

**Domestic Spaces as Sites of Violence and the Politics of Patriarchy:
Representation of Child Abuse in the Select Works of Mahesh Dattani**

Dr. L. Amutha

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Bishop Heber College
(Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

Trichy – 620017

Email: 529sendito@gmail.com

Article Received: 24/01/2026

Article Accepted: 25/02/2026

Published Online: 27/02/2026

DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.01.478

Abstract:

The paper critically examines the dramatic exploration of child sexual abuse and politics of patriarchy. The author has dismantled the cultural myth of familial sanctity. The select works have interrogated the misconception that home is no more considered as a sacred and protective shelter rather it enables the silence, unheard cries, complicity and abuse. The study unveils how the domestic spaces turns to a barbaric arena of violence, discrimination etc. The family, generally, treated as a nurturing place but for the victims Shanta, Mala and Tara, it is a place of trauma, burden and shame. Tara is physically manipulated whereas Shanta and Mala are emotionally exploited. His works represent that home as a contested space and the individual is to overcome and challenge the power of patriarchy, incest and gender discrimination.

Key words: Incest, Gender discrimination, Trauma, Cultural myth.

Introduction:

“Young girls and children are often victims of sexual assault within the family. Elderly family members and the infirm may also be subject to ill-treatment. Female domestic servants are another category which is often at the receiving end of violence. In extended families, mothers in-law are often violent towards their daughters-in-law. Though there are many incidents of assault directed against the husband, studies show that they are not so frequent and rarely result in serious injury. Despite all those different types of domestic violence, the most prevalent is the violence of the husband against the wife”. (UNCR1994).

The main objective of the paper is to attempt a psychological study of Mahesh Dattani notable and pathetic characters Mala, Shanta and Tara from *Thirty Days in September* and *Tara* respectively. Psychology determines the traumatic condition of any beings. When the psycho domain is affected, somehow it can also undoubtedly ruin the human life to a great extent. They have been traumatized for the various issues. The sexual abuse hits emotional mind set of seven years old Mala who is agony and fear to share her sexual torments of Vinay, to her mother Shanta. The sexual torture of her maternal uncle Vinay, teaches the life as full of negative, betrayal and agony. *Tara* deals with the emotional separation of two conjoined twins and manipulation of family members to favor the boy child over the girl child. The play focuses on the courage and spirit of a handicapped girl child Tara, and the injustice done by her parents

Mahesh Dattani is a versatile and the first Indian English dramatist who is honored with the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1998. His keen observation of life encourages him to trace the suitable contemporary subject matter for his plays. All the plays of Dattani are embedded in realism delineating consideration on subalterns, and the ignored ostracized, exploited and suppressed groups of society. He has strikingly and unhesitatingly handled social tabooed issues such as homosexuality, lesbianism, transvestism not to shock the society but to create an awareness about these essential issues. His projection of the plight of the girl child or woman is one of the parts of his focused concepts.

Regarding sexual excitement, Freud wrote: “This apparatus [i.e., the somatic and psychical sexual apparatus] is to be set in motion by stimuli, and observation shows us that stimuli can impinge on it from three directions: from the external world by means of the excitation of the erotogenic zones [...], from the organic interior by ways which we have still to explore, and from mental life, which is itself a storehouse for external impressions and a receiving-post for internal excitations. All three kinds of stimuli produce the same effect, namely a condition described as “sexual excitement”, which shows itself by two sorts of indication, mental and somatic”.(Stoleru Serge 2014)

The plays of Dattani have not failed to establish marriage as social customs which gives legitimate prerogative to have sexual harassment. He has presented the dark substances of the urban families, their disputations and problems. No theme is considered careless by Dattani. The consideration of an ordinary man is also portrayed in-depth in his plays. Social marginality occurs when an individual is denied his or her belongingness to a positive reference group or mainstream social groups because of gender, class, or occupation defined by the society as inferior.

Likewise, Dattani has taken effort to give other equal ways through realistic the projection of the women personalities whom the readers get an idea to discern the

different levels of marginality. Generally, the plays of Dattani are a voice for the women and the total marginal people toward redressing the imbalance created by Indian society. India has viewed radical changes in socio-political in both pre-independence and post-independence time, but only a small amount of changes has become possible to the women. But incessantly they are being marginalized at multiple levels. Subordination of women or any gender discrimination, as a theoretical background, is foregrounded on the premises of binary opposition within class, caste, gender etc. in any society inclusive of Indian society, Dattani has posed a question through fringe issues whether a woman can speak or not.

In both the plays, the dramatist has not only thrashed out the abuse and trauma of the child but also highlighted the helplessness of women in the society as well as in the family. Dattani has clearly told that parents, particularly mother should mandatorily give the attention to the words of the daughters when they try to share their feelings.

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect recently compared definitions of abuse from 58 countries and found some commonality in what was considered abusive in 1999, the WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention drafted the following definition". Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power." (Runyan Desmond 2002)

Domestic Spaces as Sites of Violence and the Politics of Patriarchy:

Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*, is a story of fake love and betrayal, it has treated the sensitive and social taboo of child molestation. The main concept of the play is built around the trauma of Mala who is incessantly haunted by the past memories. The protagonist, Mala converses with psychiatrist, sharing her scarred psyche. The story concept is in the retrospective thought, finally got courage to unveil her terrible past haunting memory to the readers through the psychiatrist. Mala and her mother Shanta have been deserted by her husband, live in self-confinement flat. There is no patriarchy authority to control over them, to protect, or to provide financial assistance. They go to their uncle house to enjoy the summer vacation where she is incest by her maternal uncle Vinay. He is the abuser of Mala, molested her at the age of seven and resumes till her thirteen. She is physically exploited and emotionally consoled her not to disclose the secret to anyone. The sex monger Vinay, on the occasion of Mala's birthday, has taken her to a secret place for the birthday gift and abused her. Further, she is given a promissory note that he could give shower his care and affection for the exchange of his devil desires. He undoubtedly deceives and diverts her mind from the

psychical suffering by reminding her school activities. And after every incest, her uncle comforts and ensure that their sexual act as secret to others, further he added fuel to the fire, that if it is let it out, she could be treated as bad girl. As a child, she longs for the care and affection from her parents, being denied by them, ultimately she has sought shelter of her abuser.

At the age of thirteen, Vinay has got uninterested in her sex which gives her great emotional shock. Her continuous sexual affair makes her as sex maniac. To fulfill her sexual desire, she searches for the right kind of people who are similar to Vinoy at age. She attempts to attract and seduce the men, sexually. She never feels discomfort to sleep with any men, sometimes, even for the thirty days with the same person. The sex has instilled her as game. She could not control herself for having sex as she is misguided by the devil minded uncle that she is born for it. Finally, she is addicted to it and becomes whore or bitch. As a result, she has lost her self confidence and faith in herself, develops desolation around her. Deepak, from a decent family understands her disorder and decides to help her. He is ready to extend his hand for taking Mala to the normal life of everywoman. She has rejected his promissory note for marrying her, reasoning that she is unfit to be a wife of someone. Her conversation with psychiatrist has evidenced that she wants to be redeemed from such social tabooed and immoral act. Shanta, her mother, is happy to know about Deepak proposal, acknowledges that she has got answer for her prayer to Lord Krishna. She has sought the help of Vinay to convince Mala for Deepak's marriage proposal. When Deepak enquires Shanta whether Mala is abused as child, she denies. Mala boldly has expressed that her uncle has given a flat to shut her mouth. Her depravity of child abuse guides a range of emotions beginning from betrayal to agony, guilt, and to the thought that they are for attraction and seduction of the men.

At least as a mother, Shanta should have attempted to safeguard her daughter when she witnesses the physical act between Mala and her uncle, Mala with her nephew. She pays no attention to listen the voices of Mala instead she has pointed out that she is uninterested to listen her imaginary stories. And, further she tries to pretend that she remembers nothing, diverts her mind or starts chanting the mantras before the portrait of Lord Krishnan. Mala: "I am not talking about a bad dream! I am talking about the time when uncle Vinay would molest me. When I was seven, eight ... You were busy in either pooja room or kitchen. I would go to papa and cry. Before I could tell him he would tell me to go to you. You always fed me and – you never said it but I knew what you were saying to me without words. That I should eat well and go to sleep and the pain will go away. But it comes back. It didn't go away forever"(25 – 26). The above quote reflects the internal conflict of Mala.

Mala keeps blaming her mother for her silence. She worries that her mother should have taken preventive measures to restrain her from such behavior. It is her deliberate silence which directs towards the feeling of betrayal. When Mala realizes and wants to end her demon like act, it is too delay to do and she could not curtail visiting the men after the men for her desire. As a consequence, she psychologically suffers and transfers her resentment on Shanta who is equally responsible for her disorder. In the view of Mala, her mother has been neither a good wife nor caring and responsible mother.

The voiceless Shanta has become voiced, all most, at the end, and Mala has received shocking and horrible past indelible memories of her mother. She has been victimized for ten years, since at the age of six, by her own brother Vinay. A sense of fear and punishment which limit her of voicing against her brother, Vinay, abused her own sister. The dread of Vinay and the society destroys the life of both mother and daughter. Such an aspect and element of horror makes Shanta speechless to the complaints of Mala and suffering of her own. She ventilates all her woes to Lord Krishna alone. She has give up all her sensitivity which mirrors that both love and sex gives her no joy or no pain. Except Lord Krishna none could see the pain, fear, trauma in her eyes. When a girl or woman gets incest, they become wordless; incidents indelibly are imprinted bad remarks on their psyche forever. Mala realizes and stops her charges against Shanta. She understands her mother as a fellow sufferer, thus in the name of uncle's so called dutiful relationship, he is an abuser of Mala and sister's pious relationship, abuses Shanta. The suffering of Shanta is well matched with Spivak's "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (Spivak).

The play *Tara* opens in London with Chandan who, now, is a famous writer. The series of flashbacks takes the audience an insight about early life of Siamese conjoined twins Chandan and Tara. Chandan recollects his childhood days with his sister Tara. In general, *Tara* is associated with the issues of gender difference. It is a pathetic dramatic representation of the pain of the twins. They are conjoined from the chest and have three legs. The chances of survival of third leg are more with Tara but however, the political and economic influence of Bharati's father, it has been preferred for Chandan. "Imperialism's (or globalization's) image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind. How should one examine this dissimulation of patriarchal strategy, which apparently grants the woman free choice as subject? (Spivak).

Tara, the girl child is the victim of gender discrimination in the patriarchal society. Celebrating the son is a traditional and age old custom of any Indian family. Tara is abused for gender identity and has been domestically marginalized and victimized to the extreme.

She is given an injustice by her own grandfather and mother. The parents of the twins are educated and rationalist but their prejudice of boy child has never allowed them to act practically or rationally. As a consequence, Bharati is voiceless against of the desires of her male family members.

The play *Tara* is another typical and bitter example for child abuse. Tara is disadvantaged, depressed, and finally ends her life. The inner conflict of women in patriarchal society is rooted up with political and economic power. The abuse of Tara, represents the tale of every girl child born in Indian rural and urban family for the different reasons. It a thought provoking query that how the children of the same womb are treated injustice. Indian society has its own restricted concern that male child is an asset whereas the female child is burden. This is because of stereotypical misconception and faith in religion and myth that male is protective shield of a family but girl is burden of dowry. The recurrent harmful practices for girl children are gender based violence, child marriages, sexual harassment, exploitation, marginalization etc. It is a dreadful circumstance that Bharati is a mute spectator while the leg is disconnected from Tara. Mr. Patel has great plan for the future of Chandan, he creates an opportunity to involve in business whereas the same is not preferred to Tara. His special interest is pointed out very well while he expresses his angry at Bharati for having given the knitting work to Chandan. Further, he has insisted that these works could be offered to Tara.

Though the siblings are separated physically, their emotions, love and care for each other is inseparable. They maintain a good understanding with each other and volunteers to sacrifice anything for anybody. Chandan is different from Mr. Patel and plans for well fare of his sister. When Tara has gone for kidney transplantation, Chandan stops going to school for a year. He wishes his parents to treat both of them in equal. Their mind union and care for each other is very well reflected in their conversation while Chandan plans to leave the house.

Tara: (mock-filmt style). Bhaiya(Hugs him).

Chandan: Careful, we are in Bombay. You just called me a doodwalla.

Tara: Oh. Chanda. What would I do without you?(293)

Tara holds a sense of grudge against the society and hates the outside the world. The real pain of her physical disability is expressed while she charges Bharati , her mother for her plight and agony. Chandan enjoys all the benefits greater preference while Tare is convinced to accept the position of subaltern. The conversation of Bharai with Roopa evidences that Tara is talented, enthusiastic and aspiration irrespective of her physical disability. Tara is self made, has the confidence to conquer the world. Tara: “I am strong. My mother has made me strong. About me. Strong. Healthy. Beautiful” (289).

Chandan gets all the privileges, only he is legally nominated for all the property of his grandfather after the demise of him. It is another record to know about the original social position of a girl in male dominated social order. Bharati, as a mother, fails to voice for her basic rights, as she too is one of the victims. She takes effort to give her daughter happy, care and affection and ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of Tara. She deliberately wants Roopa to be accompanied Tara for which she bribes Roopa with variety of food. The dialogue with Chandan conveys how terribly she struggles to give joy for Tara. Bharati: “Yes I plan for her happiness. I mean to give her all love and affection which I can give. It’s what she.....deserves. Love can make up for lot” (307).

Bharati understands the feelings and worries of her daughter. She is quite fear of the future of Tara and explains Chandan that it is bit comfortable with beauty, intelligence etc as long she is young but after a certain age the world will not accept her. She could not imagine her future with Chandan and ventilate her unspeakable emotion to her son Chandan. Bharati: “She.....she must make more friends. Chandan is all right- he has writing, but she....He is different, he is sort of self- contained, but Tara.....She can be very good company and she her talents. She can be very witty and of course she is intelligent. I have seen to it that she.... More than makes up in some ways for what she.... Doesn’t have (298).

The mother –daughter relationship is not in right path, her guilt not only ruins Tara but also herself. The guilt and fear of her injustice to Tara leaves her insane. Her extra maternal concern and love for Tara is worthless after the discovery of the truth that Tara is discriminated just for her gender identity. The anguish of Tara is not only the discrimination of her mother inflicted on her but the betrayal which crushes down her. She is disillusioned of her so called happy and caring family setting. Mala and Tara suffer with the indirect domestic violence of her uncle Vinay and mother Bharati respectively. The maltreatment of both the girl child is manifested two different ways. The causes of their suffering are the passive witnesses of the parents who are reluctant to expose rather the mothers Shanti and Bharati learn to live and experience it.

Though we are in the 21 century, Indian societies are patriarchal to varying degrees particularly in under developed, sub urban areas and sometimes this attitude is practiced, taught and reinforced within the home. Urban employed, rural parents, and grandparents may require orientation and skills-building in gender-sensitive parenting techniques. There are varieties of abuses which occur within the house like threatening, controlling, violence etc. The abuse can be unlimited to physical, psychological, emotional and sexual. Teachers also have pivotal role in identifying the domestic violence as they normally spend more time with the children. World Health Organization reports that approximately 300 million children aged between 2- 4 suffer with physical and psychological violence in the hands of

family member. And one in five women has been sexually abused as a child age of 0-17 years. The consequences of child ill treatment result in life time physical and mental health. In the modern era, internet sets a vital role in transforming novel problems to the children. Parents and teachers must inculcate the other side of the technology to the children.

References

- Barry, Peter, (2006) Third Ed: “ Beginning Theory: An Introduction to literary and Cultural Theory”, Manchester University Press, India.
- Dattani, Mahesh. Collected Plays. Penguin Books, 2000.
- https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/violence_girls_eng.pdf
- Multani, Angelie. (1989). Mahesh Dattani's Plays: Critical Perspectives, New Delhi. Pencraft International,
- Ray, Supriya M. (2003): “ *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Bedford/St.Martin’s, New York.
- Runyan Desmond. Child Abuse and Neglect by Parents and Other Caregivers. World Report on Violence and Health, P 57-86, 2002.
- Stoléru Serge, (2014): *Reading the Freudian theory of sexual drives from a functional Neuroimaging perspective*. Front Hum Neurosci, , fnhum.2014.00157.