



# Indelible Memory Clots: Child Abuse in Select Plays of Mahesh Dattani

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**Abstract**— *Child abuse is rampant in any society, regardless of its socio-economic or religious background. The purpose of this paper is to summarize how Mahesh Dattani addresses indecent treatment of children and incest abuse in some of his plays - a trauma that victims are often unable to open up to and are forced to cope with throughout their lives. It also presents the mental and physical ordeals faced by several of the characters due to their bitter childhood experiences: how Mala and her mother Shanta never recovers from their painful encounters with incest abuse ("Thirty Days in September"), taunts that disabled children get habituated to ("Tara") and the way Jiten and Nitin's abusive father will shape their character for the worse in future ("Bravely Fought the Queen"). Findings from this present study will demonstrate that different human beings react to childhood trauma differently, regardless of whether they disclose their past traumatic incidents to others or not.*

**Keywords**— *Mahesh Dattani; Child Abuse; Trauma; CSA; Violence; Victim; Disclosure.*

## INTRODUCTION

What is child abuse? Does it concern only sexuality or something else too? Is the issue genuine? Is it possible for someone to look at a child exclusively as a sexual object or is it just another psychological imagining of the little ones? Can children describe their experiences with perpetrators properly, and even if they can, how reliable are their recounts? Researchers are constantly faced with a variety of questions, both within their own minds as well as from the surrounding community.

Several studies have been conducted in the field of child abuse, specifically in regard to child sexual abuse (CSA) and the impact it has on victims' later lives. Multiple studies also indicate factors that facilitate or restrict the process of disclosure. To address the issue further, the aim of this study is to reinterpret three of Mahesh Dattani's plays – "Bravely Fought the Queen" (1991), "Tara" (1995) and "Thirty Days in September" (2013) – in the light of child abuse, and therefore show that theatres can play a role in making people aware of this inhuman act. Additionally, multiple instances are produced from these plays, which aid in creating a fictional narrative

based on what is really taking place in our society right now.

## What is child abuse?

A comprehensive definition of child abuse is quite difficult because there are so many ways that children can be mistreated, violated, exploited or physically assaulted. The World Health Organization (WHO), in 1999, provided one of the most frequently used definitions by professionals and academicians. The institution defined 'child abuse' and 'maltreatment' as two phenomena that include various "forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment or commercial or other exploitation," the natural consequences of which are children suffering health and developmental problems, as well as a threat to their dignity and survival ("Child abuse and neglect by parents and other caregivers" 59). While many people think of 'child abuse' and 'child sexual abuse' as interchangeable concepts, the latter is a unique component that exists on the outskirts of the former. CSA is defined by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) as "any sexual interaction with a child for which consent is not or cannot be given" (Parkin) due to a kid's

inability to grasp sexual language or when assent is obtained through force or fear.

### **Awareness of the Issue**

In India, sexuality is taboo, and discussing it with others is even more so. People acknowledge that there are numerous incidents of child abuse in the country, but they tend to dismiss it when it comes to sexuality. India has about 16 crore children, with 35.3 percent of the population between the ages of 0 and 14. (censusindia.gov.in). The concept of CSA, particularly incest abuse, is often dismissed by Indian families (Nisha 67). Studies undertaken in India as early as 1996, and subsequently, confirm the existence of such occurrences. The data obtained from these studies suggest that many of the people studied had been sexually abused at least once before reaching the age of 18-19 years. According to data, 62.5 percent to 76 percent of children are sexually assaulted at home (“Indian Research on Child Sexual Abuse”; Virani 21), with roughly 40 percent to 50 percent being molested by male relatives (Nisha 68). More recently, a survey conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, revealed that several types of child abuse are extremely common in the society, including physical, sexual, and mental abuse, which have all been experienced by at least 50 percent of the sample (Saini 303). Apart from these, Indian public spaces have abused children, mainly girls, as a punitive measure towards their mothers for giving birth to a female child. Already known for their son preferencing attitude (Clark 2000: 95-97, 101, 106), Indians, usually the male population, indulge in misogynistic actions that include infant sex change of unwanted girls, physical abuse, sexual abuse, sex trafficking and abandonment (Chapman 2014: 52) along with inhuman practices such as smothering little girls, poisoning or drowning them, burying alive and even force feeding grain husks to choke female babies to death (Patel 1985: 2; Chapman 2014: 55).

In asphyxiating environments akin to these, the topic of general awareness about child abuse, with CSA in particular, and child neglect is an expected concern. Various types of misuses, particularly the inconspicuous ones that are not easily featured, additionally should be brought into the mainstream media. Moreover, since this entire upsetting circumstance concerns youngsters, they should be made aware of CSA alongside their privileges, individual wellbeing and assent. Instructing a child about sexual double-dealing is a gigantic task – a work that is presently almost ignored in India nowadays. In any case, despite the fact that schools, instructors, specialists, advisors, social labourers and others engaged with child support are devising more up to date thoughts to make

minors mindful of the situation and familiarizing them with ‘good’ and ‘bad’ physical contacts, “lack of coordination”, “quality of skills” (Nisha 71) and other gaps in the system disrupting the good deeds. Social anthropologists like Jenny Kitzinger has zeroed in on giving equivalent weightage to society’s mindfulness since acquainting youngsters with CSA and related ideas alone will surely not help in forestalling misuse (85) – the environmental elements around which kids grow up ought to likewise be made aware of the abhorrent acts and made prepared to shout out at whatever point they see any instance of misuse.

Fortunately, with a varying range of media present today, the process of awareness has become comparatively easier. In the 2017 “Youngster Sexual Abuse Awareness and Perceptions among Young Adults in India” report delivered by Kailash Satyarthi Children’s Foundation, it was tracked down that albeit 90 percent of grown-ups matured 18 or more had some awareness of CSA being a culpable offense, just 72 percent had actual knowledge of the Protection of Children against Sexual Offenses (POSCO) Act, 2012 (14, 18). Establishing the fact that over one-third of the female and one-fourth of the male respondents have experienced some form of sexual experience during their childhood – the highest being recorded in west India (2015-16), the report also revealed females favouring child education of CSA (49%) which is comparatively higher than their male (37%) counterparts (30-31), perhaps because girls become primary targets of sexual offenders from the moment they are born.

### **Role of Live Theatre in Creating Awareness**

With such a wide range of media already at our disposal, and newer ones emerging on a daily basis, theatre as an agency has a lot of potential to raise awareness about child abuse. Live theatre, unlike any other aural (radios, audiobooks, podcasts, etc.), visual (pictures, graphic designs, fine arts, etc.) or audiovisual (movies, videos, etc.) medium, can change lives and assist child abuse survivors in moving on. The most obvious reason for this is that because theatre is done live, both audience and actors can interact closely. Mark Jacobs, a cultural studies and sociology researcher, believes that having a diverse audience in the theatre hall helps to create a unique learning environment for all since people may discuss the various aspects of a piece by expressing their own viewpoints (135).

Child abuse is a socially significant issue, but the experiences of those who have experienced it are also extremely personal. Live staging of unpleasant and disturbing scenes like child rape will “allow private feelings to be jointly expressed and reinforce the sense that

we are not alone”, as theatres can constructively exploit this condition by encouraging interpersonal and intrapersonal engagement among viewers and performers alike (McCarthy et al. 50). Performances can be done with performers who were exposed to abusive situations as children or with audiences that have the same demeanour. This is exactly what Mahesh Dattani's “Thirty Days in September”, commissioned by the Recovering and Healing from Incest (RAHI) Foundation, does:

The play turned out to be a liberating and learning experience for everyone involved. Especially for the actors, who had to delve deep into unexplored areas of themselves in order to connect truthfully with the material of the play . . . that often left them shaken and not a little disturbed . . . it was a process that took them into the heart of darkness! (Dubey 3-4)

Because of its long link with ‘catharsis’ – the reproduction of an action consisting of circumstances that provoke sentiments of sorrow and terror in order to relieve one's emotions (Bywater 35) – drama may also be used as a kind of therapy. Child abuse victims, particularly incest abuse victims, suffer more as a result of delayed or inability to reveal owing to shame, self-blaming, panic, victims belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, and emotional relationship to the offender (Clancy 47-75; Nisha 70; Reitsema and Grietens 331-333). Live performances elicit emotional responses in the audience, assisting people in exposing their experiences to peer groups, psychologists, family, friends, or trustworthy others.

### Projections of Child Abuse in Dattani's Plays

“Mahesh Dattani's plays talk to the audience”, comments Susan Oommen (347). His sculptures elicit an undercurrent of human emotions, serving as a cruel yet truthful reflection of society. His themes revolve on a milieu of issues encountered mostly by metropolitan Indians, challenges that sometimes feel a touch elite in comparison to the average viewpoint. A few of his familiar subjects are that of human relationships lingering dangerously towards the forbidden areas of homosexuality (in “On a Muggy Night in Mumbai”), religious bias sprinkled with seasonings of sarcasm (in “Final Solutions”), the unspoken pains of disability in addition of being born a female in India (in “Tara”) alongside the torments of child abuse (in “Tara”, “Ek Alag Mausam”, “Bravely Fought the Queen”) and incest abuse (in “Thirty Days in September”), among others. However, Dattani has effectively avoided the insatiable need to use his plays as a political voice. In an interview with Erin Mee, the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer said that he has recognised the potential of theatre as a vehicle, preferably for social change, and that he uses it to put into words what

is going on around him (20-21). Evidences of child abuse in Dattani's plays can be clustered into three distinct features:

- a) The dilemma of disclosure
- b) Caregivers exploiting children and the case of incest abuse
- c) Non-pathological impacts of child abuse in adult life

### The Dilemma of Disclosure

Sexual abuse is one of the most heinous crimes that can be committed to a child, largely owing to their innocence, which makes them even more susceptible. Disclosure of CSA is often a complex process and research shows that a myriad of factors determine when and how, if at all, a victim will disclose their experiences (Reitsema and Grietens 335). Set on the themes of love and betrayal, Dattani's play “Thirty Days in September” treats the sensitive issue of incest abuse with the primary victim and protagonist Mala Khatri disclosing specific details of her agonising memories of abuse with uncle Vinay. At first Mala lacks confidence as she tapes a conversation with her counsellor, hesitant to use her real name, but soon decides that “there's nothing to hide” (8) and that it is the perpetrator himself who should be afraid of being recognised. Readers find Mala tragically blaming herself for the abuse: “I know it is all my fault really . . . It must be. I must have asked for it . . . Somehow, I just seem to be made for it . . . It's not anybody's fault, except my own” (9). This incident resonates with numerous other cases of CSA sufferers where victim blaming is a common phenomenon, the latter acting as a barrier to disclosure (Clancy 90; McDaniel 206; Reitsema and Grietens 331). She even holds herself and her apparent whore-like nature responsible for her parents' separation - that there could be other external causes completely eludes her: “I . . . don't think my mother and he got along – that way. Again because of me . . .” (33).

Mala's confusion provides readers with a glimpse into what goes on inside the mind of a victim of abuse and how trauma can wreak havoc. There are several symptoms that they suffer from, including:

- i) mood and anxiety disorders,
- ii) relationship problems,
- iii) sexual complications,
- iv) irregular eating habits,
- v) alcohol and drug abuse (Clancy 4; Reitsema and Grietens 333).

The play's characters undergo similar agonies: Mala has relationship problems with her fiancé Deepak Bhatia. Although both share a lovely partnership like other couples, she gets sudden mood swings that make her say

puzzling things like “It is over. I don’t want to continue with our relationship” (14) or “I cannot love you” (54). Shanta maintains that her daughter does have some difficulties but assures Deepak that she is otherwise an admirable woman. However, she hides her own childhood abuse in her brother's hands in the whole play, and only in the last pages does she finally reveal her sad truth: “I was six. And he was thirteen . . . For ten years!” (55) – a secret that is bound to bemuse the audience and the readers alike.

Previous researches on child abuse discuss the process of disclosure by victims during their adulthood. Draucker and Martsolf present four distinct stages of it:

- i. “working up to coming out with it”
- ii. “really coming out with it”
- iii. “revising the story: story-as-account”
- iv. “sharing the story: story-as-message”

(1039)

Alka Trivedi, in Mahesh Dattani’s “Bravely Fought the Queen”, was a victim of physical violence during her childhood. Her brother Praful “dragged [her] into the kitchen” (257) and pushed her face in front of the lit stove as punishment for coming home from school on a neighbourhood guy’s scooter. Her process of disclosure, as she divulges the fearful events to her sister Dolly after so many years, conforms to the first and third points of Draucker and Martsolf’s theory, where survivors gradually recount general details of their trauma. These instances demonstrate the dilemma surrounding disclosure of traumatic events that victims carry on throughout their lives if not communicated properly and on time.

### Caregivers Exploiting Children and the Case of Incest Abuse

Multiple studies indicate that a child’s sexual abuse is typically perpetrated by someone they are already familiar with (Clancy 27-46; Reitsemá and Grietens 332). Children often experience mixed emotions when their biological parent or another parent-like figure responds abusively to them, such as foster parents, stepparents, uncles and aunts; and it is natural for them to have conflicting feelings when the person who should be taking care of them turns out to be the abuser. And since children have little or no idea of sex, things get even more harrowing for them. A child’s feeling of uncertainty is common when someone tries to get physical with them: “The word used by 92 percent of the victims when asked to describe how they were feeling? Confusion” (Clancy 38). Nevertheless, some could intuitively comprehend that things were going in the wrong direction (Clancy 39). Dattani’s Mala went through a similar ruthless ordeal in the play. The frequency of Vinay's molestations during their vacation to her uncle’s house shattered her little mind

to the point that the scar remained until she confessed her tale on tape, expressing her wish to “be a little girl again” (33).

Throughout human history, children have been taught to obey their elders and authority figures without questioning their actions. It is this “teaching of obedience to all adults” (Prendergast 124) that the sex offender takes full advantage of. And since the caregiver transforms silently into a miscreant, CSA victims often feel a sense of betrayal within them (Clancy 123) – a feeling that both Shanta and Mala encountered. Mala was so utterly confused with the abusive behaviour that she started desiring, and even somewhat loving, the perpetrator: “Please understand he is not a bad person or anything like that . . . I am so confused, I don’t know what I feel for him” (Dattani 34). This same state of confusion befell Shanta as well – “I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn’t know how to speak” (Dattani 54) – the trauma of incest making her take refuge in God.

Child sex offenders employ various strategies to exploit children, sometimes by gaining trust (Clancy 37) and sometimes by bullying (Clancy 42, Nisha 70). Considering that children are naturally vulnerable, culprits make use of the chance to intimidate them.

Perpetrators often frighten children into silence and secrecy by threatening to harm them, another family member, or a favourite pet, and/or they use their position of authority to convince their victims that the situation is “normal”, and the victim has a duty to obey the adult. (Kinneer 3)

Vinay uses the same tactics to frighten Mala by abusing his authorial power. At his residence, Mala was forced to recite ‘Thirty days in September’ during which Vinay would rape her and if she attempted to protest, he would either promise to keep the matter hidden – “This is our secret” (43), or scare the child by threatening to tell her parents – “If they hear you they will say you are a bad girl” (43), or pointed to her ugliness – “See, I love you even though you are so ugly” (44), or sadistically humiliated her – “You like it! You enjoy it! After four years, you have become a whore! At thirteen you are a whore!” (44).

Parents indulging in child maltreatment, who abuse and/or neglect children, can be seen in Dattani’s play on disability “Tara” as well as in “Bravely Fought the Queen”, both portraying the primacy of patriarchy in Indian culture. While Tara, already habituated to daily taunts for her handicap, is a victim of son preferencing outlook, Alka was punished for sharing a scooter with an unknown male. Incidentally, it is the family members who mistreat the two girls during their developmental period. Tara’s parents did not want her to lead a normal life: she was denied college education along with her grandfather’s

property. Furthermore, even though Dr. Thakkar knew that the third leg would suit Tara much better than her brother Chandan, the Patel family conspired and “risk[ed] giving both legs to the boy” (378), only to permanently cripple them both. As for Alka, her brother Praful, who is also a caregiver, punished her for her actions. As an ex-Honorary Secretary General of the Indian Medical Association, Narendra Saini suggests parents and society generally avoid using harmful methods for training their children (306); sadly, Alka’s situation represents an obvious violation of the same.

### Non-pathological Impacts of Child Abuse in Adult Life

Apart from clinical symptoms, several permanent changes can occur in the lives of child abuse survivors and to look beyond a strict medical point of view might help in further research. This study will focus on two distinct signs –

- a) firstly, they tend to victimise others in later life and
- b) secondly, they develop a religious outlook.

#### *Victimising Others in Later Life*

A substantial amount of data supports the idea that childhood trauma makes a person abusive as an adult (Conte 259). This argument is emphasised by Mahesh Dattani in his play “Bravely Fought the Queen”, a drama about three generations of a family in which the father’s violence has rendered the son aggressive as well. Baa’s husband was a dominant man who used to beat his wife on a regular basis, and the latter would demonstrate it to her sons: “Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are!” (278). Recollections of this kind were so traumatic that they were repeated even after their father died, long after he had passed away. When Nitin informs her mother of his plans to sell their home, both of them are haunted by those events. Researchers in the field of violence and traumatic studies have found that “maternal childhood abuse consistently predicted increased externalising behaviour in the offspring . . . childhood abuse impacts subsequent generations” (Myhre et al. 263). Their study demonstrated that mothers and children who experienced abuses reported more “externalising behaviour” (266) than others.

Jiten is aggressive to his wife Dolly as a result of his childhood trauma from a violent father. After knowing that Dolly’s father was not dead and was actually living with another woman accompanied by their four children, Jiten started hitting his wife, then pregnant with Daksha, for deceiving him and his family. Nonetheless, Baa’s encouragement to his son to “throw her out as well” (311), not only shocks the audience, but also demonstrates that

the previous victim is now victimising others. Ironically, she wanted to preserve the kid — their heir apparent — at the same time she ordered her son to beat his wife: “No! Jitu hit her on the face but not on the . . . stop it Jitu! On the face, only on the face!” (311).

#### *Development of a religious outlook*

Childhood maltreatment has been shown to have long-term harmful effects on human development. Researchers, medical supervisors, and professional counsellors utilised the Ego Grasping Orientation (EGO) scale to examine women who were sexually molested as children in order to learn more about their spiritual growth and to assist victims lessen the impacts of childhood abuse (Smith et al. 132). According to the findings, spiritual maturity and a shift in religious mentality assist many victims in their rehabilitation journey.

Self-surrender is a requirement for real self-transcendence, according to spiritual authors and theologians, and religion may occasionally give company on a person’s life journey (Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum 166, 172; Hill and Pargament 64). In Dattani’s “Thirty Days in September” the stage ostentatiously displays a dominating portrait of Lord Krishna in the living area – in addition to a pooja chamber – as if to convince the spectators and readers of spiritual alliance from the start. Breaking the glass painting of Krishna – perhaps her only defence – for always being “busy in either the pooja room or the kitchen” (26), Shanta is chastised throughout the play by her daughter for defending her child molester brother Vinay – “I am talking about what I told you five years ago, but you said it wasn’t true, it couldn’t be true” (25), hushing Mala for “pushing [herself] on him in the bedroom” (27) and even condemning her for being a “bad girl” who has “gone ashtray” (29), the abused mother discloses her own peril as a child with the same man only in the final scenes, at a point when audiences may have become disgusted with her unsympathetic attitude and “frozen” (36) composure. While Mala accuses Shanta of being a failure as a wife and mother, the latter tries to conceal her sorrow by placing her faith in God: “Krishna knows what all I have gone through. He knows” (36), her ultimate revelation coming in the form of a choked agony as she defeatedly declares “I looked to Him . . . He helped me. By taking away all feeling. No pain no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti” (55). This act of victims surrendering to a higher spiritual figure has been cited as indicative of their “fatalistic, passive resignation to events” (Smith et al. 132). Shanta, unable to inform others of her incestuous abuse, sought sanctuary in God. Finally, with Vinay’s symbolic death, the mother-daughter duo’s confrontation with their horrific past comes to an end, as

they both recover in the prayer room by confessing their hardships and asking for forgiveness from each other.

### CONCLUSION

Dattani's characters try to secure "their own space or freedom from an invisible, self-inflicted form of oppression" (Banerjee 166), as is established from his plays under consideration in this paper. The line between love and hatred gets blurred when Tara struggles to free herself from the shackles her parents have placed on her, or Dolly is trying to forget her husband's abusive behaviour towards her, or Mala takes revenge on her childhood molester. Starting with cultural values and family dynamics to perpetrators' relationships with victims, this paper examines the difficulties faced by CSA victims. This paper also illustrates how abuse, neglect, and physical and mental violence suffered by children can leave a lasting scar, sometimes so deep that it's impossible to recover from, thereby describing the various outcomes that might later show up in an abused victim. Children are naturally vulnerable and it is the duty of mankind to save them from cruel beasts wearing masks of humanity, else this "merry-go-round-shunning of responsibility" (Nisha 72) will only hurt the little ones more. There is no utopian society that exists, but an optimistic approach can be pursued by speaking one's opinions, creating awareness, enacting legal measures, and opening more to children. Those things will benefit all in the long run.

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