexual abuse and its consequences which haunts the victims throughout their lives.

4. Patriarchy and Children

Patriarchy plays a predominant role in preventing children from forgetting their traumatized past. Dattani explains the impact of patriarchy in child molestation through two characters in the play Thirty Days in September. The protagonist Mala and her mother, Shanta, have undergone molestation in childhood by the same person inside their family. Possessed with that memory, both of them have ruined their familial life and relationships. Normally in India, children undergo some suppression even by their parents. Some of them are claimed to be good for the moral development of children but not everything. The abuse, exploitation and degradation of themselves are also taken for granted by some elders and leave the children with the non-healing scar of child sexual abuse. Considering the children's future and their family reputation, parents too neglect and hide their trauma by not taking any action against the crime and would not let the children open their mouths. Likewise, even though they reached adulthood, Mala and her mother both suffer from a silent threat of molestation that happened in their childhood. To survive in the patriarchal system of India, both the mother and daughter have not disclosed it to anyone and remain silent victims. Thus, in the play Thirty Days in September, Dattani visualizes the emotional fluctuations of the victims from their early childhood to adulthood, resulting from childhood molestation.

The play's protagonist, Mala, is the victim of this abuse, but she maintains silence against injustice. She bears the pain of self-humiliation, but she is not permitted to reveal the truth before society. But the scars cut deeper, and the suffering of the victims lasted much longer, often extending for their whole lives, because of the great emphasis placed in our society on preserving family reputation at all costs (Israr 1).

5. Fake Familial Bonding

The perpetration starts from the child's home, relatives' house, our neighbour's house, often considered the safest place for a child to survive. The protagonist's mother was molested at the age of six, and it continued for ten years in her own house by her brother Vinay, and the same thing happened for her daughter Mala in the same house by the same man. Vinay, her maternal uncle, molested her at the age of seven till thirteen from his house and in her own house whenever he came to meet them. So, their own house turns into a hell of molestation, threat and mental disintegration. Here the divinity of family relationships and blood relations in Indian culture is questioned, and the emotional bonding in a family gets demolished. With the agonized memories of sexual molestation, Mala and her mother are forced to have a normal relationship with Vinay on behalf of financial support and to get rid of the gossiping society. Vinay uses the vulnerability of Mala to threaten her not to disclose the abuse to anyone. Vinay says, "You want to come here during your holidays, no? Then don't cry.....If they hear you, they will say you are a bad girl. This is our secret (Like an order but in a whisper.)" (Dattani 123). Mala and her mother are supposed to hide their emotions and maintain a formal relationship with him. Every second they undergo termination whenever Shanta calls him 'bhaiya' and Mala calls him "uncle". Vinay too shamelessly acts as a father figure when the wedding proposal of Deepak and Mala is concerned. The play gives evidence for a fake bond of familial relationship from both the offender and the victims. It portrays the shattered emotions of the two women under the fake bond.

6. Shame and Guilt

The oscillating state of Mala is revealed by the recorded voice in a tape recorder where Mala has taken counselling for her exploited psyche. She could not be bold enough to disclose the truth and was unable to conceal it. She is in a dilemma whether to protest against the perpetrator or to be silent. Mala wants to protest, but thinking about society, she thinks that she might not face the people once she reveals the truth. According to Beena Agarwal, "Mala is the protagonist of this abuse, but she maintains silence against injustice. As soon as she comes to the stage of adolescence, she finds that the world is hostile and human relationship is a betrayal" (118). She remains a silent victim who cannot raise her voice and suppresses her emotion by not disclosing the truth to the world. Analyzing her conversation with the counsellor, Mala is first ready to tell her name and convinces herself that there is nothing to be ashamed of. But suddenly, when she thinks about her past, she is scared and ashamed to tell her name and assumes that she has sinned. These are the words of Mala, "I don't know how to begin...Today is the 30th of September...2001, and my name is... I don't think I want to say my name..."
When Deepak got enraged and attacked her, the man, she confessed that she has been abused as a child and insisted that her voice even in her own house. Both her father and mother have not given ear to Mala's words because she is a daughter relationship. Whenever she tries to explain her mental agony to her father, he does not even allow her to say a word and sends her to bed. Her ruined emotion prevents her from having a normal husband and wife relationship and a normal mother-daughter relationship. Whenever she tries to explain her mental agony, her trauma and guilt consciousness does not allow her to have proper eye contact with her daughter Mala. Instead, she looks into the portrait of Lord Krishna and fails to comfort or give a proper response to the queries of Mala. Shanta accuses Mala of deliberately being tempted and enjoying sexual relationships with many men to conceal her fault and abuse. Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri states, "Child sexual abuse spans a range of problems, but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that is the ultimate betrayal for the abused" (73). Mala could not raise her voice even in her own house. Both her father and mother have not given ear to Mala's words because she is a child. Whenever she tries to tell the abuse to her father, he does not even allow her to say a word and sends it to the mother, and whenever she tries to explain it to her mother, she fills her mouth with food or looks at the picture of God and ignores her. The ignorance of her parents, too, created an emotional suppression in Mala. She makes herself silent and lives in her world of sexual companionship with many men for thirty days. At this juncture, Mala says,

I am not talking about a bad dream! ....go to papa and cry. Before I could even tell him why I was crying, he would tell me to go to you (Dattani 106).

8. Psychic Disintegration

On the other hand, Mala's response to the molestation turns to be reverted by getting obsessed with the sexual intercourse and doing it as a medication for her dilapidated soul. She becomes sexually addicted, and the extreme state is revealed from a scene where Mala even tries to have sex with a stranger, she met at a party in front of his fiancée. Mala insisted, "Do whatever you want with me, but take me with you now" (Dattani 101). Mala's soul is destroyed, and because of her exploited psyche, she starts having sexual relationships with many men and ends it in thirty days. By doing so, she gets relieved from her emotional pain and anguish for a short period. Even when Deepak approaches her nonsexually, it is Mala who volunteers to expose her body by pulling her T-shirt up to the face to tempt Deepak for sexual intercourse. She complains to Deepak about a man looking at her for a long time in a restaurant scene. When Deepak got enraged and attacked the man, she confessed that he was not looking at her and wanted him to look at her. It shows Mala's mania that every man should get attracted to her. She shares her mentality openly with Deepak, not considering him as a man who proposed to her for marriage. These words of Mala made Deepak understand that she has been abused as a child and insisted she take counselling. The abused past and its haunted memories drive her to phobia and emotional disorder even in her adulthood. She is possessed with sexual affairs and could not get rid of them, which drives her into mental pain and suffering every second. At a point of mental crisis, Mala says,
I am so bad, and I can't tell you where to begin! It's not just the men in the office I told you about but before... much before ... No, there is nothing to tell about my uncle, forget all that, please help me stop this behaviour. (Dattani 114).

9. Indian Wedding Concept and its Influence on Children

In Indian marriage institutions, chastity and virginity are considered women’s purity, and they are brought up according to that belief right from their childhood. If a girl is exposed to sexual assault before marriage, society disqualifies her from setting her foot in marriage. Even if the girl is abused in her childhood without her knowledge, she will be rejected for marriage. Most of the girls hide their abused past and get married, but the scar of abuse and guilt remains in their minds until the end of their lives. Some girls remain unmarried because they cannot get rid of the shame and guilt that they experienced in their past. Wikipedia states, "In 1999 the BBC reported on the RAHI Foundation's survey of sexual abuse in India in which 76 % of respondents had been abused as children, 40 percent of those stating the perpetrator was a family member” (Evolutionary History). Obsessed with guilt and an unforgettable past, Mala too objects to enter into a wedded life with Deepak, even though her mother is very interested in the proposal. She is filled with remorse but could not get out of the memories of her abused past and the abuser. Her mental stability got shaken, and she could not accept a blissful future right in front of her. Deepak guesses that Mala had undergone child sexual abuse and even spoke to her mother regarding that. He is very serious in identifying the man who gave the incurable scar to Mala and put his whole effort into making her get rid of the depressing past. Though Mala knows all these trials of Deepak, she stubbornly refuses to marry him. Mala says,

You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!! I cannot love you.... I am not sure whether I can love anyone... else. (Dattani 134).

10. Conclusion

Dattani portrays Mala and her mother as victims of child sexual abuse, where Mala ruins her mental equilibrium and takes pleasure from the pain of sexual intercourse with many men. In contrast, her mother is depicted as helpless to save her daughter from the same man. Exploited physically, mentally, and emotionally, Mala undergoes prolonged agony in her long passage of life. The childhood trauma tortures her mentally, and the cultural hegemony conditioned her soul in the name of reputation and family honour. Though Shanta remains silent throughout her life, Mala tends to protest against her uncle but resist making her get rid of the depressing past. Though Mala knows all these trials of Deepak, she stubbornly refuses to marry him. Mala says,

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