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The Woman in the Body: Locating the Individuality within Patriarchy in Dattani's Thirty Days in September and Ek Alag Mausam

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to bring to light Mahesh Dattani's endeavor in both the plays *Thirty Days in September* and *Ek Alag Mausam* to highlight the fact that liberation for women can only be attained when they question the oppressive and domineering norms laid down by patriarchal setup. *Thirty Days in September* is a powerful portrayal of love and deceit that treats the astute and generally taboo issue of child sexual abuse. The second play *Ek Alag Mausam* is an eminent and thematic innovation in the field of Indian English drama dealing with the pain and suffering of HIV positives of Indian society. The women characters in both the plays prove that women can empower themselves by eschewing patriarchal power constructions and they are determined to make their presence felt as an individual. Their act of self-assertion has given them self-confidence, self-respect and self-motivation.

Key Words: Individuality, patriarchy, oppression, liberation

Mahesh Dattani in both the plays *Thirty Days in September* and *Ek Alag Mausam* attempts to highlight the fact that liberation for women can only be attained when they question the muggy and oppressive norms laid down by patriarchal setup. Dattani's women protagonist Mala in *Thirty Days in September* and Aparna in *Ek Alag Mausam* openly question the conventional norms and attain a rebellious attitude towards the stereotyped image of woman, thereby, developing a feminine susceptibility against the feminine consciousness that has prevailed earlier. Sheila Rowbotham has aptly commented in her book *Women, Resistance and Revolution*:

One of the compelling facts which can unite women and make us act is the overwhelming indignity or bitter hurt of being regarded as simply 'the other', 'an object', 'commodity', 'thing'." (98)

The women protagonist in both the plays of Mahesh Dattani have begun to see themselves as individuals with an identity of their own and refuse to mould themselves according to the conventional roles and limitations imposed upon them by the patriarchal society.

The paper analyses the factors that lead to the objectification of feminine body as explicated by Bartky in *Femininity and Domination* where she uses Marx theory of Alienation to explain the objectification that results from women's preoccupation with their appearance. According to Bartky:

In the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality women must make herself 'object and prey' for the man...women lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other. (73)

This tendency to see and treat themselves as objects to be gazed and decorated has been one of the factors which have led to the exploitation of female body over the centuries.

Thirty Days in September is a powerful portrayal of love and deceit that treats the discerning and generally taboo issue of child sexual abuse. The play endeavors to lift the veil of silence which surrounds child sexual abuse and addresses the issue audaciously. The play is built on the trauma of Mala who lives with the haunting memories of her abused past. Her abuser is her uncle who subconsciously lives with her all the time, as part of her dirty reflections. He damages her natural growth, deters her from pursuing her love interests beyond the ominous thirty day period and scars her soul every now and then. As Mala withers under the psychological pressure exerted on her by the abuser, her mother watches silently, living her own pain and suffering mutely.

The play brings home the horrors and pains of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship who are the victims of incest and child sexual abuse. Blume gives a conceptual description of the violence which according to him does not require force:

Incest, as sexual abuse and abuse of power, is violence that does not require force....It is abuse because it does not take into consideration the needs or wishes of the child, rather meeting the needs of the 'caretaker' at the child's expense...incest can be seen as the imposition of sexually inappropriate acts, or acts with sexual emotional overtones, by or any use of a minor child to meet the sexual or sexually emotional needs of one or more person who derive

authority through ongoing emotional bonding with that child. (Secret Survivors 4)

The title of the play signifies how incest destroys the emotional as well as psychological well-being of a woman. That's why; the protagonist of the play, Mala does not carry on in any relationship with a man beyond thirty days. The play portrays the issue of incest through Mala and her mother, Shanta. Both the daughter and the mother are sexually molested in their infancy by the same person Vinay, who is Shanta's own brother. The sexual molestation has different consequences for both the victims as Shanta is dragooned into bearing it mutely due to social pressure and taboos and Mala revolts against it in her own way.

The play begins with Mala's conversation with the counselor which reveals her perplexed and mystified state of mind. Dattani unveils the variance of Mala's conscious and unconscious mind through the counseling and recorded voice on tape. Mala holds her mother accountable for the disaster which shattered her dream of a settled life and her attitude to life has changed. She hesitates to tell anyone what is bothering her and she does not even know that she is a victim. She stammers out her sentences:

I—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... I am sorry... I know it is all my fault really... It must be. I must have asked for it... it's not anybody's fault, except my own. Sometimes I wish that my mother... (CP II 9)

Mala not only bears the pain of sexual assault in her childhood but also equally suffers the emotional hurt caused by her mother's silence against her molestation which exists in her unconscious mind. Here the dramatist shows how patriarchy shrinks women to their bodies which are conceived in functionalist and reductionist conditions. Shanta represents that section of women who are bludgeoned into silence and submission by the burden of patriarchal authority. Being a submissive mother whose husband has left her alone with the responsibility of a daughter, she tries to stay away from the horrors of the exposition of the dark reality which she feels will destroy her daughter's life. She deliberately ignores Mala's situation and always tries to divert Mala's mind by calling her horrifying experience a fabricated story. The casual attitude of her mother intensifies Mala's anger and she retorts:

I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven. Then eight. Nine. Ten. Every vacation when we went to visit him or when he came to stay with us. You were busy in either the pooja room or the kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could even tell him why I was crying he would tell me to go to you. (CP II 25-26)

The playwright has tried to focus that the exploitative physical relations which signify man's victory over woman can ruin her life completely. Thus, Mala's anguish and pain is intensified from her realization of her mother's silence and betrayal. In this regard, Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri in her book observes:

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)

The sexual assault on Mala in her childhood and betrayal at the hands of her mother not only affects Mala's psyche but also develops a sense of guilt consciousness in her mother. Shanta in order to compensate for her guilt of being silent to the injustice meted out to her girl, requests Deepak to marry Mala but Mala turns down Deepak's proposal for marrying her arguing that they would not be attuned. At the end of the play, after the revelation of the reality that she was molested by her maternal uncle, Deepak asks her to come with him but she refuses and says:

You don't understand! You don't understand!! I cannot love you because I see this man [her uncle, Vinay] everywhere. I can never be free of him. Even if I was, I am not sure whether I have the ability to love anyone... else. (CP II 54)

It is Shanta's silence which creates misunderstanding between them and they start distrusting each other. Shanta's silence is the result of the inessential position of women in the society as compared to the essential "Other". When the silence is broken, they find each other on the same surface. Her mother's revelation of the fact that she also suffered the molestation for ten years by the same person when she was six shatters Mala and she regrets "We were both struggling to survive but—I never acknowledged your struggle" (CP II 58). Through the silence, Dattani has tried to highlight the degenerating Indian morality

on the one hand and the stereotypical image of women which present them as objects of sexual pleasure. Spacks in *The Female Imagination* comments on the passive nature of women in the patriarchal society:

Man reserves for himself the terrors and triumphs of transcendence, He offers women safety, the temptation of passivity and acceptance; He tells her that passivity and acceptance are her nature. (16)

Shanta portrays the image of a traditional Indian woman who bears the pain by keeping her voice silent whereas Mala is a girl with modern sensibilities who revolts not only against her mother's silence but also challenges the institution of marriage which thrives on male supremacy.

The second play *Ek Alag Mausam* is an eminent and thematic innovation in the field of Indian English drama dealing with the pain and suffering of HIV positives of Indian society. Against the love-saga of the two HIV positives Aparna and George, the plot of the play deals with poignant crisis in the life of Aparna who has to wage a fight both at personal and social front. The play is a heart ranching story of two women who are doubly marginalized and traumatized due to a disease which they receive from men. Here, Dattani highlights the ethos of women like Aparna by mirroring her experience, who is silenced by various customs, myths, conventions and misbelieves of the society. Beena Aggarwal has aptly commented in this context:

Ek Alag Mausam is a play with a message, it is not a question of the love of the two people but it is a question of love with life. Dattani takes the place

that the misfortune of being marginalized as being HIV positive, cannot crush the urge of life. (Mahesh Dattani 140)

In this play, the playwright focuses on fundamental urge of human beings to survive, to belong and to live life in an admirable way depicting incidents of past and present in the lives of Aparna and George. Aparna is expecting a baby and informs Suresh, her husband about the Cooper's telephonic talk and requests him to accompany her to hospital. She pleads and ask him, "It's something about our baby. I am scared Suresh. I want you with me" (CP II 476). She is greatly hurt as her husband is not keen to accompany her and she is compelled to go to the hospital alone. Cooper advises her to give up her baby at the hospital and Aparna strongly objects to this idea by asking, "Why? What's wrong with my baby?" (CP II 478). Aparna wants the child to survive and expressed her anxiety, "Am I going to lose my baby?" (CP II 478). The revelation of her being HIV positive shatters her completely and she utters, "It's not possible, how I could be HIV positive?" (CP II 478).

When informed by the doctor that Aparna received the infection from her husband, Aparna is jolted to realize the bitter fact of her shallow marital life. Here, Dattani depicts the grim reality of the institution of marriage where men have always exerted power over women inside and outside the marriage.

Aparna's illusionary sense of companionship is further shaken by the interrogatory words of Suresh which further puts Aparna in a vague condition, "What are

you going to do now?" (CP II 482). Suresh leaves the city and Aparna makes futile efforts to hold him back and begs her, "Suresh, stay for a while! Just talk to me for a while!" (CP II 482). Aparna undergoes a sense of uprootedness and insecurity in her desperate mood and vulnerable condition. Aparna loses her child and she is undermined both in her body and will. Nevertheless, unshaken by all these, Aparna seeks refuge at Jeevan Jyoti Hospital and gradually she feels that Jeevan Jyoti is her new and true home. When she goes to the hospital, the group therapy session is going on and Aparna observes the session. Dr. Machado moves around with grace and energy while addressing the inmates.

Dr. Machado. (moving around) Aren't we all dying? Isn't everyone in this world dying? (Pausing for effect) I am not HIV positive. But I am also dying. But do I think about my death all the bloody time... (CP II 486)

Dr. Machado tries his best to elevate their strength and shake off their fear of death. The people are encouraged and cheered by his attempt. Aparna is moved by Dr. Machado's slogan "Keep fighting. Seize the moment" (CP II 487). He infuses positive attitude into the minds of the people infected with virus because the social disgust, exclusion and avoidance are more horrifying than the horror of death.

The play *Ek Alag Mausam* celebrates the joy of life rather than mourning on the death. When Aparna complained that she should have been informed about Suraj's deceased parents. George puts it in a very subtle way. "Death is not news over here. Life is" (CP II 504). Ramnath was

encouraged to play cards even before few seconds of his long breath. Dattani maintains the notion that under the evil impact of the social prejudices and myths, people are forced to live lives at the peripheral level of society and cause social exclusion of the weaker sections of the society.

The lake washing scene illustrates Dattani's notion of female sexuality which is viewed with disrespect. The feelings which emerge in Aparna's heart on watching George's wet body are suppressed by her. Female sexuality is a locus of anxiety in patriarchal discourse and male control of the female body is culturally endorsed. Male sexuality is celebrated and female sexuality is usually subsumed in reproduction. N. P. Kumar in his book, *Writing the Female* has aptly commented about the patriarchal endorsement of man's sexual urges, "Though woman is defined by her sexuality, she is restrained from enjoying her sexuality" (41).

Dattani in this play juxtaposes the plight of HIV positive wife on the one hand and HIV prostitute on the other. Rita represents the darker side of HIV positive prostitutes who are used, abused and reduced. Kate Millet in *The Prostitution Papers* calls prostitutes 'political prisoners' of a patriarchal society. In short, the core of prostitution is sexual politics (119). Dattani through another women character Rita in the play highlights the unlicensed sex business that is managed by men, in which women are reduced to functional thing and an object of appetite for men. Rita was employed at a brothel as a sex worker and was infected because of her involvement in illegal sex business. She

along with her daughter Paro was driven out of her brothel as she was losing customers due to virus infection.

Dattani is concerned with the problems and suffering of the marginalized people and he tries to justify them by putting their voices on the page, stage and also onto cinematic screen. George informs Rita that they are taking them to Jeevan Jyoti hospital where she will be looked after without giving anything in return and assures her that hospital will take care of her along with her daughter. Rita is so relieved that she feels happy to have virus and pathetically speaks, "Oh! Thank God I have Aids" (CP II 528). Rita is a sex worker but her motherhood is intact and is all the time thinking about her little daughter. It is quite touching when she asks Aparna to allow her daughter to stay with her only for one night and requests "Let her stay with me just for one night please" (CP II 529). Aparna and Rita, both women belong to different social background but they have the same undying desire for motherhood. Beena Aggarwal observed:

Aparna and Rita are from two distinctive social status, but both of them possess equal quest for motherhood. It signifies that human sentiments, human sympathy and human sensibility is associated with the universal human experiences, irrespective of externally imposed restrictions. (Mahesh Dattani 147)

Dattani in this play seems to be missioned at working for the cause of the deprived and marginalized. He strives for doing the justice to the people who have been denied love and justice. He dramatizes the emotional crisis resulting from the lack of understanding about the dreaded disease

AIDS very skillfully and artistically. Aparna's love and care for Paro, George's affection for the kids, all the HIV positives and feelings for Aparna, and Dr. Machado's undying paternal care and consideration are the way to redress the gaps carved in their lives by social apathy and fate. The stroke of AIDS cut off their relationship from their loved ones for good. Aparna is separated from her husband and has to let go the unborn child.

Mahesh Dattani is deeply conscious of woman's muted and invisible existence in the male supremacist society where her subjugated position is the order of the day. Aparna in *Ek Alag Mausam* and Mala in *Thirty Days in September* voice a strong feeling experienced by women in general; the feeling that they are not fairly treated by men. Their act of self-assertion has given them self-confidence, self-respect and self-motivation. Mala and Aparna in both the plays are not deterred by the discouraging attitude of society and they have evolved different strategies not exactly to grab male space but to assert their own individuality and act independently with a sense of freedom and conviction in the patriarchal set up. These characters prove that women can empower themselves by eschewing patriarchal power constructions and they are determined to make their presence felt as an individual.

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