

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* in the light of *Rasa* Theory

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Abstract

Theatre is a platform where live actors perform in real time before live audience which makes it a unique art form because it exists in the 'present'. The live actor-audience interaction is one of the special thrills of the theatre for both the performers and the audience. Dramatic performance has a direct appeal to the sensory organs enabling the audience to relish the Rasa, a Sanskrit concept which has different meanings but it is understood comprehensively in a Sanskrit phrase Param Asvadniya Tattava, which is basically an essence of drama. Rasa theory has been propounded by Bharatmuni in Rasadhya of Natyashastra.

*The aim of this paper is to trace the elements of Rasa and Bhava in Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September*, a drama, presenting the agony of a girl who has been molested in her early childhood by her own uncle. Mahesh Dattani, an Indian English Dramatist has tried to highlight this atrocious issue of incest through his theatrical skills on Indian stage. My paper will also be focusing on the contribution of Dattani in the Indian theatrical tradition in context to *Thirty Days in September*.*

Keywords:

Mahesh Dattani, *Thirty Days in September*, Rasa Theory, special thrills, Dramatic performance

India is a country where all the things have been descended from God and theatre is noexception to it. It is believed that during the Golden Age, pains and sorrows were foreign to man but when the universe was moved by contradictory passions, there arouse a need for spectacle and sensuous entertainment. Though, the sacred four *Vedas* are considered as the repository of all wisdom and knowledge, but these were only accessible to the few elites and not to the common men. Dissatisfied with this situation, the gods led by *Indra* went to the Creator, *Brahma* and begged him to produce something which all may enjoy and this is how the fifth *veda* or *Natyaveda* came into existence. It derives its elements from all the four *vedas*.

The main purpose of *Natyaveda* is to instruct the audience through the dramatic representation of good and evil. The surging up of emotions of the audience plays an important for their self-learning. *Rasa* and

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Bhaava theory of Bharatamuni has effectively described the relation of audience and the live performance. This theory is the central principle of Indian dramatics and poetics. Rasa is regarded as the '*paramasvadhniyatattava*' in a dramatic performance which enlightens the audience by showering its essence on their minds and prompting them to relish it. This theory is fully capable of analysing the literary texts with all their intricacies as it has the great relevance in contemporary times also.

Mahesh Dattani, the first Indian playwright to be felicitated with the esteemed Sahitya Akademy Award, has dealt with the issue of humanism in general and injustice done to the marginalized sections of the society in particular. He himself has acknowledged the ancient Indian dramatic theory when he said, "everything is geared towards Rasa" (qtd. in Parmar 22). His deep-rooted concern for rasa makes him a distinct playwright on the contemporary scene.

Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* is a quintessence, where he has woven the intricacies of trust and distrust. This play narrates a tragic, dark and gripping tale of child sexual abuse, which is considered as a taboo issue in most of the communities. This play is actually commissioned by RAHI (Recovering and Healing From Incest), a Delhi based NGO that provides support to female victims of incest. Since its first production at the Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai on 31st May, 2001, this play is spreading

awareness of the prevalence of incest among people in Indian households.

Thirty Days in September has touched hearts and consciences everywhere. Sensitive and powerful without ever offending sensibilities, it manages to bring home the horror and the pain within the framework of a very identifiable mother-daughter relationship. (Dattani 4)

Thirty Days in September can be analyzed in the light of *rasa* theory with all its convolutions taken into account, in order to study the development of the individual *rasas*. It has been predominantly scrutinized in the light of *Bhibatsa Rasa* and *Raudra Rasa*. Bharatmuni in his *Natyashastra* described *bibhatsa rasa* as "the Odious (*bibhatsa*) Sentiment has its basis the Dominant State of disgust. It is created by Determinants like hearing of unpleasant, offensive, impure and harmful things or seeing them or discussing them" (Ghosh 115).

Since *bibhatsa* has *jugupsa* (disgust) as its *sthayi bhaava*, this brief introduction is enough to highlight the complexity of the issue. It focuses on the trauma of mother and daughter and at the same time brings into light the dirt and filth of incest which is odious and not accepted at all. To portray such a disgusting relationship

on stage is a very bold attempt made by Dattani.

Bharatamuni's explanation of *raudra rasa* in *Natyashastra* is "the Furious Sentiment has its basis the Dominant State of anger. This is created by Determinants such as anger, rape, abuse, insult, untrue allegation, exorcizing, threatening, revengefulness, jealousy and the like"(Ghosh 112-113). *Raudra rasa* is manifested through the *anubhavas* of the protagonist. She communicates her feelings of *krodha* (anger) and *vega* (agitation) to invoke the *rasa*.

The opening scene of the play reflects the *bhaavas* of *veer rasa* when the protagonist says that the embarrassment she has faced throughout her life is now to be faced by the person who has committed this heinous crime.

After all, it is he who must hide. He should change his name, not me. It is he who must avoid being recognized. In people's homes, at parties, hopefully even on the streets. He should look other way when someone spots him anywhere on this planet. (Dattani 8)

The transitory emotion that leads towards the consummation of *veer rasa* is *dhrti* (contentment). In *Natyashastra*, Bharatmuni explains *dhrti* as:

Contentment (*dhrti*) is caused by [Determinants such as] heroism, spiritual knowledge, learning ... It is to be represented on the stage by Consequents such as enjoyment of objects gained, and not grumbling over objects unattained, past, partially enjoyed, lost and the like. (Ghosh 131)

But at another moment, she feels bad because she knows that, the person is not alive now even to regret or to feel humiliated. "The very first speech of the play extends the impression of self realization [...] to drag audience to share the anguish of fractured psyche of Mala" (Agrawal 120). The emotions here in the scene depicted are not stagnant but transitory or moving which sometimes make the audience feel more than two emotions simultaneously. It is a very complex phenomenon. For instance, at the very outset, Mala's words depict her valor and her victory over the guilt repressing her but at another moment; she is presenting her confused state of mind, where she does not even want her name to be revealed before audience.

Mala's *anubhavas* (sighs and deep breaths) make the audience feel the emotions of *soka* (grief) for her. This grief is not an outcome of distress or jealousy but it is born out of joy. Mala bluntly reveals her real name, "Mala Khatri" and confidently

asserts that the person, who has molested her, should hide himself from being recognized because she has not been a participant but a victim of his beastly passion.

The plot of the play further progresses and Shanta, Mala's mother is seen praying and singing (*Mere to Giridhar Gopal, Doosrona koi*). She appears to be very calm, silent and devoting lady as if she is ignorant about the psychological condition of her daughter. Her attitude evokes the emotions of *sanka* (apprehension) in the audience which leaves them in doubt and 'doubt' is the basic feature of *sanka* according to *Bharatamuni*.

The transitory emotions associated with Shanta are *jadata* (*stupor*) and *cinta* (*anxiety*) which ultimately crop up the emotions of apprehension in audience. Shanta's "not uttering any word, speaking indistinctly, remaining absolutely silent, looking with steadfast gaze" (Ghosh134) are the *anubhavas* which express her stupor.

Deepak, as a character emerges out to be a savior who promises Shanta to help Mala in getting out of the conflict which is ruining her life. He assures her for taking out Mala from her psychological trauma only when she agrees to help him by telling each and everything associated with Mala's life. He also expresses his intentions to Shanta that he is willing to marry her daughter in spite of Mala's indifferent attitude. Deepak's assertions console Shanta and she finds an

outlet of her guilt in the marriage of Deepak and Mala. On hearing such encouraging words from Deepak, she gets relieved and a ray of hope surges up in her mind. Deepak's assurance provides relief to the disturbed mind of Shanta and she starts dreaming of her daughter's good future but this *mati* (resolve) is not possible without the revelation of truth which is being veiled by both Shanta and Mala.

The psychological condition of Deepak is depicted who is willing to help Mala but Mala's hostile attitude towards him perplexes his mind. Deepak's yearning for Mala evokes such emotions which lead towards consummation of '*sringararasa*' which has its base in the *sthayibhaava* of *rati* (love). As *sringararasa* has two *adhithanas* (bases)-*Sambhoga* (*loveinunion*) and *vipralambha* (*loveinseparation*), the transitory emotions or *sancharins* like *sanka* (apprehension), *cinta* (anxiety and worry), *nirveda* (dejected and indifference) and the *anubhavas* of Deepak express that, here, the *sringararasa* has not been provoked by their love in union but their love in separation (*vipralambha*). Mala, who is torn between her past and future yells to Deepak, "You don't understand! YOU JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND!! I cannot love you."

Mala's mind is hemmed in with the thoughts of the person who has molested her being a child in her summer vacations. She is so obsessed with his memories that she cannot keep her relationship with one man for more than one month. She cannot resist her

advances towards men which looks awkward and evokes emotions of disgust among audience. “The root of Mala’s anguish lies in the silence of her mother towards whom she looks for consolation”(Agrawal 121).Mala hates her mother for being silent during most of her critical moments. She dislikes her negligence and attitude of escaping to take support from Lord Krishna. Whenever she endeavours to tell her mother her sufferings and pain, she stuffs her with her favourite alu-parathas. Mala’s deliberations are capable of bringing *asru* in the eyes of audience.

Where were you when he locked the door to your bedroom while I was napping in there? Where were you during those fifteen minutes when he was destroying my soul? Fifteen minutes every day of my summer holidays, add them up. Fifteen minutes multiplied by thirty or thirty-one or whatever. That’s how long or how little it took for you to send me to hell for the rest of my life! Surely you must have known, Ma. (Dattani53)

Shanta has the found the way to help her daughter by worshipping Lord Krishna. This is her self-assurance (*mati*) but even this resolve has not worked and Mala’s life became worst than earlier. The mother’s

chaos is in fact double inside. She has buried many turbulent emotions deep inside her heart and rarely allowed them to come out. It is now Shanta’s turn to speak of her remembering and forgetting. She recalls many painful realities of her daughter Mala and her sexual advances towards her brother, Vinay. “But Mala [...] You enjoyed it. [...] Yes! How can I forget? [...] And please don’t talk about trying to forget the pain ... Try to forget the pleasure” (Dattani28). She accuses her daughter for her willing sharing of sensual pleasures. Her revelation invokes *bibhatsa rasa*. Her *smriti* of the events discloses the reason for being *jada* through her life.

The mother despite knowing everything wanted her daughter to start afresh. She advises her to forget everything as she herself has forgotten everything. She reiterates, “I forget. I forget everything. Be like me” (Dattani29). These very words are enough to give a clue of her silent past suffering with a question mark in the mind of the audience. The mystery of the past revealed when Shanta breaks her years long silence and speaks the truth behind her being *jada*.

I was six, Mala. I was six. And he wasthirteen ... and it wasn’t only summer holidays. Forten years! For ten years!! (Pointing to the picture of God). I looked to Him. I didn’t feel anything. I didn’t feel pain, I didn’t feel pleasure. I

lost myself in Him.
(Dattani54).

The revelation of the fact, that Shanta has also suffered the molestation for ten years by the same person when she was six, makes Mala dumbstruck and stunned. She regrets: "While I accused you of not recognizing my pain, you never felt any anger at me for not recognizing yours. We were both struggling to survive but—I never acknowledged your struggle" (Dattani58). The meaning of silence is now comprehensible.

Now the relationship between the mother and daughter is entirely metamorphosed. So many unspoken words started having meaning for her. (Nagori 203)

Mala has no grudges against her mother. She tells her that it is very difficult to forget that person completely but she is trying to come out of it. The play is a marvelous expression of *soka*, *krodha*, *bhaya*, *bibhatsa*, *harsa* and other sentiments but it ends on a happy note leaving a kind of satisfaction making the audience to taste the relish of *Shanta Rasa*.

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