

**SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PLAYS OF**  
**MAHESH DATTANI**

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**Abstract**

*The present paper entitled 'Sibling Relationships in the Plays of Mahesh Dattani' manifests the myriad shades of relationships between a brother and a sister. The play 'Thirty Days in September' reveals the theme of incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister for the first time in Indian English Drama 'Bravely Fought the Queen' brings out the bitter relationship between Alka and Praful further revealing a homosexual relation between Praful and Alka's husband. The next play 'Tara' shows a very significant sibling relationship. Chandan and Tara are conjoined Siamese twins who are later separated by an operation. They are very close to each other and share every sorrow and happiness of their lives. Thus, Dattani's plays have always brought up themes which were pushed under the carpet till date.*

**Key Words : Brother -sister -Incest --homosexual--conjoined Siamese twins-**

## **SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE PLAYS OF MAHESH DATTANI**

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Mahesh Dattani's plays emerge as a fresh arrival in the domain of Indian English Drama in the last decade of the twentieth century. He has explored the concealed issues of the society which were in the dormant stage till date. His plays have a great contemporary value. His novel and innovative themes have changed the whole face of the Indian English Drama. He is the first playwright to receive the Sahitya Academy Award for writing in English. Human Relationships have always been the core of his plays where in most of his plays he uses family as his locale.

The play "Thirty Days in September", Dattani feels is the most serious of all his plays. He brings up a very sensitive and incredible brother-sister relationship in the play. The relationship is that of sibling incest between Vinay, the elder brother and Shanta his real sister. The relationship simply is stunning and perturbing.

Shanta is very much for her name. 'Shanti' refers to silence. Throughout the play she tolerates mutely all the blames and attacks her daughter puts on her. Her daughter's expectations are shattered by the mother. Mala was sexually abused by her maternal uncle Vinay. In the process of growing up, it is common for children to have encounters involving exposing or sexual touching in which the other child is either too young or too old to be regarded as a peer. Some encounters are pleasant to the child, others are not. Some are clearly abusive. Negative reactions tend to be more common the larger the age difference.

Vinay was as good as double the age of Shanta. Thirteen years old Vinay had sexually abused Shanta who was just six when he did it for the first time. This went on for ten long years. The impact was very negative. She was threatened by the brother if she opened her mouth. Her tongue was cut off. When the daughter Mala who was sexually abused by the same person blames her mother for all the suffering and mental tortures in her life, defeated say:

“ Shanta (defeated). Yes. Yes! I only remained silent. I am to blame.

That is why God is punishing me today. I remained silent not because I wanted to, but I didn't know how to speak. I-I cannot speak. I cannot say anything. My tongue was cut off... My tongue was cut off years ago... (To Deepak.) Please save her. How could I save her when I could not save myself? (To Mala) ... Did you ever see the pain in my eyes? No. Nobody saw anything. Nobody saw anything. Not my brothers, not my parents. Only (pointing to the Man) he spoke. Only he said, only he saw and he did.

*The man backs away looking at Shanta with a warning.*

Shanta: I was six, Mala. I was six. And he was thirteen... And it wasn't only summer holidays. For ten years! For ten years!! ... No pain no pleasure, only silence. Silence means Shanti! Shanti! But my tongue is cut off. No. no. It just fell off somewhere. I didn't use it. No. I cannot shout for help, I cannot say words of comfort; I cannot even speak about it. No I can't I am dumb.” (CP II 55)

The incestuous relationships between Vinay and Shanta turn out to be very damaging for Shanta. Usually, most siblings or brothers and sisters cope very well with their childhood experiences and sometimes feel strengthened by them.

Shanta's childhood experiences were quite unpleasant. Her stormy silence perturbs her daughter Mala. Shanta's childhood experience of abuse makes her silent is okay but she has no hatred for that person. Though he has done so much damage to her personal life, she calls him to her house to talk about Mala's marriage with Deepak. Why should she create such a helpless situation for herself? It's absolutely not necessary for Shanta to beckon Vinay to discuss with Deepak and get them married. Lot of pretensions on either side makes the situation more awkward. Not only was he the seducer of Shanta, his sister, but also of her daughter. Shanta was not ignorant of this. Shanta had been accepting finances from him in the name of father, making Mala feel positive for her father. He was blackmailing her and taking advantage of her helplessness. The Indian mind-set that a male person of the family should take all the decisions regarding matchmaking is very much fixed in Shanta's mind-set. Despite the entire incestuous acts she seeks her brother's help.

“Man: Shanta, you know you can always rely on my help. That is

nothing. Isn't she like my daughter also?

(Shanta looks at him. The man continues regardless)

Man. Think nothing of it. I shall play the dutiful uncle tomorrow at dinner. I should interview the boy and see if he is suitable for our Mala. Isn't that right?

(No response from Shanta...)" (CP II 38)

The brother through his words and gestures pretends to be a man or brother/uncle of grave concern, when he is not. Shanta is the only sister of Vinay. His bad deeds make him compensate as much as he can. He again wants to pretend to be brother of great responsibility. He enters with an envelope handing over the papers of the ownership of a flat. It was a gift from an incestuous brother to the persecuted sister.

The gift given by a brother to a sister was disliked by Mala. Her uncle was trying to take away her mother's self-respect also. She opposed her uncle but was silenced in the name of marriage. Her mother's silence makes her feel that she herself has demanded it. The seducer uncle/ brother didn't just buy a flat but purchased his own sister only. Vinay bought Shanta's silence so that she can never tell anyone what he did to her as well as his daughter. It is also very clear that his own opinion was pushed in the name of the brother's opinion. While handing over the envelope all his remarks for the sister are sarcastic in nature. He himself is responsible for ruining the entire life of his sister and still has the shame to maintain relations by managing to keep Mala's room for himself during his visit. Simply disgusting!

In fine, we can conclude that the relationship between the brother Vinay and sister Shanta is very very strange. It brings out the undue advantage taken by a brother of a helpless sister. Dattani in the play 'Thirty Days in September' comes up with scarred psyche.

Another play 'Bravely Fought the Queen' has another pair of brother and sister, Praful and Alka respectively. Praful and Dolly are also brother and sister where Alka and Dolly are co-sisters, that is, wives of Jiten, and Nitin respectively. Alka is a highly frustrated personality. She is presented as a confirmed alcoholic and hence a misfit in the family. Her case gains a certain kind of poignancies in the fact that she has been used by her own brother as a

veil behind which surreptitious homosexual relationships may continue. The relationship between Alka and Praful is bitter. She takes him to be a cheat. They both have unpleasant experiences of each other. Even if he visits Mumbai he would never come to meet his sisters Alka and Dolly. It seems Praful is unhappy with Alka. Dattani throughout the play never brings Praful on the stage directly. He is always the talked about person.

Alka pours herself a drink and says "A saint! (Laughs hard) Like my husband. Such close friends! Friends from college! (Dolly gives) Nitin and Praful were at home talking. I came home from school with the neighbour's son on his scooter instead of walking with you. I told him to drop me before our street came. He didn't understand and dropped me right at our doorstep. Praful saw. He didn't say a word to me. He just dragged me into the kitchen. He lit the stove and put my face in front of it! I thought he was going to burn my face! He burnt my hair. I can still smell my hair on fire. Nitin was right behind us. Watching! Praful said, 'Don't you ever look at any man ever.'" (CP I, 257)

Alka was pushed out of the house for humiliating her mother-in-law in front of Praful. Dolly thinks that, Praful, as a responsible brother begged Nitin to take her back. But Dolly was mistaken. It was Praful's selfish motive to continue with his homosexual relationship with Alka's husband.

How can this cruelty of Praful be explained? Did she really deserve this punishment for the mistake she committed according to Praful? Praful's conspiracy for the future is very evident. Already, Praful and Nitin were maintaining their sexual relationship. Nitin's presence at that moment makes Praful do all this, so that she should be woman of character in the eyes of Nitin to get them married in the future and very happily sustain his relationship with Nitin. Alka's anguish and frustration is due to her husband's homosexual libido and her brother Praful's deceit of not revealing the reality of Nitin to her. She takes out her resentment in the end when she says:

The saint gives sister to the Sinner and disappears! Finished. Matter over... The saint has another sister who is bad, bad, bad. He beats her till she gets better. And he has this friend. A best friend! The sinner's brother turns out to be his best friend. Not such a co-incidence. (CP I 300)

Dattani presents Dolly much more competent and courageous than Alka. Their relationship with their brother is also different. Dolly defends her brother from

all allegations whereas for Alka, Praful is treacherous. Jiten and Nitin also have contribution in negative to see that the brother and sister don't get along. Jiten tells him a lie that they are in Ooty with their friends when he expresses his wish to meet them at home. Such incidents add to the estrangement of their sibling relationships.

Tara and Chandan in Dattani's 'Tara' have an emotional as well as physical attachment being Siamese twins. Tara's attachment to her brother and the internal anguish is expressed in her conversation with her brother, Chandan, when she says: "May be we still are. Like we've always been, inseparable. The way we started life. Two lives and one body, in one comfortable womb. Till we were forced out.... and separated". (CP I 325)

The relationship between Tara and Chandan is quite strong as most of the things they have to do are together. Being Siamese twins they were conjoined from the breastbone down through the pelvic area. Indeed, it was miracle that they were born alive, as Dr. Thakkar says because twins with conjunction of such complexity are, in most cases, stillborn. Their lives are full of painful experiences of the hospital. In spite of this, they enjoy each other's company talking of the doctors and hospitals in a jovial manner lest the whole atmosphere should become serious.

Chandan. How was physio?\*

Tara. Nice doctor. Rotten nurse. Not like Bangalore.

Chandan. (Jovially) Doctor's. Nurses. A painful necessity in our lives.....

Tara. Mind you, some of the doctors aren't so painful to look at. This one's called Dr. Gokhale. He's handsome in a 'ghati' sort of way. I love Maharashtrians!

Chandan. In London you swore you were going to marry that Irish doctor, whats-his-name. And we were only twelve then.  
(CP I.333)

Being of the same age, they enjoyed every part of their life together, let that be music, about friends, about family. Their parents' discussion of the children's career was with a difference. Patel was worried more of Chandan whereas Bharati pretended to worry of Tara. Bharati's favours for the male child during operation and later to compensate for the mistake by showering love upon her, is all ridiculous. Dr.Thakkar, the godlike 'life-giver' is aware that the third leg would adhere better to the female half, and yet becomes party to the decision of

giving the third leg to the male baby. In a sense he prongs their lives through surgery, but also eaves them physically mutilated and mentally traumatized, doing notoriety as phenomenal freaks of science. Chandan after learning all this is shocked. The mother has a nervous breakdown and is hospitalized. Tara after the operation again and again asks about mummy. Her father refuses. Chandan is to be admitted in the college but Tara is not. Chandan is not ready to go without Tara. He always wants equal opportunities to be given to Tara. When the father asks Chandan to visit the office with him, he tells him to take Tara. The father refuses. The father in a conservative manner wants the male person to handle office work. Tara is also hurt at times when her father's words indicate gender bias. In fact, Tara is more confident and competent than her brother Chandan becomes helpless and paralyzed without Tara. She endeavours to encourage him to be bold. She wants him to face the reality of life.

Tara: I mean, why don't you join college?

Chandan: Without you?

Tara: Yes!...You're scared. You're scared you'll find out you can't do very much on your own! Face it. You are a coward.

Chandan (angrily): Well, I'm sorry. Not everyone has your strength!

Tara: You are afraid. Afraid of meeting new people, people who don't know you. Who won't know how clever you are. You are afraid they won't see beyond your...

Chandan: That's not true.....

Tara: Who do you know in this city? Except that silly Roopa?... It's all the same. You. Me. There's no difference.

Chandan. No difference between you and me?.... That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.

Tara. I'm scared as hell too! ( CP I. 360-61)

Chandan and Tara are not only emotionally interdependent on each other but spiritually also Chandan is more dependent on Tara. Dattani has very well taken care that Chandan also does not take undue advantage of the opportunities given to him. He has throughout the play tried to do justice to her. Usually, every girl child born in an Indian family does suffer some kind of exploitation and if there is a boy child in the family then the exploitation is very much visible as the privileges are consciously or unconsciously provided to the son.

Chandan, the privileged brother, wants to turn his anguish into drama on his sister's childhood. Throughout the play it can be felt that Tara bears some grudge against the society. She seems to have some kind of aversion with the outside world and her world consisted of only her parents and her brother whom she is very close to.

Tara trimly desired to meet her mother alone in the hospital. But her father never allowed her to do so. She intensely felt that her mother wants to tell her something confidential. Chandan tried to pacify her when, at last, she pours her anger on her father. The father who had concealed the truth till then, reveals that Tara's life was at risk to sustain Chandan's life. This regret made the mother insane. Tara, after listening to the whole story just utters: "And she called me her star!". (CP I .379)

Tara eventually dies as her prognosis was already fatal. Chandan, unable to digest the truth, leaves for London and becomes Dan. The mother also passes away after six years of Tara's death leaving Dan all alone. He is never able to forgive himself. He wishes: but somewhere, sometimes, I look up at a shooting star.... and wish. I wish that a long forgotten person would forgive me. Wherever she is.... Forgive me Tara. Forgive me for making it my tragedy.

To conclude, the relationship between the brother Chandan and sister Tara were very intimate. They were as if the two sides of the same self rather than two separate persons. Dan writes Tara's story to rediscover the neglected half of him as a means of becoming the whole.

Thus, Dattani manifests myriad shades of sibling relationships in his dramatic world which at times are alluring and at times perturbing.

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