



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *THIRTY DAYS IN SEPTEMBER*

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Article Received:01/10/2020

Article Accepted: 28/10/2020

Published online:02/11/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.4.48](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.4.48)

Abstract

Child abuse is a common phenomenon in our society and Child Sexual Abuse is viewed as something which is not talked about openly because of the “cultural silence” that exists around sexuality. Mahesh Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September* is wholly based on the concept of the subalternization of girl child and the politics of silence. The play deals with the taboo issue of Child Sexual Abuse (henceforth referred as CSA). It is called a “Silent Crime”. It is one of the most dehumanizing and heinous act of violence on the female body and psyche. In this research article my endeavour is to uncover the veil of silence which surrounds CSA and discusses this invisible issue unflinchingly. Dattani, here shows that CSA occurs because the system of silence in this matter encourages the culprits to commit the crime again and again. Besides, the subalternization of girl child in our societal, cultural, political and religious activities/attitudes gives birth to such a “congenial” environment in which abuse can easily thrive. The silent sufferings encourage the victimizers and silence is sometimes taken as passive acceptance on the part of the victim. Therefore, in CSA a girl child as a subaltern experiences extreme physical, emotional and psychological torture at the hands of patriarchy but cannot speak. Dattani as a responsible sociologist dissects the different aspects of CSA and lays it bare before the readers/audience so that subalternization of girl child through CSA may be stopped with immediate effect through mass awareness.

Keywords: sexual, abuse, silence, subaltern, speak, subalternization, girl child, suffering.

Introduction.

I only remained silent. I am to blame... I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak. I-I, cannot speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off... My tongue was cut off years ago... No pain, no pleasure, only silence. Silence means *shanti*. *Shanti*. But my tongue is cut off. NO. NO. It just fell off somewhere. I didn't use it, no. I cannot shout for help. I cannot say words of comfort; I cannot ever speak about it. No I can't. I am dumb.

(*Thirty Days in September*, Dattani, Vol-II: 55)

These words of Shanta (which means “silence”) at the end of the play justly proves that a female subaltern who is a victim of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) cannot speak or there is none to listen to her words. Child Sexual Abuse may be categorized in different ways such as physical abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, etc. CSA may be defined as contacts or interactions between a child and an older or more knowledgeable child or adult who may be a sibling, a caretaker, a person

in position of authority, etc. and the child is being abused as an object of gratification for the older child or adult's sexual needs. These contacts or interactions are done against the will of the child using bribes, gifts, chocolates, threats, trickery, force etc. According to a recent study, about one in ten children are victims of sexual abuse before their 18th birthday. According to the report of WHO, in India one out of every ten children is being sexually abused at any given point of time. The latest report of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), India, shows that over fifty thousand cases have been recorded so far under the law of The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO, 2012).

It is also worth noting that recent researchers show that a large number of children are sexually abused either by the members of their own family or relatives or by strangers. But the ratio of abuse by the members of family is significantly higher. Home or the house of relatives in festive mood is the safe place for the abusers. CSA leaves very horrible impact on the psyche of the victims. The break through research entitled *The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Rapid Evidence Assessment* by Cate Fisher and et al, in 2017 brilliantly records the impacts of CSA. The following words of the victims of CSA, as quoted by Cate Fisher and et al, would touch the sensibility of any person:

What he did to me affected my whole life, every relationship, my personal identity, and the general trajectory of life's path. Childhood sexual abuse manifested in all aspects of my life. (Fisher 4).

Another victim of CSA says:

The effects of what happened have stayed with me, un-dealt with and unprocessed, throughout my life. The damage from my early years has coloured everything else at all stages of my life. I know it sounds dramatic but I'm just telling it like it is. (Fisher 4)

The victims and survivors of CSA generally suffer from emotional distress, trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety,

depression, risky and inappropriate sexual behaviour, insomnia, anti-social behaviour, criminal offences, drug addiction, reducing the intimacy of parent-child relationship, loss of faith in any relations, disillusionment with religion etc. Among these impacts the psychological trauma or long-term psychological trauma is the fatal one. According to Roger Luckhurst

...trauma is something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented on overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes.... So it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or a ghost.

(Luckhurst 499)

Discussion

The aforementioned aspects of CSA and its impact are very much applicable to the two victims of CSA i.e. Mala and Shanta, in Dattani's play *Thirty Days in September*. If we look at the history of writing this play, the whole mission and vision of Dattani would be clear to us. Dattani "had been commissioned by RAHI" (Recovering and Healing from Incest), a supporter group for women survivors of incest, "to write a play on child sexual abuse" (Dubey 4). Before writing this play, Dattani worked with RAHI and talked with the victims of CSA to feel the agony and trauma of the victims who have gone through these hellish experiences. In the words of Dattani:

First I wanted to meet those who have survived the trauma. Most of the women I met were in their 20s and 30s, even 40s. Some were now married and have learnt to live with the past, some were still emotionally fragile. It is their story. (Biswas 2001: The End).

Dattani's interactions with the victims of CSA bring out some common traits among the victims. One of those common factors was "a sense of betrayal because a trust is broken. Most of the times it is a close relative who is the abuser" (Biswas 2001: The End). Another significant aspect that came up is the postcolonial subalternization of girl child by the

patriarchal norms of society which makes the victim thinks that it is she who "invited the incident". (Biswas, 2001 : The End) This stigma is the root cause of being a "silent sufferer". Dattani wove an excellent story with the common features of the victims of CSA in his play *Thirty Days in September* and fired the stage.

The central theme of the play revolves round the Child Sexual Abuses (CSA) of Mala by her own maternal uncle, Vinay, and its horrible psycho-neurotic impact on the later life of Mala. Not only she but her mother Shanta is also a victim of CSA by the same person. Both the mother and daughter are in this way subalternized because of the silence that Shanta keeps to sustain patriarchal hegemony. As a subaltern, Shanta cannot speak. Dattani selects the name "Shanta" planfully because it means "silence". She remains silent throughout the play and bears her pangs silently. Shanta's silence bounds her daughter, Mala, to be silent which affected not her body but her psyche also. It is the silence and the betrayal of the family that affects most of the readers. It is this silence that makes the abused feel betrayed. Shanta realized, just like Mala, that her parents and other members of her family knew what was going on. It is shameful that no one raised voice against it. Shanta was subalternized in these ways and she lost her own voice of protest when the same thing happened to her own child.

Shanta: How could I save her when I could not save myself.... No. Nobody saw anything. Nobody said anything. Not my brothers, not my parents. Only (*pointing to the Man*)He spoke. Only he said, only he saw and he did.(Dattani Vol-II : 55).

In this way the subalternization of girl child goes on generations after generations and "to be silent" turns out to be our cultural norms. Through the CSA of two generations, Dattani symbolically indicates its existence from long past. Being subaltern, women or girl child cannot speak or raise their voice or there is none to listen to them.

The play opens with the conversation of Mala to councilor, which lays bare different aspects of her traumatized self. Through flashback

technique Dattani depicts Mala's disturbed psychic state. Mala was sexually abused by her maternal uncle when she was a little child. Her father left them to settle with another woman complaining Shanta as a "frozen woman". In this condition, Mala's maternal uncle comes forward to help them financially. He, however, in turn destroys the lives of both Mala and Shanta. The power of money is an important aspect in the subalternization of women. Vinay, the culprit, wields great control over Shanta's family because of his financial help. Mala does not know anything about this financial help. She cannot understand why her mother remains silent despite knowing everything about CSA. She boldly asks her mother:

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? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one or whatever. That's how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life!.... You know, I couldn't say anything to you. You never gave me a chance to. It only you had looked into my eyes and seen the hurt, or asked me "beta, what's wrong?" Then may be, I would have told you... (Dattani Vol-II : 53)

The sexual abuse continues for long and unfortunately she turns out to be a whore. The maternal uncle blames Mala for being so. "You like it! You enjoy it! After four years, you have become a whore! At thirteen you are a whore! (Dattani, Vol-II : 44). In due course of time, Mala becomes a sex addict or sex-maniac letting her be sexually "used" by men in the hope of reducing her pain. The memories of horrible childhood force victims of CSA to punish themselves. "I-I seduced my uncle when I was thirteen! I – slept with my cousin – and – anyone who is available." (Dattani, Vol-II: 33). Her maternal uncle damages her innocent self. She cannot trust anyone and her love never lasts beyond thirty days. Her childhood sexual exploitation makes her emotionless and mechanical in sex. Deepak comes in her life as a good angel and

falls in love with her. She, however, openly declares:

You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!! I can't love you.... Because, because... I see this man (her maternal uncle) everywhere. I can never be free of him. I am not sure I want to be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone else. (Dattani, Vol-II : 54)

This is the pathetic condition of a victim of CSA. The abusers of Mala subconsciously live with her all the time as part of her dirty reflection.

At the end of the play Shanta reveals the cause of her silence which is the silence of suffering as well. It is due to Vinay's financial help that Shanta's mouth is locked. Mala attacks her mother thus: "He (Vinay) bought your silence. So that you can never tell anyone what he did to your daughter" (Dattani, Vol-II: 52). The character of Shanta is less an individual and more a silent witness of CSA within the family. She has never learnt to raise her voice against CSA in a patriarchal society. She is a typical female subaltern who has lost her dignity and self-respect. Shanta reveals her sexual abuse in this way: "I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen... and it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!!... I cannot shout for help... I cannot speak about it." (Dattani, Vol-II : 55)

When a girl child should play with dolls, Shanta becomes a doll for her brother to satisfy his sexual hunger. She pays a heavy penalty for being born as a girl in the patriarchal set up where her cries go unheard by her own parents. This is the worst kind of subalternization of girl child in our patriarchal society. The greatest impact of CSA is the endless silence. The silence of Mala and Shanta became cancerous for their selves and it nibbles their identities bit by bit.

The child sexual abuse of Mala and Shanta reminds us of the film *Highway* by Imtiaz Ali. The film is the story of Veera (screened by Alia Bhatt) who was sexually abused by her own uncle when she was nine years old. Like Mala's mother, the

mother of Veera, too, told Veera to be silent in this matter:

Main 9 saal kit hi... wo imported chocolates late the... mere uncle... mujhe god me bitha kar pyaar karte the... aur akele me bathroom ke andar phir god me bithate the aur pyaar karte the, cheekthi thi main aur mera munh band kar dete the... ek din maine mummy ko bol diya... mummy ne kaha, "ssh ssh kisi se kehna nai, theek hai"... uske baad maine kisi se nai kaha.... (Highway, 2014 Movie)

[I was nine years old... he used to give me imported chocolates... my uncle... he made me sit on his lap and loved me... he took me to bathroom and again made me sit on his lap and made love to me, I used to shout, he used to shut my mouth... One day I told this to my mother, "ssh, ssh don't tell this to anyone, ok..." after that I did not tell anything to anyone.]

Actually, Mala and Veera are not just characters from a play and a movie respectively; they represent those victims of CSA who are subalternized in postcolonial elite society because of the dirty politics of silence. A study, conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, entitled *Study on Child Abuse: India 2007* records that:

Parents do not speak about sexuality as well as physical and emotional changes that take place during their growing years. As a result of this, all forms of sexual abuse that a child faces do not get reported to anyone. The girl, whose mother has not spoken to her even about a basic issue like menstruation, is unable to tell her mother about the uncle or neighbor who has made sexual advances towards her. This silence encourages the abuser so that he is emboldened to continue the abuse. (MWCD 2007: 73)

Recently, a number of creative works have been done on CSA. Pinki Virani's *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India* (2000). Pinki has been honoured with a National Award for this book by the Government of India. Anna Burn's *Milkman*

(2018), Man Booker Prize winner novel, is an excellent story on child sexual abuse. Besides, Mira Nair's film *Monsoon Weeding* (2001) and Sujoy Ghosh's film *Kahaani 2* (2016) are based on CSA.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

Undoubtedly, the study of Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* uncovers the veil of silence which surrounds the Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) of girl child. Being a subaltern a girl child cannot speak about the abuse or raise their voices or there is none to listen to them. Sometimes, they are blamed for the abuse. It is supposed that she invited the incident. But research work shows that being a subaltern the victim of CSA cannot speak: "I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak. I-I cannot speak.... I cannot ever speak about it." (Dattani-II : 55). This is the problem of all types of subaltern. The adverse impact of CSA turns Mala into a sex-addict or a sex-maniac letting her be sexually "used" by men in the hope of reducing her pain. As a result, she cannot trust anyone and her love never lasts beyond thirty days.

The finding of this study shows that Deepak's "ethical intervention" helps Mala to come out of her subalternity. Deepak, creates the enabling circumstances for Mala to speak for herself and thereby come out of the disempowered position of subalternity. Therefore, this research shows that "silence" against "sexual colonialism" is a common fate of all women in all ages. "Silence" makes them subaltern despite belonging to a postcolonial era. The movement of "Breaking the Silence" in child sexual abuse can save many lives from its doom. Mala (in *Thirty Days in September*) and Veera (in the film *Highway*) both break their silence and came back to their normal lives. With the help of Deepak, Mala unveils the culprit who is no other than her uncle. Mala would have raised her voice long ago, if she had received support and courage from her mother. Further, CSA occurs at home which is considered a site of safety and security. Unfortunately, home sometimes becomes an unsafe nest as it happens with Mala, Shanta or Veera.

Dattani's projection of Mala shows that a girl can shed off her shackles of subalternization if she gets support from her near and dear ones. The journey of Mala from the state of silence and guilt to that of self-confidence and self-respect shows that women empowerment is the crying need in today's postcolonial society so that a female subaltern can cope up with any adverse circumstances. The play also throws light on the fact that the parents should handle a girl child with utmost care, affection and importance. It is the duty of parents to listen to their children when they want to speak something about their experiences. If CSA happens to any child, raising voice, breaking silence and protest can save innocent children. We want no Mala or Veera in our society.

The study about CSA in Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* also brings out that there are some barriers and challenges of CSA. Proper knowledge about it may surely be helpful to eradicate CSA from society. The following barriers and challenges of CSA are the outcome of this research work and it must be noted carefully.

- i. Cases of CSA do not come out publicly.
- ii. To be a victim of CSA is a strong social stigma and shame for the victim as well as family.
- iii. CSA is taken as a western problem, not Indian social problem.
- iv. The child is blamed rather the perpetrator for the abuse.
- v. Reluctant of women to report CSA.
- vi. Absence of CSA in school curriculum.
- vii. Lack of professional, clinically-trained expertise for counselling the victims of CSA.
- viii. Poor legal as well as medical procedures etc.

The following recommendations are also the outcome of this research work. These few recommendations are highly suggested by the researcher to emancipate girl children from the thralldom of subalternity. These recommendations

would definitely change the situation if these are implemented with utmost sincerity and honesty

Recommendations to Eradicate Child Sexual Abuse.

- i. The parents of all levels should be taught about CSA and how to raise voice against it.
- ii. The curriculum from school to university level should include different aspects of CSA according to their understanding level.
- iii. To train children about “good touch” and “bad touch”.
- iv. Workshops, street plays, lectures need to be organized at school and college levels
- v. Burning need for widespread awareness of the different aspects of CSA and the psychology of the abuser.
- vi. Different types of media such as social media, print media, film etc. should play an active role to root it out.
- vii. NGOs, Panchayet should be involved for mass awareness.
- viii. Legal action against the abusers must be taken immediately
- ix. Counselling centers with expertise faculty need to be set up in all districts

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