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Best Kept Secret: The Conspiracy of Silence in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*

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Abstract

This article explores the nuanced dimensions of silence, examining its physical, psychological, and textual manifestations in Mahesh Dattani's play "Thirty Days in September," addressing the sensitive theme of child sexual abuse (CSA). It delves into the multifaceted roles of silence as a mechanism for psychological resistance, repression, suppression, and avoidance in the lives of CSA survivors, particularly portrayed through the characters of Shanta and Mala. The article also explores the symbolic presence of God as a silent refuge and the intentional use of authorial license to veil characters' voices, highlighting the complexities of familial dynamics, societal expectations, and the pervasive silence surrounding CSA, emphasizing the challenges faced by victims in articulating their experiences. Furthermore, it delves into the psychological impact of repression and suppression on CSA survivors, detailing the intricate interplay between memory recall, dissociation, and the difficulties survivors encounter in acknowledging and confronting their traumatic past. The narrative of the play is dissected to reveal instances of silence as a coping mechanism, as well as the role of shame, secrecy, and power dynamics within familial contexts. The portrayal of God as a silent presence becomes a symbolic sacred space for characters to express and confront suppressed aspects of their harrowing experiences.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), Dilemma of Disclosure, Incest, Abuse

Introduction

The utilization of silence as a spatial construct serves numerous heuristic purposes within the context of human civilization. Traditionally defined as "a state of not speaking or writing or making a noise" ("Cambridge Dictionary") and associated with the

intentional suppression of thought by compelling individuals to remain quiet (“Merriam Webster”), silence is often perceived as culpable for fostering an absence of meaning. However, in practice, the absence of verbal expression frequently proves to be more efficacious. In Mahesh Dattani’s play, *Thirty Days in September*, which addresses the sensitive topic of child sexual abuse (CSA), the rhetoric of silence plays a pivotal role in facilitating psychological resistance. It acts as a mechanism for repression and suppression in the lives of victims, illustrating its potential effectiveness. Moreover, the act of forcibly silencing an infant, child, or even their parent or caregiver parallels a form of dominance commonly employed by child sexual abusers. The concept of textual silence also emerges as a literary strategy employed by writers to represent the unrepresentable. By deliberately choosing to silence characters, authors make their unspoken words more vividly comprehensible and identifiable, thereby exploring the nuanced dimensions of trauma and the complexities of human experience. In essence, silence, both in reality and in literature, proves to be a multi-faceted phenomenon, influencing and reflecting the intricate aspects of human psychology and societal dynamics.

Psychological Silence as Repression, Suppression and Avoidance

The term “repression”, with respect to CSA, can be defined as a total or partial removal of conscious traumatic memories from a child’s awareness (Singer vii). Cases of CSA survivors repressing their memories are exceptionally common, particularly in the case of incest abuse. More than half of the women in a study (Loftus et. al 80) reported childhood sexual abuse memories, with varying recollections: 69% remembered the abuse throughout their lives, 12% recalled parts but not all, 19% forgot the abuse for a time but later regained the memory and those who forgot exhibited deteriorated memories with less clarity, fewer details, and diminished emotional intensity. Child sexual abuse survivors commonly repress memories, experiencing amnesia for parts of their childhood and enduring persistent poor memory and learning issues into adulthood, with the resurfaced memories often remaining unclear due to dissociation during the abuse (Ratican 33, 35). Past traumatic experiences often

remaining buried in the subconscious contributes to almost 50% of incest abuse victims completely forgetting the occurrences (Blume 81), and approximately 60% suppressing those distressing memories for several years (Bradshaw 43), highlighting the profound impact of repression on recollection and the challenges faced by survivors in acknowledging and confronting their traumatic past.

Silence as a vehicle runs deep, albeit implicitly, in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*, primarily as a mode of repression, suppression, and avoidance of sexual abuse memories. Numerous instances of Mala Khatri and Shanta Khatri using silence as a strategy to repress their incest abuse memories are seen throughout the text. A more alarming aspect of CSA unfolds here: the mother-daughter duo had experienced sexual abuse in the hands of the same man Vinay — identified as Shanta's brother and Mala's uncle. For traditional Indian family reasons or otherwise, Shanta tries her best throughout the play to make Mala forcibly silence these memories from ever resurfacing. Growing up, however, she begins to realise that the repressed memories of her past afflictions were negatively affecting her present life and relationships with others. Naturally, she then accuses Shanta of destroying her life by relentlessly silencing her: "Ma, I am talking about what I had told you five years ago, but you said it couldn't be true. But now I know that you want to believe it is not true" (Dattani 25). In this context, Susan Clancy distinguishes between suppression and repression, asserting that the former is a voluntary and conscious act on the victim's part, involving a deliberate effort to eradicate traumatic memories, constituting a coping strategy frequently adopted by individuals striving to manage the impact of incest abuse (155). Dattani portrays both the female protagonists, especially Shanta, as using psychological silence as one of the means to endure their common torment. She forcibly tries to forget her memories and fervently urges her daughter to do so. In the play's concluding sequence, Mala sternly excoriates Shanta for her arid silence even after divulging all the scarring details, to which the latter defeatedly replies, "Forget. Remember what I told you. Forget!" (Dattani 54). Intentional forgetting, employed as a suppression mechanism, contributes to the pervasive silence surrounding child sexual abuse (CSA), inadvertently enabling abusers and perpetuating a culture of

silence that hinders widespread awareness and societal activism against this reprehensible crime.

Repression and suppression intersperse in the text during what Clancy calls “inaccurate memory recall” (53) — when the present psychological status of the victim silences the true traumatic memories by misrepresenting them. As Vinay regularly molested Mala as a child, she used to cry, expressing her physical pain. Years later, these haunting memories were distorted within Shanta’s psyche, who observed a few of those incidents firsthand. When Mala continuously reiterates that uncle Vinay and another cousin “made the advances” (Dattani 28), Shanta replies that she remembers something entirely different — that it was little Mala herself who wanted to become intimate, it was she who wanted her uncle’s kisses and physical touches. Mala’s vehement protests denying these false accusations get helplessly silenced as her mother continues:

SHANTA. But Mala, I have seen it with my own eyes. You enjoyed it. You were an average child but you had my brother and your cousins dancing around you. That is what you wanted. Yes! How can I forget?

...

Silence.¹

This kind of cognitive “dissociation”, encompassing the compartmentalization of experience, with sensory and emotional fragments stored as isolated elements in memory, is common to sex abuse victims as it acts as a defense channel to help victims silently escape the pain they experience (van der Kolk and Fisler 510). Observing her own daughter Mala undergo sexual assault, and having personally endured similar experiences during her childhood, Shanta’s recollections of these molestations have been significantly fragmented, rendering them exceedingly challenging to be fully and accurately reconstructed.

Clancy asserts that articulating traumatic experiences could be imperative for psychological well-being as victims require the ability to verbalize and discuss what occurred, which may play a crucial role in overcoming the psychological distress they endure in the aftermath; paradoxically, victims often employ two prevalent coping mechanisms, namely attempting to avoid thinking about the abuse and endeavouring to forget about it, as alternatives to openly discussing their painful experiences (155). In the initial act of

Dattani's play, when the "Man" masquerading as a paper vendor enters the Khatri household and demands payment with his "pelvis thrust out in an imposing manner" (11), Shanta experiences visible discomfort, yet she refrains from voicing her unease and, instead, acquiesces by making the payment. This cognitive silence, manifested as a purposeful avoidance of discussions pertaining to traumatic memories, recurs in several instances within the play. When Mala discloses her experiences of abuse, Shanta intentionally sidesteps the topic, redirecting the conversation towards a fruitless discussion about Deepak Bhatia. Moreover, even in Mala's early childhood, when complaints were raised regarding her uncle, Shanta deliberately evaded these discussions by diverting attention through the act of feeding her daughter, utilizing this not only to silence Mala but also to suppress the resurfacing of her memories. It is seemingly perplexing that a mother would disregard her child's complaints, particularly those concerning a matter as significant as child sexual abuse. However, empirical evidence suggests that two factors contribute to the difficulty of forgetting memories: their negative emotional valence, causing distress to the individual recalling them, and the existence of environmental cues capable of triggering the memory (Clancy 153). Consequently, whenever Mala was subjected to sexual abuses by Vinay, Shanta's unconscious mind would invariably evoke her own past experiences with the same individual.

Silence involving Shame and Secrecy

In 2020, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights documented 420 verified cases and received 3,941 calls related to CSA over a span of six and seven months² (PIB Delhi). Despite these reported cases, it is crucial to recognize that instances of CSA are likely significantly underreported, as many victims choose to endure their suffering silently rather than confront potential familial embarrassment and public shame. This reluctance to report contributes to the pervasive underestimation of the true extent of CSA prevalence. Moreover, distinguishing itself from adult sexual abuse, CSA represents a complex dilemma, constituting a double-edged sword involving both perpetrators and victims within the same familial context. This intricate dynamic further underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges associated with addressing and

understanding the prevalence of CSA in contemporary society. Studies in India since 1996 reveal that a substantial proportion, ranging from 62.5% to 76%, of children experience sexual assault within the confines of their homes (Virani 21), with approximately 40% to 50% of these assaults being committed by male relatives (Nisha 68), thereby complicating the ability of victims to articulate their grievances. Women's mobility in the context of sexual abuse becomes restricted due to the pervasive feelings of shame and the need for secrecy, as the prospect of public disclosure of traumatic experiences carries the potential for adverse repercussions. Consequently, this situation engenders a state of deliberate silence among female victims, wherein they consciously refrain from speaking out about their experiences of abuse, highlighting the complex interplay between societal expectations, trauma, and the suppression of victim narratives.

Dattani intricately intertwines the themes of silence, shame, and secrecy in three discernible sequences within the narrative. Firstly, the monologues between Mala and the counselor illuminate a profound apprehension towards disclosure, underscoring the pivotal role of secrecy in her experience. This is evident as she hesitates to fully divulge her memories during the recorded conversation on the 30th of September, refrains from disclosing her identity, requests the cessation of the recording to enable a more candid conversation, and even extends an apology for a circumstance for which she was, in fact, a victim during her childhood. These instances collectively highlight the intricate nexus between silence, shame, and the imperative to conceal traumatic experiences, providing nuanced insights into the psychological complexities surrounding the disclosure of child sexual abuse: "It's not anybody's fault except my own" (Dattani 9). Hence, Mala employs silence as a means of controlling information, strategically veiling her experiences in a shroud of secrecy. Secondly, within the tripartite conversation involving Shanta, Mala, and Deepak, silence becomes a deliberate instrument to withhold historical narratives. Deepak expresses skepticism about Shanta withholding information, while Mala staunchly rejects her mother's proposal to conceal her traumatic past from Deepak: "How can I hide all this from him if I am to marry him Ma?" (Dattani 29). Finally, Vijay's sexual assault on Mala reaches a

culmination in the imposition of silence as a tool of oppression, employing the threat of exposing her “whore”-like actions to coerce her into compliance: “If they hear you they will say you are a bad girl. This is our secret” (Dattani 43-44). By explicitly shaming Mala’s very body while raping, Vijay exacerbates her silencing, asserting, “I love you even though you are so ugly...Nobody will tell you how ugly you are. But you are good only for this” (Dattani 44). In this context, textual silence assumes the role of a metaphor, symbolizing the subordination of women through their forced muteness in the face of abuse, highlighting the complex interplay between power dynamics, gender-based violence, and the suppression of victims’ voices in instances of intimate partner violence.

God as a Silent Presence

The portrayal of God as a silent body, introducing a profound thematic element in the play’s exposition, is embodied by the grandiose presence of Shri Krishna on stage. The silent existence of God, positioned in the narrative’s background, serves as a symbolic sacred space for the otherwise reserved Shanta, enabling a form of self-disclosure where the unspoken dimensions of her psyche find articulation. Within this sacred realm, Shanta unveils her innermost silenced thoughts, revealing the traumatic incestuous childhood experiences of the sexual assaults perpetrated by her brother Vinay and his subsequent molestations on her daughter. Seeking solace in Lord Krishna, Shanta utters that He “knows all [she has] gone through” (Dattani 36), emphasizing the symbolic significance of God as a sanctuary for victims to express and confront the deeply suppressed aspects of their harrowing experiences. In Act III, when Mala starts condemning her mother for being oblivious towards her physical and psychological destruction, Shanta finally de-silences herself, much to the reader’s astonishment, that none except God ever felt her pain:

(Pointing to the picture of God.)³ I looked to Him. I didn’t feel anything. I didn’t feel pain, I didn’t feel pleasure. I lost myself in Him. He helped me . . . By taking away all feeling. No pain no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti⁴ . . . I cannot shout for help, I cannot say words of comfort, I cannot even speak about it. (Dattani 55)

Within the play, Shanta's silent prayers can be interpreted not merely as a pursuit of spiritual transcendence but rather as an expression of a familial connection with God, seeking solace and guidance from the Divine. It becomes a means for her to cleanse herself from the haunting shame of past trauma, a process aimed at preserving both her interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

Human silence exists within a particular framework, situated between "divine silence" and "animal silence" (Gould 3), constituting a binary of speechlessness, characterized by the voluntary suspension or involuntary debility of human speech or language. "Silence is a definitive character of God" (Gould 3), and is understood as an empty spatial entity. He comments: thematically connected to the vast expanses of the cosmos is the incomprehensible silence attributed to God and the heavens, a transcendent silence that holds significance within theological and post-theological discussions, often categorized under the framework of "negative theology or apophasis" (8). Shanta's connection with Lord Krishna and Mala's relationship with her "imagined" counselor can be likened to spaces facilitating the communication of the unsaid. In moments of internal silence, the mother-daughter duo engages in occasional conversations with their respective personal God-figures, where Mala's temporal interactions with her counsellor transform into Shanta's spiritual connections with Lord Krishna. Despite Mala's reproach of her mother's constant prayers during her complaints about inner turmoil, she inadvertently overlooks Shanta's concealed pain. The resulting inadvertent silence, arising from Mala and Shanta's revelations before the silent presence of Krishna/counsellor⁵, constructs an ideal pathway for both of them to seek peace and solace in their quest for emotional healing.

Bodily and Authorial Silence

The occurrence of sexual abuse immediately silences the biological body, but alongside this, there exists an additional dimension of the body's silence in terms of the ego. The inherent nature of the body remains an integral aspect of our identity that remains beyond the scope of ego consciousness. Unlike the body ego, shaped by mirrored reflections and perceived images, the "body in itself" encompasses sensations continuously circulating. Awareness of these sensations

arises when one ceases mental dialogue, self-reflection, and imaginative projections, instead focusing on the present sensory experiences in the body's silent realm (Hill 30). The rhetoric of silence necessitates reader attentiveness, as silence, devoid of explicit explanation or speech, inherently demands interpretation and an active act of reading to discern its meaning (Anderson 59). Absolute physical absence has the potential to function as a manifestation of bodily silence, particularly within closely-knit familial structures. It is akin to authorial license, granting authors the authority to deny a character's voice entirely which involves strategically omitting explicit details to safeguard the dignity and privacy of survivors.

The play portrays Shanta as a sexually silenced individual, as evidenced by her reluctance to share a room with her husband and her explicit prohibition of any physical contact. This behavior is interpreted as a consequence of witnessing Mala's experience of incestuous abuse. Mothers of sexually abused daughters, particularly those who themselves experienced sexual abuse, exhibit significantly higher levels of adverse childhood experiences, current psychological distress, and problematic parenting practices, including the lowest emotional support from family and the least supportive parenting, while mothers of abused daughters who were not themselves abused tend to employ more punitive discipline; collectively, mothers of sexually abused daughters report heightened distress and parenting challenges in the aftermath of their daughters' abuse disclosures (Trickett et al.). This insight suggests a correlation between Shanta's observed behavior and the documented impact of incestuous abuse on familial dynamics. The play, therefore, underscores the nuanced ways in which authorial silence can convey the complexities of trauma and its far-reaching effects within the family structure. Shanta's husband opts to abandon the family instead of delving into the genuine cause of her state as "a frozen woman" (Dattani 36). In the face of Mala's accusations, it becomes apparent that the unfolding scenario serves to underscore not Shanta's shortcomings, but rather, it magnifies her father's deficiencies as both a spouse and a parent. This culmination of physical silence takes on an auditory dimension as Shanta, grappling with her internal turmoil, emits unintelligible utterances in the form of "Aaaaa, oooooo" sounds (Dattani 55). This phonetic expression encapsulates the profound impact of

unspoken pain, adding a layer of complexity to the narrative and emphasizing the limitations of verbal communication in conveying the depth of Shanta's emotional distress. Ironically, Shanta's silenced virility seeks to mute Mala's voice physically by overfeeding her with alu parathas, as Mala reflects, "I couldn't speak because I was being fed all the time... I thought that was the cure for my pain" (Dattani 24).

Elaine Bander defines the concept of authorial silence as a rhetorical device where an author intentionally imposes silence either on the text itself or on their own expression, representing a deliberate absence or omission of certain narrative elements (52). This notion stands distinct from the silence exhibited by characters within the narrative, where the narrator describes them as refraining from speech. Authorial silence thus involves a deliberate choice by the writer to control the narrative by withholding information, creating a unique layer of meaning beyond the characters' interactions and dialogue within the story. In Act III, a pivotal moment unfolds as Mala undergoes complete silencing of her voice during the alternating speeches of Man/Vinay and Deepak. The scene, where Ravi inflicts harm on young Mala while Deepak simultaneously attempts to soothe her, can be viewed as a symbolic representation of the perpetual struggle between Freudian id and superego. Notably, Mala's verbal silence coincides with her metaphorical absence upon Vinay's entrance, only to be de-silenced once the desecration concludes. Though Dattani does not explicitly articulate the reason for this narrative choice, it can be interpreted as his deliberate effort to depict Mala as an unrepresentable, trauma-induced entity caught between the clutches of a perpetrator and a caring fiancée.

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse is a profoundly distressing and pervasive issue that has severe and lasting impacts on its victims. The consequences extend beyond physical harm to include profound emotional, psychological, and social repercussions. Victims often face challenges in disclosing the abuse due to fear, shame, or manipulation by the perpetrators, leading to delayed reporting. Clancy discusses how abused children frequently face challenges in disclosing their traumatic experiences, often due to factors such as their young age

(12), the potential for inaccurate recollections (34), the fear of threats from perpetrators, feelings of helplessness, and a limited understanding of the abusive acts during that period (52). Moreover, societal stigma and disbelief can further compound the trauma for survivors. This article explores the multifaceted nature of silence, encompassing both physical and psychological dimensions, as well as its manifestation within the textual framework to portray muteness and its varied roles in Mahesh Dattani's play "Thirty Days in September," which addresses the theme of child sexual abuse. The examination extends to the portrayal of a Godlike figure as a silent refuge and the intentional use of authorial license to shroud a character's voice. Acknowledging the limitations of this article, there exists a potential avenue for further research within the domain of silence as employed in theatrical works addressing child sexual abuse. Adequate support systems, including counseling and therapy, are crucial for victims to cope with the aftermath. The legal system plays a crucial role in seeking justice and holding perpetrators accountable, but it is imperative to address broader systemic issues to prevent and combat child sexual abuse effectively. Public awareness and education are essential tools in breaking the silence surrounding this sensitive issue and fostering a culture that prioritizes the protection and well-being of children.

Notes

1. *Italics in original.*
2. The 420 cases of CSA were received between 1st March and 31st August 2020. The 3941 calls were received between 1st March and 15th September 2020.
3. *Italics in original.*
4. 'Shanti', contextually, in Hindi, means silence or peace. It sounds similar to the name Shanta who also wished for peace from the traumatic memories of CSA.
5. The author uses "Krishna/Counsellor" merely because of their similar role in the text and not to offend any religious or professional spaces.

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