



**LOOKING AT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AS A SYSTEMATIC
INDOCTRINATION INTO SELF-ABNEGATION: A READING OF
DATTANI'S *THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER***

Dr. Nilanjana Sen

*Assistant Professor in English, Kishore Bharati Bhagini Nivedita College (Co-Ed), Behala, Kolkata,
West Bengal, India*

Abstract

*This paper examines Mahesh Dattani's play *Thirty Days in September* to explore how child sexual abuse operates as a patriarchal tool of systematic indoctrination, coercing victims into silence and self-abnegation. Commissioned by the RAHI Foundation to transition incest from a private shame into a public discourse, Dattani's work shatters long-standing societal myths surrounding the "sacred" Indian family. It exposes how perpetrators are often respectable, trusted insiders rather than dangerous outsiders. Through a critical reading, the study analyzes the distinct psychological trauma inflicted upon the central characters, Mala and her mother Shanta, both childhood victims of the same abuser. The paper unpacks the "survivor's cycle," demonstrating how the victims suffer deep-seated confusion, guilt, and emotional crippling. This trauma manifests in contrasting defensive mechanisms: Mala develops a hyper-sexualized, promiscuous persona, trapped in a destructive cycle of 30-day relationships, while Shanta undergoes complete emotional and sexual frigidity, utilizing repression and memory loss to survive. Furthermore, the paper highlights the insidious nature of patriarchy, which routinely shifts the blame onto victims, branding them as "bad girls" while allowing abusers to retain moral authority and evade legal consequences. However, the study concludes that the play offers a vital narrative of survival and catharsis. Through the persistent support of Mala's fiancé, Deepak, the women eventually break their generational silence. By articulating their suppressed trauma, they shift the burden of guilt entirely onto the perpetrator, validating recovery and reclaiming their identities.*

Keywords

Fault, Silence, Speech, Child's Sexual Abuse, Slut, Frozen, Survivor's Cycle, Nothing to Hide., etc.

Full Article

"I know it was my fault, nobody else's. I was made for this, maybe I was born like that" (*Thirty Days in September*, xx).

Every society has its own arbitrary criteria of defining the border between silence and speech into which experience is divided. Patriarchy maintains its centrality in both ways—first by its eloquence in condemning incestuous women and by implication, subjugating them to the privileged role of angel in the house, and, secondly, by its silence about men's role in creating such deviants. If the promiscuity of adult could be safely deposited on the account of the "bad" women, the child sexual abuse remains, by definition/implication beyond the boundary of speech and society chose to live content with it unspoken. The desired silence is attained by conviction of the abused, the potential speaker, to be the guilty one, one who is "bad" and must hide from the society. Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* was a deliberate project commissioned by Anuja Gupta and Aswini Ilawadi of RAHI (Recovery and Healing from incest) Dilli, as "part of RAHI's effort to



turn incest or child sexual abuse from a private issue to public one and help women survivors come into recovery” (Foreword, IX).

The very last decades of twentieth century opened up the flood gate of women’s lib movement in India, and a socially committed writer like Mahesh Dattani felt upon himself the pressure of participating in the process, and laying bare some of the issues wrapped in secrecy and silence for centuries regarding women’s experience and “family’s best-preserved skeletons from the ‘khandaani closets’” (Virani, 46). But in order to be equipped enough to write a play on such a sensitive issue having such grave consequence on the victims, required sufficient organized knowledge. The members of RAHI and even some survivors and their partners all participated in the journey of the dramatist. “The imaginative freedom allowed by the fictional form [which] would make the subject alive” (Foreword, XI) gave birth to an aesthetic product performing its social role. Three major points were focused on – first, the play would articulate “how their (survivors’) life and relationships are affected by their abuse”; second, whatever be the case “recovery is possible if the woman begins to honour herself and supportive system is provided to them”; and third the play should serve vital purpose of “breaking the silence and myth surrounding the perpetrators, victims and survivors in our society” (Foreword, XII).

Syedda Hameed in her opening address to the seminar “Recognizing Violence Against Children in the Private Sphere” said, “It can be a myth that home is the safest place for children” (Virani, 14). The truth, however, could not enter the arena of discourse. Freud was compelled to supplant his observation about the root cause of hysteria among women being sexually abused in childhood by his theory of Electra Complex due to extreme social pressure. In the same manner, Sandor Ferenczi (for his insight into CSA), John Caffey (findings of internal injury of children due to sexual abuse) and others were shouted down. It is only with the publication of Henry Kempe’s *The Battered Child Syndrome* in 1962, that the phenomenon got accepted as an “in-family evil” (Virani, 44). However, the victims continued to face denial and minimization of the abuse and the accusation of the victims. It remained so hard for us until very recently to accept that child sexual abuse exists in India, since it contains the potential of tearing up the façade of happy family of sacred India and exposing an “ugly India” (Virani, 53). The most striking feature about the crime is that the abusers are not dangerous or lunatic people; rather they are “respectable” men living in decent homes. Even after accepting the existence of the phenomenon in “Indian” society, the mainstream – chiefly constituted of upper and upper and lower middle-class – pushed itself into the shell of another myth: “...what happens among People Like Them, especially People Like That (Plat), does not touch, and therefore should not concern, People Like Us (Plus)” (Virani, 12). On the contrary, as Pinki Virani utters in the same breath, “The former do not have constant physical access to our children as the latter do” (Virani, 12). RAHI felt the precise need to shatter the same fairy tale about the complex and silenced issue, and their precise area of working coincided with that of the dramatist: “We felt he would be the right person to reach out to Rahi’s target group of middle and upper-middle class women” (Foreword, XI). Dattani too observed, “I chose this setting because I did not want them to dismiss sexual abuse as something that does not happen to people like them” (Bite, 7).

The dramatist’s first reaction was a “deep sense of anger. I could not understand why they have not killed the abusers by now” (Note, XX). The answer is sought throughout the play. M.S. Raj Sree observes, “Given this cultural reticence, there existed no established language in which to narrate the experience of sexual trauma, and that absence itself circumscribed the possibilities for conceptualizing and representing any but corporeal injuries” (Bite, 151). Hence, the present play attempts to move beyond the set border. It presents the promiscuous sexual liaison of Mala Khatri as a revictimization of her painful experience of being sexually abused as child by her uncle who strategically exploited the need of an emotionally insecure child to be loved: “I love you even



though you are so ugly... you are good only for this..." (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 52). The abuse in childhood once for all Damages Mala's natural growth and deters her from getting along with any adult relation beyond the ominous cycle of thirty days (a repetition of her nightmarish childhood vacations in the abusive uncle's house). The religion-maniac mother Shanta hysterically tries to "forget" the excruciating abusive experience of her own and that of her daughter and advises Mala to do the same ("No pain no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti. Shanti" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 67). The mother, haunted by the "daemon" within her daughter, and the daughter by a sense of being betrayed, fail to communicate with each other, both carrying the burden of contrary feelings towards the exploiter- a combination of love, anger, pity, dependence, and hate.

Once Judith Butler observed, "...there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (Bite, 142). Mala's woman's body is constructed and politicized as a tool to please and a single means to get anything she deserves. She becomes oblivious of the difference between "the everyday body as it is lived, and the regime of disciplinary and regulatory practices that shape its form and behaviour" (Butler, Qtd in Bite, 143). As Doctor Shekhar Seshadri observed in *Recollecting Our Lives*, the victims undergo "survivor cycle". "The cycle continues, wheels within wheels, spokes of shame being added each time the child recalls the sexual abuse and the sense of powerlessness" (Virani, 65). The child is submerged into deep confusion about both the definitional and consequential implication of the happening, and a sense of helpless and wrong kind of silence along with betrayal accompanies her/his sharp physical pain if the abuser belongs to the closest circle. If the child is physically, mentally, emotionally and financially dependent on the adult, refusal becomes impossibility and acceptance becomes intolerable. Consequently, Mala develops into an emotionally crippled woman with her butchered psyche continually bleeding by her mother's terrible silence (nudging Shanta herself to bleed imperceptibly). Thus, the systematic exploitation turns the victims into either promiscuous like Mala or frozen like Shanta – both the categories detested by the same patriarchal society.

The phenomenon of abuse and exploitation is not a one-way traffic, it gets built through a complicated network of the abused turned into abuser, the abused enjoying being abused ("use me"), the victim victimizing other sometimes with success sometimes with getting farther abused under veneer of victory and so on. The man in the party who is easily seduced by Mala's inviting glances to dance with her and enjoys sexual pleasure planning for more behind his fiancé's back, does not hesitate to throw Mala at the slightest threat of breaking up of his sanctified and sanctioned relationship with Radhika. The sight of Radhika shocks the man out of his clandestine planning and he dumps Mala to follow her in order to ask her forgiveness: "She led me on, I swear. It is her fault" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 21). Mala suffers the extreme humiliation, fights her tears and covering her face leaves the party. But the same Mala gets irritated at her mother's letting Deepak, her real well-wisher in her house. The action of the man in the party is not a stray incident, but a recurrence of history. When a teenager, Mala gets assaulted by her cousin of course with her consent, being recommended by her uncle ("I was uncle Vinoy's reference") (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 28). This is the only space where patriarchy denies both its authority and authorship: "She made me do it." However, after molesting her, the abusive exploiter returns to his role of protective patriarch and confides his concern about Mala to her mother -- "He asked me not to let you go outside the house" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 29).

With the progression of the play, bitter truths come oozing out of the bleeding psyche of two women banished from the world of common humanity - making one a "whore" and the other "frozen" – and compel them live a life of confinement in their an "unreal" world where only the reality of trauma and self-abnegation exist. The man comes as the uncle for Mala and "bhaia" (brother) for Shanta – the only shelter and provider after Mala's father left them without any



communication. He continued to molest Mala when she was seven up to when she became eight, nine, and ten and stopped only when she was thirteen. The child of seven comes with her parent to her maternal uncle's place to spend her vacation and the Hobsian figure takes her to a secret corner to give her the birth day present for coming to the age of seven. She is ordered to pull up her frock and help his uncle to do whatever he likes in exchange of his allowing her to come here to spend holidays. Farther more, she is asked to show her love to her uncle since she has expressed her affection in front of her parents and her refusal to do anything would be breach of trust and everybody would call her a "bad girl". Moreover, the kid is almost converted to the belief that she is ugly and extremely unlovable, the belief getting farther petrified by the fact of her father's leaving the family for another. The uncle however promises to love her if she obeys his order. As ordered, she goes on singing the nursery rhymes. To add a little salt, the abuser also represents it as "our secret". After the deed is done, he orders silence and makes her convinced that she also enjoyed since she is only "good for this" being so ugly. A child with a rather uncaring father who sends his crying child to her mother for consolation and a mother who before asking her child the reason for weeping stuffs her mouth with food, she becomes pathetically dependent on her abuser who promises to love in exchange of sex. The longing to be approved and needed turned her into a seducer at thirteen trying to provoke her uncle -- of course this time against his will -- to have sex with her, a teenage girl seducing her cousin. And when she grows an adult, she becomes a slot. Once for all she is categorized as a "bad girl", a category she fits herself in by following the norms of the role: she finds fulfillment by playing the role she is "made for".

The pedophilic never leaves the adult Mala psychologically even after being thrown away by her moralizing uncle who loses all sexual interest in her after she becomes thirteen. Mala sees him in every man and having no other alternative to capture attention, the extremely lonely girl tries to provoke by her sexual charm, and whenever anyone tries to come nearer her more than physically, she rejects him. As if to match with the holidays, she always prefers the affairs which last for thirty days. The uncle revitalizes Mala's childhood by his absent presence and assumes the mode to warranty his mastery. In every relation Mala wants to replicate the freeze moment of childhood. Even in the fold of love and security offered by her fiancé Deepak, Mala is haunted by the man and finds herself unable to strip her off: either she repeals the relation or sees the same man in him and offers what she has to give in exchange of approval.

Mala, the architect of the "bronze beauty campaign" deserving of IFA Award, appears in another face. She dresses provocatively, looks at the almost unknown man seductively, helplessly giving the impression of her infatuation with the man and gets irritated at recognition of her work: "Is it the place to talk of work?" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 19). The man cautiously introduces Mala with his fiancée Radhika and finds excuse to respond to Mala's alluring proposal to dance together. He of course flirts with her by praising her and Mala leads him on and shows her satisfaction at being flirted with and more so when she knows that he is in the town for a month. She directly offers to be physically near: "Hold me closer" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 21). She agrees to his proposal to drink together but only wants it now while her partner wants to drop his fiancé first and then have his rendezvous. With obvious eagerness, Mala comes closer to invite a kiss. She goes on inviting his sexual proximity until she is thrown out by the user to satisfy his greater need of winning his fiancé's confidence.

All the incidents are quite in tune with Mala's own confession "I don't know why I do it... It means a lot for me. That is why I am a bad girl" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, xx). Thus, Patriarchy successfully categorizes a woman as a "bad girl", makes her conform to it, compels her belief that she is "made for it, which ultimately washes the abusers of their guilt (being led on) and use her for the purpose she is made for.



If Mala's wound bleeds profusely, Shanta's blood freezes as a consequence of deep scar inflicted by long and damaging sexual abuse which they experienced in their respective childhood by a very close family member. Neither a thing of joy, nor pain for her" (Bite, 10). She could not bear the touch of a man, even her husband, without being a lesbian. She became sexually defunct, living a life of isolated existence beyond sensory experience -- a life devoid of sensuous feelings. Most pathetically, she even fails as mother and proves ineffective in protecting her own child meeting the same fate as hers. Mothers who are sexually abused in their own childhood, often show Munchausen syndrome or experience "blinking out" from time to time, creating a space between herself and the child so that they cannot hurt it as she was by her adults (Virani, 56). She is unable to communicate her warmth and concern to her for whom she lives ("I don't pray for myself, I pray for her") (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 8) and is incapacitated to help in her utter crisis, share her deepest sorrow, even understand her real self – only increasing distance.

Terrified being faced with a horror which s/he can neither define nor deny nor deter, the victim of child sexual abuse "becomes a survivor through the process of developing defensive strategies which endeavour to protect her, his, inner core" (Virani, 198). Its whole being works to the only purpose of survival and s/he becomes accustomed to the coldly comforting zone – the survivor's cycle from which s/he denies to move on. The resistance of Shanta consisted of several escape roots like repression, denial, detachment and dissociation. Most frequently, she returns to the self-abasement -- always ready to assert "It is my fault" – which becomes almost a leitmotif in the play reiterated by both mother and daughter. Her escape mechanism includes evasion of subject by taking refuge to physical discomfort and more strongly taking shelter in "praying" – always seeking the security in the fold of her "puja" (worship). Another favourable device she deploys is replacing fantasy with truth and vice versa. Thus, the real person in her keeps inaccessible – her face covered with so many layers of deluding masks. The survivor cycle even sometimes denies access to memory of the very sexual abuse. Consequently, the most effective mechanism she brings into action is the loss of memory: she forgets everything, everything that might disturb the make-belief world of "shanty" (peace).

The most oppressive face of the structure of patriarchy comes out when we find these women are helplessly dependent on the very abuser in multiple ways. The family, consisted of a housewife deserted by her husband without any provision for alimony and a minor child, is pathetically dependent on the "man" who acts as the provider in absence of the conventional one. The financial dependence apart, he is the "man" for the family to face the world in whose absence the paper-Walla acts as the surrogate. However, the most pathetic is the emotional dependence/confinement which he imposes on them by cutting them off from all source of love and affection and demolishing successfully the belief that they are at all worthy of it. Shanta requests him to be the man-representative during the meeting with Deepak and his family as the head-of-the-family and unfalteringly he agrees to play the "dutiful uncle" because "she is after all like my daughter" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 47). Mala is haunted by the fact of her uncle's leaving her disgusted with her behaviour which only cements her belief that she is unlovable except as a sex object. Even after knowing full well that uncle Vinoy was an abuser, she gets hurt at his addressing Shanta directly ignoring Mala; unable to resist herself, almost under breath she calls him and moves towards his proximity engrossed in his affectionate chit chats with Shanta in spite of herself until suddenly checks with much pain and leaves the place. Dattani shows his real mastery in introducing the short act, and the gestures make up for so many things. As Dr. Rani Raote found out from her activities in the field of child sexual abuse, "women, who have survived a dysfunctional relation, tend to react negatively when they enter in a functional one. They often try and spoil the thing for themselves by some psychopath" (Virani, 198). Naturally much tension concentrates in the arena of partnership. The sexual traumatization leaves Shanta frigid and she



fails to communicate with her partner/husband with any warmth, and victimized by a fear-psychosis, always tries to save herself from the touch of the daemon. Her husband fails to delve deeper than the surface and trying for some times, leaves the “frozen woman” and their daughter. The play is of course the tale of darkness, but not unredeemable; silver lining of love, dependence and trust appears around the dark cloud of oppression and the consequent deformity. The pains Deepak takes and the urgency and sincerity he shows are not the craze of the infatuated adolescent: Deepak shows real concern and respect for his partner and tries to address her crisis. He compels her mother to talk, challenges her uncle, convinces Mala to see the psychiatrist and supports patiently for the whole duration of her counselling until both find the most joyous victory.

With no option left to save Mala even this time, she breaks her silence. The words come out defying the warning for the first time which kept her mum in all manner for so many years; they come out disjointedly through broken half-formed syntaxes mixing “didn’t” and “couldn’t” replacing agency with the instrumentation, subject with object -- all varying modes of speeches centering round the constant, unfathomable pain. She speaks directly to Mala as she admits that she did not save her because she could not, she could not help Mala as she could not save herself, and in her turn, Mala also could not help her mother. Shanta’s mute existence gets eloquent: “Nobody looked at my pain at my eyes. Not my brothers. Not my parents. Only he spoke, he asked he saw and he did” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 65). Shanta was robbed of her power to act or speak, she was got decamped even of the power of feeling – “I felt no pleasure, no pain, only silence” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 65). A terrible history of maiming the humanity of Shanta finds ventilation in the tortured expression: “I was six Maala, you were thirteen, and I was six. And not for holidays but for ten years” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 65). “I did not keep silent because I wanted to, but I didn’t know how to speak” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 65), at last Shanta manages to articulate. She could not tell anyone, could not shout, and could not even expect a word of comfort except from her Krishna who alone helped her by divesting her of any feeling. The dumb suffering she underwent is piercingly dramatized by making the “man” make unintelligible sounds like “ah, ih, oh, uh” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 66). As if unable to bear the unbearable pain, Shanta takes recourse to a grosser physical pain and jabs the sharp piece of glass in her mouth.

The exclusive standards of morality by which the abusers measure themselves, not only find ways to keep themselves out of legal regime by silencing the victims in numerous ways; in fact, they don’t consider their act as crime at all. The callous indifference and complacency with which the abuser Vinoy carries his authority as the head/man of the family, do not show any lack of confidence or doubt at his position. In the dinner he plays the most jovial, frank and dutiful guardian of the helpless women sponsoring the dinner as expected. He cracks jokes, appreciates Deepak, silences Shanta’s objection of Mala’s taking one more peg of wine and affectionately pats Mala being a big girl by now. He keeps unperturbed at the subtle hint of a threat “I have been a big girl for fourteen years now” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 58). He criticizes councilors for creating trouble “where there is no problem” and for blaming parents as “they exploit the fact that most of us carry some grievances against our parents” (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 58) to earn their living. Very cunningly during his tirade against them, he introduces the fact of Mala’s father’s leaving his family as the presumed reason behind Mala’s “depression” and suppresses Mala’s protest with sufficient authority. However, faced with a tough opponent like Deepak who won’t let it pass so easily, he resumes the real authority: first he demonstrates the care and protection he has always given unabashed (“I have always given her love and attention after her father left her”) (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 58); then being even more pin-pointed in area of Mala’s abused childhood, he brings in the strategy of pressurizing the weakest region and almost command Shanta to protest against his insult (“Your brother is being insulted... and you are keeping quiet?”) (Dattani, *Thirty*



Days..., 59); and finally, he acts the liberal well-wisher and both forgives and appreciates Deepak's concern about Mala and declares his faith in him as having potential of a "good husband for our Mala" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 59).

Dattani directs his dramatic enterprise towards the unwrapping of the issue of child sexual abuse from layers of farther victimization, towards the reckoning of the fact that: "...I have nothing to hide. Because I know it wasn't my fault" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, xx). Finally, the voice of Shanta breaks out from the silent zone to confess: "I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 67). Mala, now "entitled to life", completes her journey from "It's not anybody's fault, except my own" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 3), to the assertion: "I do not hesitate to use my real name now... There's nothing to hide. Not for me. After all, it is he who must hide." (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, 2) She codifies the victimizer as abuser and brings him under the socio ethical surveillance by which until now she was alleged guilty. Coming under the preview of criticism, the uncritical ubiquitous presence of the controller, interpreter and monitor is defunct: "He is dead" (Dattani, *Thirty Days...*, xx).

The object towards which the artistic endeavour of Dattani moves is making the story of individuals into that of "us", to see and incorporate the element of universal probability in it: "We all were once children. We loved, trusted and respected elders around us and were in charge of our life that love could well have been, might have been or it has been reciprocated with abuse. That is the story of us" (Note, XX). The extent to which the project was carried forward could well have been measured by an observation by Lilet Dubay, who was also the director of its first production --, "After every performance, women have come back stage with their own traumatic stories writ large on their faces, grateful for the catharsis the play offers, but even more, I think, for expiation of their own guilt which they have arrived as a heavy burden for so long...For through it they believe, their silent screams have finally been heard" (Bite, 15).

The final message which RAHI aims at transacting through this project is met full justice with, simultaneously making an aesthetic product a social statement: "she is not alone, she is not to blame and the road to recovery may be long but it starts with a single step" (Foreword, XVII).

References

- Bite, Vishwanath, ed. "Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September: A Critical Study*". *Mahesh Dattani: His Stagecraft in Indian Theatre*. New Delhi: Authors Press, 2013. 5-17. Print.
- Dattani, Mahesh. "30 Days in September- a story about incest in an Indian family". New Delhi: Survivor Communications (RAHI Foundation), 2002. Print.
- Gupta, Anuja., and Ashwini Ailawadi. "Foreword". *30 Days in September*. New Delhi: Survivor Communications (RAHI Foundations), 2002, ix-xviii. Print.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981. Print.
- Kumar, Shiv. "Child Abuse and Its Psychological repercussion in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*". *Mahesh Dattani: His Stagecraft in Indian Theatre*. Ed Vishwanath Bite. New Delhi: Authors press, 2013. 72-83. Print.
- Sree, M.S. Raj. "Opening the Discourses on Incest and Child Sexual Abuse with Reference to Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*". *Mahesh Dattani: His Stagecraft in Indian Theatre*. Ed Vishwanath Bite. New Delhi: Authors press, 2013. 140-52. Print.
- Virani, Pinki. *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000. Print.



Article Received:06/06/2026

Article Accepted:15/06/2026

Published Online:30/06/2026

To Cite the Article: Sen, Nilanjana. "Looking at Child Sexual Abuse as a Systematic Indoctrination into Self-abnegation: A Reading of Dattani's Thirty Days in September." Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol.-VII, Issue-1, June, 2026, 75-82. www.literarycognizance.com

This is an Open Access e-Journal Published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

