Chapter V

Crime, Abuse and Politics of Silence in Urban Space

Urban violence is not always communal or collective. There are some forms that are covered under the garb of civility in the private sphere of home or within family. There are many factors that give rise to such violence. Review of such type of violence hints sometimes at the psychological, sometimes at social and sometimes at the cultural reasons behind it. That is why even in the comfort and luxuries of the urban space we find that there is a silent point that denies the very existence and voices of the female city dwellers. This silent point is very much similar to the idea of German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann who propounded the concept of ‘spiral of silence’ which is a process in which minority group does not speak up because they fear isolation from society (Neumann 1984). Analysing Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* and Mahesh Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September* and *Bravely Fought the Queen* on the similar pattern we find that the city space is full of such silent screams sometimes in the disguise of family and sometimes as an inhuman flâneur (Saltz 2008).

Being a woman in the city space is one of the most frightening, worrisome and at the least, uncomfortable experience. Looking at the urban space with a gendered lens, it is difficult to look beyond the violence and daily harassment that girls and women face in cities. In the first Delhi Human Development Report published in 2005 after the public-perception survey of 13,000 people, women’s safety was listed among the top three problems in the city (along with employment and housing). Delhi’s shame continues with the National Crime Records Bureau’s report 2012, where once again Delhi is categorised as the most unsafe city among 88 important cities of India.
Considering the present scenario in Delhi, woman's safety is a primary concern.

Historian Janet Wolff famously argued in her paper “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity” that no female counterpart is the paradigmatically modern figure; flâneur, could exist, given that his terrain was the world of the streets. Comfort and mobility in public was an exclusively masculine experience. The flâneuse (Wolff 1985) was impossible or at least invisible.

This chapter deals with the study of human relations in the urban environment with regard to the incidents of crime against women in the geographical space of the city. Large population and urbanisation often lead to squalid congested settlements and result in urban decay. Such settlements have large levels of unemployed and underemployed population, which in turn leads to poverty, lower social status, crime and other vices. Urbanization represents a complex socioeconomic and political force as well as a distinct local culture and history. Within this the place of women has not been constantly analysed.

Global urbanization leads to lack of space, unequal resource allocation, and low access to opportunities. People who come to the cities in search of employment take up jobs on small pay packets leading to underemployment. Most of these people are in their prime with no support structure such as family. Discrimination against women is not limited to any one particular walk of life. As Doel Mukherjee (2005) refers to the quote of Krishna Ahooja Patel, “Women account for more than one-half of humanity and they work for nearly two-thirds of all the working hours but they receive only one-tenths of the world’s income, and own less than a bare one percent of the world’s productive assets” (17). In a study of women’s place in the cities,
particularly in the western world during the period of industrialization and
urbanisation the historian Elizabeth Wilson writes:

For although women along with minorities, children, the poor are still
not full citizens in the sense that they have never granted full and free
access to the streets, industrial life still drew them into public life and
they have survived and flourished in the interstices of the city,
negotiating the contradictions of the city in their own particular way.(8)

In India people refrain from talking about crimes against women. These are
not discussed within families and in the community as these are considered a social
stigma. The plays assessed in this chapter namely *Lights Out* by Manjula
Padmanabhan and *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *Thirty Days in September* by
Mahesh Dattani voice many issues of violence, spanning the victim’s as well as the
people’s reaction towards crimes against women and the urban circumstances
surrounding the episodes.

**Silence & Rape**

Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out* is about the insensitivity of the urban
population. The play is based on a real life incident of gang rape of a woman which
happened for many days in Mumbai where inmates of high society were a mute
audience to the crime being committed right outside their own house. Manjula
Padmanabhan presents this *blasé attitude* (Simmel 1969) of the city inmates with
great intensity in *Lights Out*. The play is not only about insensitivity not just
brutalized towards the victims of rape but towards all those who are perceived as
underlings. In theory the link between urbanity and crime is congruous and it is
observed that the city space amplifies the intensity of the crime. In urban spaces
people react in different ways when they confront crime. While emotions such as anger or fear are common, many people keep themselves aloof and do not react.

Manjula Padmanabhan exposes the apathy of society towards a woman who was subjected to gang rape. The play also poses the question of men's responsibility. The play is based on a real incident as mentioned by the playwright:

_The play is based on an eye witness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982. The characters are fictional. The incident is a fact. In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighbouring compound. In real life, as in the play, no-one went to the aid of the victims._ (Lights Out 53)

The play is divided into three scenes. Scene I is set in the flat of Bhasker and Leela where Leela is shown worried about some upcoming event. Simultaneously audience's attention is drawn to Frieda, the maid, who is working silently. Scene II begins with the arrival of Mohan in the claustrophobic flat of Bhaskar and Leela for a dinner. Mohan is already aware of this morbid, macabre scene enacted night after night. He is curious but takes it seriously. They frame various speculations regarding the nature of the daily attacks that go on. Scene III opens with the bizarre sounds of a woman screaming for help. The sound is gravelled and unpleasant with distinct words—"Let me go! Help me!" But as the evening progresses it degenerates into a general screaming and sobbing. Two more characters are introduced in this scene. One is Leela’s friend Naina, who like Leela, is agonized by the sounds while the men Bhasker and Mohan are fascinated and morbidly curious. The other character is Naina’s husband, Surinder. The edge of criticism gets sharper with Leela’s and
Naina’s position being played down as “hypersensitive” for being empathetic to the victims suffering. The drama is structured upon dialogic debate, thereby breaking the hegemony of monologic, monophonic structure. Ideas are born of male and female perspective clashes to an open-ended debate. The playwright has not privileged one over the other; the ideas are presented in the form of a problem play for the audience to look for the way out.

In cities the elite and the underlings often belong to the same urban space. While the elite occupy the economic, centre; the underlings aid in providing comfort to the privileged class. In the play though Frieda shares the same space as other characters but still she is deprived of the basic human necessities. All through the play, she does not behave like a human being; she works like a machine. Even before receiving the command, she performs her duties. Padmanabhan’s directional note in the beginning of the play stresses the robotic existence of Frieda.

Note on FRIEDA’s role: She remains constantly in sight, performing her duties in a mute, undemanding way. The other characters pay no attention to her except to give her orders. When she has no specific task at hand, she can be seen moving about in the kitchen. The audience should be allowed to wonder what she thinks. (*Lights Out 2*)

Not only the audience but readers also wonder about the mute existence of Frieda all through the play. Being present in the same house she is also a witness to the crime but never utters anything. The voiceless existence of Frieda makes her a surrogate victim of atrocities a fate that many marginalized people face. The voiceless and powerless Frieda embodies the plight of an urban being and the urban dilemma. Frieda’s silence as mentioned by Padmanabhan in the directional note “allowing the
audience to wonder” is an excellent instance of the use of theatre to access, comprehend and represent the anonymity of the city space.

Leela tries to escape the horror of violence by drawing curtains and shutting windows. The moment Bhaskar comes home Leela proposes for filing a police complaint as she is distressed by these incident. For this Bhasker says:

**BHASKER.** Baby, you must learn to ignore it now, I insist.

**LEELA.** If it takes so much effort to ignore something, isn’t that the same thing as not ignoring it? (*Lights Out* 11)

For Leela silence is complicity in the crime. It scorches her conscience. The loud and rugged voice makes her mad. It becomes a fixation for Leela. She identifies with the victim who is a woman suffering the male aggression. She repeatedly requests Bhaskar to file a police complaint. It is worth noticing here that Leela doesn’t call the police herself and waits for Bhaskar to take this action. This incident also presents the gender imbalance in India as we find that even when the drama unfolds in the urban setup the plight of woman and man’s indifference towards her suffering remains the same:

**BHASKER.** *(taking a deep breath)*: Leela, the thing to do is not let them disturb you like this. Pretend they’re not there...

**LEELA.** But how? I can’t *help* hearing them? They’re so – so loud!

And *rude*! How can I make myself deaf just for them!

**BHASKAR.** *(lets go of her)* But see I’m not deaf and I’m not disturbed by them!

**LEELA.** I don’t understand how you do it—
BHASKAR. I don’t know, really. Just don’t let them, suppose. It’s what they want, you see, they want to upset you, they want to frighten you, and don’t you see?—when you get frightened you’re just playing into their hands, doing what they want...

LEELA. But how can I just stop! I don’t want to feel this way! Who would?

BHASKAR. Some people might. Who knows?

LEELA. Well. I don’t! I feel awful, I feel sick. I can barely eat. I feel so sick. (Lights Out 8-9)

In the second scene Leela becomes more disturbed while Bhaskar is shown as fiddling with the music system as he waits for the arrival of Mohan Ram, who wants to see the “crime being committed”. Instead of showing concern he is curious. “What harm is there in watching?”(Lights Out 16). Obviously, he wants to draw sadistic pleasure as he would see a woman being traumatized.

Both men discuss the incident in detail suggesting their voyeuristic intent.

Sahil Tripathi, comments on such tendency of men as he writes:

> From the time of the ritual disrobing of Draupadi in Mahabharata, many men have participated in such stripping of a woman, forming a tight circle around her, as they have cheered, jeered and leered. Most men who should have stepped in to stop have turned their eyes away, expressing their inability to do anything, leaving Draupadi to the mercy of divine powers. And all that Krishna can do is to keep adding
yards to her never-ending sari, prolonging the humiliation. (Tripathi web)

Gradually it becomes clear that this ‘act’ is basically ‘gang rape’ and has been going on night after night without any resistance or sympathy from the people in the area. By a mere command of the perpetrators the inhabitants of the area put their lights out at night as this heinous crime is committed. The title of the play *Lights Out* simply suggests the shameless act of ignoring this dehumanization of women that is accepted by the world by avoiding confrontation. Padmanabhan elaborates the violence of the voyeurs who are equally guilty of the crime of sexual violence to the female body:

BHASKAR. He wanted to see it—

LEELA. You wanted to see it!

MOHAN. *(unrepentant)* Sure! Why not?

LEELA *(she’s not amused)* But why! Why see such awful things, unless you must!

MOHAN. Well, I was—curious.

LEELA. About such things! *(Lights Out 15)*

Both Bhaskar and Mohan here depict a male chauvinist attitude by distancing themselves from the sufferings of a poor woman and theorising and philosophising their ideas:

MOHAN. But this! Just far enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly. *(Lights Out 15)*
Both consider this heinous crime as a normal incident—observing sometimes saying that the victim is diseased or wondering whether the voice of the victim is musical? They reduce such a horrid crime to an amusement:

BHASKAR. They start off clothed and then begin to lose them.

MOHAN. All of them? The assailants too?

BHASKAR. Well, the assailants tear the clothes off the victims and then, perhaps in the general excitement, remove their own clothes as well.

Similarly they distort the fact as a class struggle and their helplessness towards such issues.

MOHAN. Well, as long as it’s the poor attacking the poor (*he trails off significantly*)... you know how it is... they live their lives and we live ours. (*Lights Out 24*)

In a similar fashion they stoop to such a level that they show their ignorance towards this whole act and rename it as a religious ceremony. In Scene II, Manjula Padmanabhan justly presents public opinion after the woman undergoes this trauma. It is common that while reporting sexual assault, the victims face formidable task of establishing their creditability and dealing with the reactions of society. Most of the time the general public may not be sympathetic to the victim’s plight and consider the victim responsible for this act. She is accused of having an immoral character, poor judgement, improper behaviour or wearing provocative attire etc.
MOHAN. It’s just that—you know, all the descriptions, the screaming, the wild abandon, the exhibitionism, yes, even the nakedness—you know what it could be? You know what would explain everything?

BHASKAR & LEELA. (together) No, what?

MOHAN. A religious ceremony! Sacred rites!

BHASKAR. W-e-l-l (shaking his head) I mean, surely—

LEELA. (quite distressed). No, no! It’s too awful!

MOHAN. But—don’t you see? That would explain why no one goes to help of the victims—because, of course, if it’s something religious, no one can interfere, not even the police.

BHASKAR. (considering the point) That’s true, of course. If it’s religious, then there’s no stopping the thing. Restriction of religious freedom and all that.

MOHAN. Everyone would be up in arms.

LEELA. But—even when it’s not a ... a nice religion?

BHASKAR. No one can say what’s nice or not nice any more.

Someone else’s religion is someone else’s business. (Lights Out 25)

The third scene opens with the ragged sound that pierces Leela’s ear and creating a palpable tension. The cry for help and escape makes no difference to the attitude of Bhasker and Mohan. These screams, and the consequent indifference are the leitmotif signifying the loud anonymity of urban voices. These voices are usually frighting but unheard.
MOHAN. Personally I’m against becoming entangled in other people’s private lives. Outsides can never really be judge of who is right and who is wrong. *(Lights Out 33)*

Further

BHASKER. And now... they’re holding her legs apart—

MOHAN. One man each leg, spread wide apart...

*The both watch in silence, for a few moments, as a fresh bout of screaming starts.*

BHASKAR. Hmmm. Well, you know, illiterate people believe that when a demon possesses a woman, it is always via the—uh—*lower orifice*— *(Lights Out 37)*

It is not the situation of the victim that makes them comment like this but is symptomatic of their attitude towards women and their positioning in society. The later comments are more shocking as they throw more light on these educated hypocrites who negate the truth so easily without feeling shame or disgust on their “second rape”, a term used by Madigan and Gamble to describe the act of violation, alienation and disparagement a survivor receives when she turns to others for help and support (5). Society is least concerned about the violence of sexual assault and the impact it has on the victims. The playwright depicts this same idea of ‘second rape’ through the male characters.

BHASKAR. Funny, how it is most often women who become possessed... *Pause while screams intensify.*

MOHAN. They are more susceptible...
BHASKAR. The weaker sex, after all...

Naina returns to the room

LEELA. (With finality) It's a rape. isn't it?

Both men spin around, guiltily

MOHAN (as if affronted by the word) No!

BHASKAR. Of course not!

MOHAN Not at all! (Lights Out 38)

Another character Naina is introduced by the playwright to create a microcosm of the urban ceiling in that room. She shows her concern towards the victim and tries to call police but she is stopped by her friends who call the rape a “religious ceremony” and later call the victim a whore. Even then Naina shows her concern for the victim saying:

NAINA: Why? A whore can’t be raped? Is that the law? (Lights Out 40)

Padmanabhan gives voice to the sex workers who are given a sub-human treatment by the society. Urban space gives way to different professions. The plays poses a question that does being a sex worker makes a person not even worthy of being human? Society deprives them of their basic human rights, robbing them of their basic identity as women. The play voices a concern for the rape victims and whores who undergo the same trauma when it comes to forced sex. The play also highlights the patriarchal views of society. Kalpana Kannabiran has rightly said that the women is confronting the situation where they are in the combat between identity and legal
system due to identity politics which further pushes the women to seek the identity in the family and home. Kannabiran further highlights the atrocities of the social conditioning on a serious note:

This denial of access has serious consequences for all women, especially family women: all that needs to be done in instances of aggression or rape in their case is to prove that they are not the property of any man—that they are prostitutes. And a prostitute, or worse, still, an independent single woman, by definition, has no constitutional or democratic rights in this society. (234)

Cities as they grow are always seen as male spaces primarily. Even global cities such as London and New York, host to various ethnic groups are equally unhospitable to women. While illustrating this Mona Domosh says, “Behaviour on the streets of Victorian cities are governed by strict social codes for men and women, for working class and middle class, for blacks and whites. For women the implications often revolve around their sexuality. One of the most common terms for prostitute after all is ‘streetwalker’ “ (93-94).

Padmanabhan admits that the rape in all conditions is a violation of the dignity of woman’s will and desire. Mahesh Dattani in his play Thirty Days in September admits that rape is not mere a physical torture but a violation of the female consciousness. It simply disintegrates the inner self of the woman. Susan Giffins in her book Rape: The Power of Consciousness writes, “Legally rape is recognised as a crime with physical aspects only, namely the penetration of the vagina by the penis against the will of the victim. In effect, however, the real crime is the annihilation by the man of the woman as human being” (129).
BHASKER: Whatever rights a woman has, they are lost the moment she becomes a whore. *(Lights Out 41)*

The two different worlds coexist in urban setting. People living in the comfort zone usually have only approximation of the tough situation of poor people. Though they seem to know certain facts, they still want to remain aloof from it especially when it comes to bridging these gaps. Bhasker tries to convince the ladies about the two different worlds in the city.

BHASKER: It’s a hard world out there, Naina, a hard world. People like us—there’s just no contact at all. *(Lights Out 42)*

After a while Surinder, Naina’s husband reaches there. He poses to be very agitated about this crime in the neighbourhood and suggest killing the assailants. “Let’s go and wipe them out.” At the same time he is deeply prejudiced towards the marginalized and says that these underlings are used to difficult life.

SURINDER *(silencing the others with his voice)*: I’m telling you—these bastards understand only one thing: violence! *(Lights Out 46)*

The play ends on an ironic note when all of them come to know the rape and torture is over. Leela replies “Oh! Then it must be over for tonight” *(Lights Out 54).* Padmanabhan’s play bears out that there is a thin line between onstage action and the real life incident. The significance of the motif of the scream in the play is one of the most significant theatrical devices used by the playwright. Scream as a sound, loud, anonymous, frightening, and unsettling, yet not visibly ascribed to any specific character on the stage is the central feature of the play. It is also suggested that the alleged act of torture, which is supposed to create the screams from the victims, is viewed as ‘drama’, ‘a staged performance!’ by the callous male onlookers:
Leela (turns to Bhaskar): Well, but what about the screaming!

Mohan: Is it for help?

Leela (turns to Bhaskar): Isn’t it for help?

Mohan: Or is it just in general? That matters, you know. After all- it could just be some, you know, drama… (Lights Out 17)

In the above instance Padmanabhan makes a direct allusion to the theatrical aspect of the act, which in itself is being discussed, described and narrated to the spectators by the characters of this play. Though the recurring incident, heard and seen by Bhaskar’s family and others, shares some characteristics of a play or a drama, it is for almost all the time ‘reported’ to the audience. The scream is described as ‘different’ every night while the tormentors are described as ‘looking exactly alike’, perhaps referring to a faceless, de-individualized, collective force of violence. The theatrical devices also account for the element of exaggeration implied in the production, reception, and depiction of the scream and its loudness, its vulgarity, its frightening afterlife for ‘sensitive souls’ like Leela, who find it a torture.

The play presents the entire dramatic situation in terms of “insider/outsider dichotomy” and poses a question on the idea of urban spectatorship. Leela and Bhaskar are presented as prototypes of spectators in the city. Their characterization raises the question whether they are located outside or inside of what they are watching as Leela says that whatever they are watching they are making themselves responsible for that act. For Leela the idea of witnessing rape was horrible but Mohan and Bhasker do not share the same feeling. For them it is crazy on the part of Leela to be oversensitive on such ‘petty’ issues. Bhasker admits this when he says “These intellectuals always react like that, always confuse simple issues; after all, what’s the
harm in simply watching something? Even when there’s an accident in the street, don’t we all turn heads to look?” *(Lights Out 16)*.

Bhaskar’s insensitivity and inability as he compare the act of rape to a road accident speaks volumes about patriarchal apathy towards a horrific crime. Similarly Mohan reveals his mind, “Personally, I am against becoming entangled in the other people’s private lives. Outsiders can never really be the judge of who’s right and who’s wrong” *(Lights Out 20)*. The play underscores the concept of the responsibility of the audience as well. Watching a play, we constantly negotiate between the inside and the outside of the dramatic text. The concept of seeing without responsibility is thus interesting enough akin to the dominant idea of spectatorship in the contemporary urban space. Leela knows that just being an onlooker is the solution of this problem. As she says, “That, I will absolutely not permit whatever the secular laws of this country. I will not allow my children to be harmed by disgusting sights” *(Lights Out 30)*.

By above comments of the main characters of the play the playwright wants to convey a message that personal life is closely integrated with the public life and it is the harmony between two that can insure a balance in the society.

When it comes to stage setting, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani use similar techniques. In *Lights Out* Padmanabhan makes effective use of light and sound effects against the split level stage. The curtains on the windows have to be drawn shut but the light from outside is powerful enough to illuminate the dark space. The screams of the victim work as a devise to distinguish between locations. The intensity should be maintained neither too loud so as to suggest outside nor so soft that can be ignored by the characters shown indoor.
Through this play Padmanabhan present three different viewpoints of the urban spectators towards the horrors of rape. One is represented by Leela and Naina who empathise with the victim. They see the crime as an inner crisis but do not take any action on their own and kept pleading to the male characters to call police or take some action. The second one is represented by Mohan and Bhaskar who were indifferent towards the victim. They come up with the idea for propaganda through photographs and newspaper reports. The third perspective is presented by Surinder who suggests killing the miscreants with knives to decode the apathy of the society.

Even for Surinder, rescuing the victim is not more important than accepting the challenge thrown by the rapists upon the self-respect of the inhabitants of the area. Mohan is shown as the most cruel and inconsiderate as he goes to the extent of suggesting, “Pictures like these...we’d make a lot of money-after all, and how often does anyone see authentic pictures of a gang-rape in action?” (Lights Out 52). The play ends on the note of utter despair, without suggesting any kind of solution to the problem of coercive violation of a female body. Padmanabhan has used Brechtian technique of ‘distancing’, ‘defamiliarizing’, ‘verfremdungseffekt.’ It is very well used as the assault occurs in the background (both back stage and back of our mind) and leaves the audience uneasy. While discussing this play Jayant Kripalani affirms, “It’s a pure black comedy and is about how we all are in denial when incidents of violence on women occur around us. I can say that the audience will identify with the characters” (Kripalani web).

Rape is a way of controlling female body by proclaiming the rights of body as a commodity. Anna Furse, in “Performing in Glass: Reproduction, Technology, Performance and the Bio-Spectacular”, discusses about feminist perspective, “ We might wrest the gaze from being on us to considering our own gaze on ourselves...
because it is a matter of necessity if we are to grapple with systems of control” (149).

This notion offers a very strong critique to the situation in the play by offering the opinions of men towards the situation where the women should take a lead as they were neither subdued nor inefficient to voice against the recurrent rape. Manjula Padmanabhan in her interview with Praggnaparamita Biswas talks on this:

All the characters in the play are equally insensitive: none of them attempts to help the victim directly. Whatever their intentions and words, their actions are what we remember: they do nothing. After all, it could be argued that the women are much more insensitive than the men, because they complain about the lack of action, but none of them – including Frieda – picks up the phone and calls the police. Or the ambulance. They don’t even close the windows. So where is the question of male versus female sensitivity? In my view, there isn’t really much difference between the men and the women in the play except that they say different kinds of things.

The play uses a deliberately absurdist and surreal tone in order to hold up a mirror to the society in which such acts as this true-life event took place. (Singh and Mukherjee 625) Padmanabhan unmasks the indifferent and spineless middle class men joining hands and paralysing the system in general. Through this play the playwright mirrors the society that affirms that there are people like Bhaskar and Mohan within us. Our indifference amounts to our complicity in the crime.

**Bitter Chocolate: Silence & Child Sexual Abuse**

Like the oeuvre of Manjula Padmanabhan, Mahesh Dattani’s drama also defines the core issues of the city space. His drama caters to a segment of city
audience, who hold strong views on the certain issues handled by Dattani. His plays usually articulate all those issues, which are significant for the city dwellers the problems faced by the city dwellers. Thirty Days in September brings to the fore the real picture of the contemporary urban crime on women particularly on children. Child sexual abuse is not only an urban phenomenon yet the higher rates are in the city due to many reasons such as higher divorce cases, single parenting, nuclear families and many more.

Mahesh Dattani’s Thirty Days in September was first staged at the Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, on 31 May 2001. The play was commissioned by RAHI (Recovering And Healing from Incest), a Delhi based NGO for women survivors of incest. Since the first production of the play in 2001, RAHI has used it to spread awareness about the prevalence of incest in Indian households and to help women overcome the trauma inflicted on them by one of their own family members:

The frighteningly high percentage of incest and child abuse in Indian families has not been properly recognised. RAHI’s survey involving middle and upper middle class women in the four metros of the country revealed 76 per cent of them had been sexually abused as children. More than 40 per cent of these were survivors of incest. The scars cut deeper and the suffering of the victims lasts much longer often extending for their whole lives because of the great emphasis placed in our society on preserving family reputation at all costs. (Sumanaspati The Hindu)

The play presents the stark reality of child sexual abuse in contemporary society. Incest is a taboo not only in India but the world over and if a child is the
victim, people avoid acknowledging the episode. Dattani articulates this volatile, but suppressed, issue of our times by presenting the psychological and emotional state of the victims. As Lillete Dubey in a note on the play writes “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” (Collected Plays Vol. II 4). The title of the play embodies the inherent innocence of childhood as it is drawn from a nursery rhyme.

Thirty days hath September
April, June and November;
February has twenty-eight alone;
All the rest have Thirty-one.
Excepting leap-year - that’s the time
When February’s days are twenty-nine.

The title Thirty days in September, therefore, makes the rhyme reverberates in the mind. It connects one with the innocence of early childhood when one begins to understand the world. Ironically, if at this point of life somebody forces a child into the adult world of sexuality, it can hinder the child’s physical, mental and psychological growth. The play powerfully delineates the anxiety and pain faced by victims of incest. Particularly by highlighting the psychological disturbance and the escape mechanism of these survivors, Dattani gives voice to the unheard cries of the victims of child sexual abuse. “Dattani worked on 12 case histories before he wrote the play. He found a similarity in every case. The abuser was always the good uncle or the cousin who took the child out for an ice-cream, consoled her when she had just been scolded by her father, took her for a long drive in the car. In short, he was the closest to the child” (Tandon The Tribune).
Dattani weaves the play around a small, scattered family enduring the trauma of child sexual abuse throughout their life. There are always two ways of reacting to the situation, either by voicing opposition through violent reaction or by accepting the pain silently. Both these aspects are very well exposed through Mala Khatri and her mother Shanta. Though Mala’s mother has found escape and evasion in silence and prayer, Mala becomes extremely violent and blames her divorced mother for spoiling her life by ignoring her cries. Mala lives in the shadow of the haunting memory of her abuser—her maternal uncle—in her subconscious all the time. Her love interest is confined to a period of thirty days only as she is unable to endure a steady relation with any man for a period longer than that.

Deepak, Mala’s latest boyfriend comes as a silver lining in her life. He makes efforts to convince her that she should consult a psychologist about her unusual behaviour. He also meets Mala’s mother to unravel the suppressed past and to ascertain the cause of Mala’s distress. All his efforts go in vein until he meets Mala’s maternal uncle and suspects him to be the root cause of Mala’s disturbance. Though Mala and her mother are not ready to speak but finally, due to love and support, Mala is able to point to her victimizing uncle. The culmination of this exposure results in the horrifying knowledge that Shanta had turned towards prayer and silence, as she also had been molested by her own elder brother when she was young.

The play begins with a meeting between Mala and her psychologist. The first two speeches show the confident and self-assured Mala while the third speech transports us three years back, where we meet an altogether different Mala, who is meek and self-conscious:
MALA. I know it is all my fault really... It must be. *(Collected Plays Vol. II 9)*

Meanwhile Deepak arranges a secret meeting with Mala’s mother for exploring and extracting the hidden truths of Mala’s past. Through his insistent probing he gets a glimpse of a few facts about Mala life, such as “thirty days affairs”, the embittered relation of Mala with her mother and her behavioural abnormalities. The long monologues of Mala that oscillate between the past and the present show the recurrent images of the past torment, simultaneously emphasizing the poignant memories that haunt her forever.

Though society prefers to remain silent on these issues, incest is a common form of abuse in many families. About thirty percent of all perpetrators of sexual abuse are related to their victim either by blood or other connections. Such a form of incest is described as intrafamilial child sexual abuse. Mala too is a victim of such sexual abuse as her protector turned out to be her abuser. When Mala was quite young her father left Mala and her mother Shanta for some other woman as he was not physically satisfied with Shanta. Before leaving he shrieked at her by saying:

I married a frozen woman. *(Collected Plays Vol. II 36)*

After so many years Mala learns the fact that it was not her father but her uncle who used to provide financial support to the family. In most cases of abuse, a single mother in financial need and consequent dependence on a male elder, sets the scene for child sexual abuse. Pinki Virani in her book *Bitter Chocolate* states that “Patriarchy, power, penetration—these are all the factors that assist greatly in allowing a child to be sexually, and physically, abused...” *(Virani XX).*
Mala blames her mother for every wrong in her life. Mala has this feeling that her mother knew of the evil design of her brother who sexually exploited her daughter, still she never bothered to resist or question the abuser. Whenever Mala went to tell her mother about the incident she just fed her something:

MALA. That is how you pacified me.... Instead of listening to what I had to say, you stuffed me with food.... I thought that was the cure for my pain. That if I ate till I was stuffed, the pain would go away. Every time I came to you mummy, you were ready with something to feed me. You knew. Otherwise you wouldn’t have been so prepared You knew all along what was happening to me, and I won’t ever let you forget that! *(Collected Plays Vol. II 24)*

On the one hand Mala was sexually abused by her uncle and on the other, Mala’s mother asked her to consider everything as a bad dream and forget it. For Mala it was certainly more than a bad dream as not only her body but her soul was scarred too by the repetitive molestation. Year after year she suffered but her silent screams remained unheard and gradually she learnt to live with the pain and started “enjoying” it:

MALA. It doesn’t matter now. I just have to learn to live with the pain. *(Collected Plays Vol. II 27)*

MALA. The pleasure is part of the pain. *(Collected Plays Vol. II 29)*

Many years of forced sexual activity made Mala’s body habituated to the sex act and gradually she started craving for it. Then it was not only her uncle or cousin who molests her giving her uncle’s reference but anybody and everybody that she comes in contact with. More than an “abuse” now it became her body’s “necessity.”
But this “pleasure” is misunderstood by Mala’s mother. Shanta never blamed her brother for inflicting pain upon her daughter, yet she blamed Mala for extracting pleasure from this pain.

SHANTA. Not just the pain. I remember, much as I was trying to forget, what I saw. Not when you were seven but when you were thirteen. (Gently.) Please don’t misunderstand me, Mala. I remember, seeing you with my brother during the summer holidays. You were pushing yourself on him in the bedroom. (Collected Plays Vol. II 27)

SHANTA. That is why I forget. I went to the kitchen to vomit. Then I prayed. I prayed for you Mala. (Pointing to the portrait.) That is what I was praying to. To our God, so He could send his Sudarshan Chakra to defend you, to defend us from the demon inside you, not outside you. But you wouldn’t let me. You don’t let me. (Collected Plays Vol. II 28)

“Demon inside you” clearly objectifies the attitude of society. Dattani makes Shanta the mouthpiece of society that most of the time blames the victim for the molestation and not the molester. The woman is said to be deliberately attracting attention. She doesn’t want to take any relationship for more than thirty days:

It has to end in a month’s time. In fact I like it best when I can time so it lasts for thirty days. I even mark it on my calendar. After that, I have to move on, if you know what I mean... well it means that it is no longer satisfying to me, and I don’t mean the physical part of it, although that is usually the main attraction for me... not that I actually enjoy it when they are doing it to me ... sometimes I do, with the right
kind of people ... the right kind of people are, let me see... (Collected Plays Vol. II 18)

Though Shanta herself was an incest victim, she is unable to understand the trauma of her daughter. This apathy on the part of Shanta demolishes the so called image of a mother-daughter relationship as being a supportive bond. Dattani through his plays always tries to challenge the stereotypical gender notions. The cultural construct of a close, warm relation between a mother and her daughter disintegrates into smithereens of Shanta and Mala. Both seem to be dissatisfied with their relationship and response towards each other. This causes a deep breach between them:

SHANTA. It is so easy to slip into bad ways. I wish she would listen to me.

MALA. I wish she wouldn’t be so lost in her religion. I wish she had been there for me! (Collected Plays Vol. II 41)

Paedophilia and incest are not new entrants to the world of sexual variants but they have certainly acquired newer, graver dimensions that demand urgent social response. Uncomfortable though it may sound, 70% of urban Indian women are, in some manner or the other, been subjected to sexual abuse as children. What is worse is that the aberration, contrary to what it appears, cuts across all sections of society, sparing no one whatsoever (Tribune 2005). Cases of incest largely go unreported because of the family prestige involved. People generally see such incidents maligning the name of the family. Thus nobody comes out to confront such heinous activity. That is the reason why many more Malas and Shantas’ silent screams are still unheard. Mahesh Dattani’s play is an eye-opener in that it brings to the surface the
unavoidable dark truths of the seemingly calm and civilised exterior of society job by coming up with this such a issue of incest.

Mala has terrible memories of having been abused by her uncle. The counselling sessions with the psychologist seem to have their basis in Freudian psychoanalysis according to which childhood memories are the key to adult life. Since childhood is regarded as a significant stage in the creation of ego, leading to a balanced or unbalanced personality in adult life, much hinges upon the experiences of this early period. In the Freudian method healing might be effected through the recall of repressed childhood memories (Morgan, King, Weirz & Schopler 580-581).

MALA. By staying silent doesn’t mean I can forget! This is my hell. This hell is where I belong! It is your creation, Ma! You created it for me. With your silence! You didn’t forget anything, you only remained silent! (Collected Plays Vol. II 54)

In some ways, Mahesh Dattani presents this play as a memory play. Just as in our memory, a series of events are presented not as they actually took place but as they might be remembered, so the scenes are enacted in the play. The juxtaposition of the past and the present in the dialogues, especially of abuse and reconciliation makes for more effective theatre. In the scenes below, the "MAN" is a creation of Mala’s imagination and the voice of her forbidden pleasure:

[The man quickly enters their area. There is something very furtive in his eye movement and a sense of conspiracy in his tone of voice....He exists only for Mala and not for Deepak.]

DEEPAK. You see? It wasn’t that difficult.
MAN. Touch me here.

[Mala withdraws her hand sharply, frightened.]

MAN. You don’t love your uncle?

DEEPAK. What’s wrong?

MAN. You don’t love your uncle, hmmm?

DEEPAK. Try it one more time.

MAN. Quickly before someone sees you. Touch.

DEEPAK. Please for my sake.

MAN. You said you loved me in front of mummy and daddy. Come on! Show it!

...

MAN. If they hear you they will say you are a bad girl. This is our secret.

(Like an order but in a whisper.) Don’t Cry! (Collected Plays Vol. II 42- 43)

Strindberg in the preface of his play A Dream Play wrote “Time and space do not exist...one consciousness is superior to them all...” (Strindberg 175). This is quite applicable to Dattani’s Thirty Days in September. Although the play raises many issues such as human understanding towards the victims of incest, gender divide, man as protector and abuser, mother-daughter relationship, shame attached to incest, these are portrayed under the overall context of child sexual abuse. The carefully chosen
words and even the stage setting help in emphasizing this strategy of dwelling upon “consciousness.” On the very first page of the play, instructions for the stage setting are given:

[During Mala’s taped conversation, we see the back of a life-sized doll of a seven-year-old girl propped on the chair. During the first conversation we only see the back of the head. With every subsequent taped conversation we see more of the profile. We only see the doll’s full face after Deepak’s taped conversation.](Collected Plays Vol. II 7)

This impressionistic technique intends to point towards important elements of characterization and the theme. Mahesh Dattani also uses the word MAN instead of uncle to universalize all the abusers. At the same time he applies the word MAN for the newspaper boy as he too, like the uncle, knows how to take advantage of the helplessness of a woman.

MAN. ....There is no man in the house, that is why. If there is a man in the house, what is my problem whether her gas is leaking or her terrace is leaking. (Turning to Shanta and speaking with the authority of a man.) Hahn. Have you kept the money ready? Quickly.

[Shanta has been looking down while the paper wallah made his comments on her situation. The man easily towers over her, pelvis thrust out in an imposing manner, making Shanta very uneasy.]

(Collected Plays Vol. II 11)

Dattani points to the fact that women who are single and economically dependent are specially vulnerable to sexual abuse. Patriarchal society always looks at an unattached woman as a physical body for sexual pleasure and not as a wholesome
human being. At the same time Dattani also dismantles the image of the patriarchal male as abuser by presenting Deepak, Mala’s boyfriend, as the person who actually helps her to come out of her trauma. He helps her “to wake up after...coma” (Collected Plays Vol. II 33).

Almost all the plays of Dattani are word sensitive, giving clues to the final revelation:

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

[No response from Shanta. The man waves his hand in front of her face.]

MAN. You are off again. Ever since I can recall you simply start dreaming whenever... (Making light of it.) Remember when we were small, you would simply vanish into your world...like when we were having dinner and you nearly choked. If I didn’t know the Heinlich Manoeuvre from school, God alone knows... (Collected Plays Vol. II 38)

In the above passage, one may note the vocabulary that reveals the self-proclaimed hypocrisy of the uncle who must “play” certain roles in public but violating the mother and the daughter in private. The references also bring in the memories of the uncle in contrast to those of Mala.

In the present play Dattani uses symbolic names for the characters. While both Uncle and Paperwallah were named Man to unify their patriarchal identity as well as
perverse mentality; Shanta meaning peace or calm signifies the silence that she adopted after abuse; Deepak, meaning the lamp, signifies the light or the hope in the play which actually brings the victims out of the dark past and Mala, like a garland, signifies her again joining mainstream society after a breakdown. Mala may also signify another kind of circle, a repetition of the history of sexual abuse suffered by her mother. The vicious circle of abuse may be a chain binding many vulnerable women.

The end of the play brings a relief with the reconciliation between the mother and daughter:

MALA. ..... We were both struggling to survive but - I never acknowledged your struggle.

.....I just want to... I want to ask you whether you need my help. Please let me be of help. (gently turning her mother’s face towards her.) It’s not your fault, mother. Just as it wasn’t my fault. Please, tell me that you’ve forgiven me for blaming you. Please tell me that. (Collected Plays Vol. II 58)

Dattani through this play touches a very sensitive and yet powerful subject of sexual abuse without offending sensibilities. The play brings out the horror and pain that incest causes and also the connotation of shame and disgrace to the family honour that prohibits its public declaration. It also makes the readers think about the kind of treatment society accords to the victims of such molestation. In particular it draws attention to the plight of the dependent woman or a hapless child in a familial environment where the male protector has power, including sexual power, over the
women. It can rightly be stated by Aditi De in her review of Dattani’s *Collected Plays*:

Dattani’s plays deal with the real scenarios that are tough to turn away from. They are couched in Indian urban speak. They shy away from myth and make-believe to tackle reality head-on, no matter what the impact of the collision. They have worked onstage when directed sensitively, or read over BBC, or - somewhat less powerfully - when rendered as cinema. They prove indisputably that Dattani is in sync with millions of urbanities to whom English is an Indian language. We are his audience, his characters, his source of sustained feedback. (*The Hindu* 2005)

**Women as Bonsais: Silence & Domestic Violence**

*Bravely Fought the Queen* is yet another play by Mahesh Dattani set in another big metropolitan city Bangalore. “...a posh suburb of Bangalore. The decor is expensive, perhaps tasteful, but badly maintained” (*Collected Plays* 233). The play is about a semi-rich Gujarati family. The brothers Jitin Trivedi & Nitin Trivedi, have married to Dolly and Alka, two sisters. The two women remain at home and look after their aged mother in law, Baa. Shridhar works in the advertising firm of Nitin and Jitin. His wife Lalitha is portrayed as smart, outgoing girl. Their presence in the play signifies the plight of middle class urban dwellers.

*Bravely Fought the Queen* is divided into three acts and each act is given a name. Act I is names as “The Women”, Act II as “The Men” and Act III as “Free for All”. The Act I “The Women” presents the women in the naturalistic scenario subjected to different levels of hierarchies—domestic, social, professional. Dolly and
Alka are confined to the first hierarchy. Dattani through this play presents the ways in which exploitation is now couched in terms of culture and refinement. Sen, in his online article, “Stage Space: Mahesh Dattani’s Play Opens in England”, writes:

Much of the play’s tension comes from the interaction between the enclosed, claustrophobic female world of Act I and the male world of business in Act II. The fact that both sexes are living lives based on fantasy is cruelly exposed when the characters confront each other in Act III, and the realities of their lives emerge. The homosexuality of one of the brothers, the crippled daughter of the other marriage, Baa’s continued presence – all of these facts are concealed in the uneasy world which the characters inhabit. (Sen web)

The play begins with Dolly sitting in her drawing room aimlessly filing her nails and has a mud mask on her face while listening to thumari and humming along. She is getting ready to go out with her husband. At that moment the bell rings and Lalitha enters, carrying a large shopping bag. Dolly is surprised at Lalitha’s visit as she did not expect her at this hour.

LALITHA: (enters). I’m sorry if you didn’t expect me.

DOLLY. Oh, I did.-Not tonight, though. There must be some mix up.

Er — sit down. (Collected Plays 233)

Dolly doesn’t know much about Sridhar. Lalitha tells Dolly about Sridhar. Lalitha tells Dolly about the purpose of her coming. Lalitha comes with her Bonsai plant to discuss the “masked ball.” It is her husband Sridhar’s idea to launch Re Va Tee range. They have a plan to invite all big shots and press so as to launch this new range of lingerie at midnight “The best part about the ball is everyone will be in
costumes! And will have masks on!” (Collected Plays 237). This is an ironical statement as all the characters in the play have their mask on.

Dolly does not treat Lalitha properly. She does not appear to be interested in anything. However, Lalitha can’t leave Dolly’s house immediately as her home is far at the ‘other end of the world’. There is also a reference to the unsafe city life for women. Lalitha refers to the danger of getting looted and being raped if she travels alone by an auto rickshaw. Lalitha on this account tells Dolly, “I’m sorry but I can’t leave” (Collected Plays 235).

Darwin’s theory of “survival of the fittest” which requires struggle for existence can be aptly applied to this middle class couple Sridhar and Lalitha. It is only out of their urge to have their own space, own identity in the city space that they ignore everything related to their self esteem that is brutally ignored by Trivedi family. While Sridhar suffers in the office, Lalitha is also not welcome in the Trivedi’s house. Dolly gets irritated by her chatter and presence. Lalitha does not like this but she cleverly changes the topic from herself to the interiors of the house. Lalitha is portrayed as a loquacious woman who can talk on any topic. Dolly likes this and voluntarily gives details. She then talks about people living in the house. First she refers to Daksha her daughter:

DOLLY. Three bedrooms. Two upstairs and one down. Daksha prefers the downstairs one.

LALITHA. Daksha?

DOLLY (looks at her). I don’t suppose Jiten mentioned our daughter to you?
... DOLLY. Yes. Yes, she is in school. She goes to—let me see (closes her eyes, thinking desperately)—Ooty. Yes. She goes in Ooty.

LALITHA. Which one? Blue Mountain? My cousin’s son is studying there!

DOLLY (stares at Lalitha). No. Not Blue Mountain. The other one. (Resumes filing her nails.)” after this she consciously evades any detail or discussion on Daksha she continues “ then there’s Baa. My Mother-In-Law. We had to put her in the upstairs room because of ... Daksha. Baa had a stroke.

LALITHA. Oh! How terrible! How is she now?

DOLLY. She’s alive. (Collected Plays 239)

Baa is Dolly’s and Alka’s mother-in-law. She is immobile and uses the bell to call Dolly. When Dolly goes inside to wash her mud mask, Lalita calls Shridhar in the office to know the exact plans as she feels that there is some communication gap and Dolly has some other plans of the day:

LALITHA (dials). Hello? It’s me. Ya. Thank God you’ve reached. It looks like you’ve got the dates mixed up...No, she wasn’t expecting me... No, it’s not just that. She tells me they are going out somewhere... (Impatiently.) ‘They’ means she and her husband, her sister and her husband. I know they are there but she is soo sure of it ... Oh ... Oh! Then she has got her dates mixed up ... Well, she is getting dressed now... Look. What do you want me to do? I can’t discuss the ball with her, she doesn’t want to! Wait for an hour? But what if she wants to go
out? ... How are you so sure? ... Oh ... Oh, I see ... Okay. If you say so.

I could go over to her sister’s house if she wants to be left alone. So if
I’m not here, I’ll be next door ... Don’t be late. Bye. (Collected Plays
240)

The conversation with Shridhar reveals that Dolly is probably not going
anywhere. Meanwhile a loud bell rings from buzz room followed by a voice,
“Dolly!” ”Dolle-e!” Baa wants dolly immediately in her room. Dolly comes out of her
room wiping her face she looks angry as she tells Lalitha “without fail, she calls me
when I’m in the bathroom” This is important that Baa is only ‘heard’ on the stage in
Act I. She appears only in Act II that is titled as “The Men” and not in the Act I “The
Women.” This astute strategy by the playwright signifies Baa as agent of patriarchy;
that is why even though a female, she appears in the Act II. By this dramatic strategy
she request Lalitha to go to her room. As Lalitha disappears in Baa’s room, Alka
Trivedi enters, she is younger than her sister. She is also dressed to go out she
searches for Dolly and then she decides to call Nitin. Nitin informs her that they had
cancelled that day’s programme due to some business engagement. They have
conveyed this to Dolly. Though Dolly, who knew about this, had possibly informed
Alka that the programme is cancelled, Alka is still desperate to go out. She pleads
before Nitin:

Nitin, let us go somewhere. Just the two of us ... just for a drive.

Anywhere. There are so many things I want to discuss but we are never
... I’m all dressed and ready and all you have to do is pick me up.

Forget Dolly. Forget your brother! ... (Sighs.) All right. I will keep Baa
company ... Yes, I know, she’s lonely! (Hangs up)” (Collected Plays
241).
Through this Dattani presents a classic example in which the process of female silencing is at work in the polished ambience of the drawing room in an urban set up. This is not just a conversation between husband and wife but one that painfully reflects on the appropriation of women in society.

Alka goes in the kitchen to take some cool air and switches the light on. At that moment Lalita enters the kitchen startling Alka. Lalita soon finds that Alka is different from her sister. She is talkative and confident. She is easy going and hard drinker. She doesn’t care for anybody’s opinion about her. Unlike Dolly, she receives Lalita positively. Lalita gives her formal introduction to Alka.

LALITHA. Oh, I keep myself occupied. I do a bit of writing. Freelance. I write an occasional woman’s column for the *Times*. Sometimes I review cultural events. I am into meditation. And oh yes, I grow bonsai plants—I’ve been growing them for years. I do a bit of creative writing as well. You know, poetry and stuff like that. Nothing great but...(Collected Plays 243)

A quintessential urbanite, Lalita is an extrovert she likes company of intellectual people. Shridhar and she are planning to purchase a flat on loan once they have enough money for down payment. They don’t have any child yet. Lalita now thinks that she has a chance to talk about her favourite subject, that is bonsai:

LALITA: Suppose it comes with a bit of practice. In the beginning, you will have a lot of dead shoots on your hands. But then you learn and it ... comes. Anyone can do it. You first find a sapling of your choice. It could be of any tree. I myself prefer fruit bearing tress because when they are fully grown *(giggles)*—I guess you can’t call
them fully grown—but when they’ve reached their *(demonstrates with her hands)* dwarfed maturity, they really look bizarre with pea sized mangoes or oranges! Anyway, then you plant the sapling in a shallow tray—you’ve got to make sure the roots don’t have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming them as they grow.

ALKA. Sounds very tedious.

LALITHA. Here comes the nest part. *(Dolly begins her make up.)* you can shape their branches into whatever shape you want—by pinching or wiring the shoots. *(Collected Plays 246)*

After listening to all the details Alka reacts as per her character: “sounds very tedious.” After this Lalita turns silent. Alka gives a true picture of Dolly’s personality. She tells Lalita, “... poor Dolly is too ... straight. She is neither interested in the so-and so of this world, nor unfortunately, in the bottle. Poor Dolly, sitting all by herself, looking pretty and ... wasted” *(Collected Plays 260).*

We find Alka and Dolly are both unhappy and very miserable. They only get some comfort by thinking that she is happier than the other but the fact is both are doomed to die in gloom. While Alka sinks in her drinking Dolly sinks into herself. Alka is a self centred person. This is the reason why she does not like to take care of Baa. She gets angry when Baa rings the bell repeatedly to call her. She cries out of frustration, “God should fix her arms as well so she can’t ring...” Baa doesn’t like Alka and threatens her that she would vomit on the floor if she does not rub her back properly.

Alka also refers to her brother whom she hates from the core of her heart. He is also responsible for the strained relation of Dolly and Alka. She tells Dolly, “I can’t
forget what they did to me! Our brother is a cheat! He lied about our father to them.
And he lied to me! He lied to me by not telling me...” *(Collected Plays 256).*

He told the Trivedies that his father had died. This was a lie. His father was living separately which the Trivedies found out later. This created a void in their family. Moreover Alka thinks he knew that Nitin is impotent and even after knowing this Praful concealed the fact from her. Probably she was not aware that Nitin is a homosexual and does not feel aroused in presence of a woman. She thinks that Praful got her married to an impotent man for some selfish purpose of his. When Dolly tries to protect Praful, Alka comments “…for you, he is the descendent of a saint! A saint! *(Laughs hard.)* Like my husband. Such close friends! Friends from college” *(Collected Plays 257).* She also recalls a very painful event of her young age:

Nitin and Praful were 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 pushed 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! 
Just... Praful said, ‘Don’t you ever look at any man. Ever’. *(Collected Plays 257)*

Dolly still believes that whatever Praful did was right. She defends Praful. “He did that for your own good. You would never have been... accepted ...anywhere else. You should appreciate that” *(Collected Plays 256).* Dolly feels that Alka deserves such treatment (Alka was once driven out of her home by Nitin after this incident of
coming in scooter of neighbour’s son). Dolly is not aware of the nature of Alka’s personal tragedy that is why she finds fault in her. Alka though vocal about everything is as secretive as Dolly as far as her life with Nitin is concerned. Both the sisters heroically suffer in silence and loneliness. Alka initiates talk on Daksha knowingly that her sister, Dolly, doesn’t like talking about her daughter:

ALKA: All right. We can talk about Daksha.

LALITHA: *(obviously interested)*. Daksha?

ALKA. Her Daughter. Didn’t you know?

LALITHA. Well, she had mentioned her...

DOLLY. Stop it!

ALKA. She doesn’t tell anyone...

DOLLY. Stop it, I said!

ALKA. She doesn’t tell anyone that her daughter is training to be a dancer! She is going to be a famous dancer, isn’t she? *(Collected Plays 259)*

Towards the end of play it is revealed that Daksha is invalid. Daksha staggers on weak bones in her infirm efforts to walk which is associated with her dancing. Alka then talks about Kanhaiya, another mysterious, physically absent character in the play. This time Dolly agrees. Alka gives a detailed account about Kanhaiya while Dolly provides the missing link: "... one day, the toothless old cook’s father dies and he has to go to his village. But what luck! You see, he sends this replacement who is not toothless... Kanhaiyalal. The toothless cook’s friend’s grandson. Only twenty...A
teenager still. *Looks at Dolly* Just a few years older than Daksha...Yes! absolutely! Our Kanhaiya looks really ... ripe*  *(Collected Plays 260)*. Kanhaiya, is fantasy of both the sisters and epitomizes the idealised lover to compensate the void of physical love in their lives. This ends the Act I.

The Act II “The Men” is set in the office of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi:

_The office of Jiten nd Nitin Trivedi. An Advertising agency. Pin-ups of campaigns on a board. A huge photograph of a sensuous model with the Re Va Tee logo. Two large desks with executive chairs. A comfortable couch next to Jiten’s desk. A smaller desk belonging to Sridhar, which is overcrowded with papers and assorted items._ *(Collected Plays 264)*

Sridhar is shown as a hardworking employee who possesses necessary expertise of working in Trivedi brothers’ office. Nitin understands him but Jiten interferes in his work and does not permit Sridhar to work independently. This results in an offensive piece of advertisement. Jiten agrees that they should try to attract men and not women. Sridhar wants him to rethink on his decision as he feels it’s sheer professional suicide. Sridhar struggles due to his blunt honesty. He plans to buy the flat like every middle class men living in the city. He has no other source of income except this job. That’s why he silently suffers and accepts the offensive behaviour of Trivedi brothers. Jiten asks him to get a prostitute.

At this point Baa is introduced to the audience. Baa has suffered a lot in her life due to her husband’s violent behaviour. “I have married such a villager! Aah! You slapped me? Never, never slap me. Nobody has hit me. The men in our family are decent” *(Collected Plays 288)*. She usually thinks about her past and her
occasional delirium tells a lot about her past. “You hit me? I only speak the truth and you hit me? Go on. Hit me again. The children should see what a demon you are. Aah! Jitu! Nitin! Are you watching? See you father! (Jerks her face as if she’s been slapped.) No! No! Not on the face! What will the neighbours say? Not on the face. I beg you!” Hit me but not on ... aaaah!” (Collected Plays 278). Jiten is compared with his father by Baa as she says: “Jitu is just like his father. Just like him” (Collected Plays 284).

What happened in the life of Baa is being repeated in the life of Dolly. Baa likes her younger son as he is not like his father. He is like Baa’s father. Baa did not want Nitin to marry Alka as she knew Alka’s family well. She warns Nitin: “Nitin! Don’t marry her! Your friend Praful is fooling you! The Older one is good for Jitu, but beware of the younger one! She is like her mother!” (Collected Plays 285).

Baa has inherited huge property while both her sons wait for her death. It is revealed that she has decided to give all her property to Daksha. Act III “Free for All” has a similar setting as Act I, that is, Jiten’s house. The action starts from the point where it freezes in the end of Act I. Dolly comes out of kitchen, Lalitha is sitting and lost in thought while Alka is lying on the sofa. After a heavy bout of drinking Alka fails to recognize Lalitha she has even forgotten about the recent talk on illicit relationship of Dolly and Kanhaiya. The life of Naina Devi is presented as a contrast to the wretchedness of Trivedi family in Act II. The reference to Baa as a singer brings a close parallel between Baa and Naina Devi.

DOLLY. Do you know Naina Devi is not her real name? She was a Queen!

LALITHA. A Queen! You mean – royal?
DOLLY. She married into royalty. Imagine. She could have lived her life comfortably in royal grace and become a rajmata. But she wanted to sing!

She wanted to sing songs of love. Thumris—sung in her days only by tawaifs. The queen wanted to sing love songs sung by whores! Why? Nobody Knew. She’d seen a performance by a tawaif in her youth. The sound of the sarangi and ghungroos remained with her forever. She went ahead and sang! Her husband supported her. At times she was mistaken for a tawaif. But it didn’t matter! It didn’t matter to her because she was singing! That was all that was important to her.

Today, she is called the queen of thumri. (Collected Plays 295)

Though there is no parallel between Queen Laxmi Bai and singer Naina Devi yet Lalitha is reminded of Queen Laxmi Bai while Laxmi Bai fights, fails and dies Naina Devi fights and lives victoriously. Lalitha suggests that Dolly should put on the mask and costume of queen Laxmibai at the proposed ball dance. The similarity between Dolly and queen Laxmibai is a dramatic irony. For Lalitha the reference is casual but the audience realizes the significance of this similarity.

Alka and Dolly’s father was already married before he married their mother. The couple has three children—Praful, Dolly and Alka and then their father returned to his first wife ending all his relationships, dumping his second wife and her children as illicit. All through their lives they fought for their dignity and acceptability in society. The sisters were neither happy before marriage nor they are happy after marriage with Trivedi brothers. Dolly reveals the bitter truth about her life to Jiten:
Fifteen years ago. Hardly married for a year. Praful comes to visit us.
The same day, your mother receives a letter from her cousin in
Ahmadabad. What fate! It had to be the same day! And it had to be that
crucial month for me! What was in that letter? Our whole history.
Including the portion which Praful hadn’t told you about. (*Collected
Plays 311*)

This reference suggests that she was a child born out of illicit relationship.
This revelation resulted the outrage of Baa and Jiten. Jiten had beaten up Dolly badly
not realizing that she was pregnant. The result was that the child was born
prematurely and had been seriously handicapped. Daksha did not have bones strong
enough to hold her straight.

Alka on the other hand is portrayed as although she has suffered all her life.
She loves Praful even when she says she is angry too with him for cheating her. Alka
desperately wants to prove that she is a good person and that is why she refused to go
inside the kitchen to have sex with Kanhaiya. In fact her suffering is due to her
husband’s alternate sexual orientation. She tries to present herself as a cheerful
woman but that is her outer reality. Deep inside her lies the real Alka who is very
depressed and frustrated because of her life and the only relief comes to her when she
drowns herself in drinking. Through Nitin’s soliloquy we come to know his real
persona. He confesses the fact that before marriage he was cohabiting with Alka’s
brother Praful, who convinced him that she knew about their homosexual relationship
and does not mind getting married to him. Though Praful is not physically present in
the play but he plays the most important role in the action of the play.
The characters in the play are highly sophisticated, urban elite. The play portrays life in a cosmopolitan city where too, women are suppressed. Daksha and Baa have physical disability but the other characters have mental disability and stagnant moral growth just like bonsai. As Lalitha says “Oh. No. it’s completely resigned to its new shape. I suppose something happens inside it and ... it decides to change its size.” Bonsai specially symbolises the women as their shoots of desire are constantly trimmed in such a way that they grow only in the desired direction with the desired growth. This motif is quite clear in the play when we find that all the three women Dolly, Alka and Lalitha in a way are bonsai of different kind. They also reflect the class quotient of their male counterparts.

Dattani has used bonsai as a leitmotif for all the women characters in the play whose growth is stunned by the males. In the play it is the torturous process of female socialization with the plurality of ultimate miniaturization by the prolonged process.

This process reminds of the painful practices around the world like foot binding in China and Breast Ironing in Cameroon and Female circumcision better known as Female Genital Mutilation in Africa and Middle East. Until early twentieth century, Chinese women had endured the unimaginable pain and mutilation of the foot binding process, sacrificing their ability to move about freely and normally in the process. Thus, the symbolic connotations of the metaphor of the bonsai produce the effect of a larger reality in which the female is pinned down under a monolithic edifice of patriarchal injunctions (Mandal 104).

When Lalitha explains the process of growing a bonsai, she unwittingly seems to chart the process of the stunted growth of a female as a woman.

ALKA. You said you make bonsai?
LALITHA. Yes. I’ve got a whole collection.

ALKA. How do you make them?

LALITHA. You stunt their growth. You keep trimming the root and bind their Branches with wire and...stunt them. (*Collected Plays* 244)

This description is applicable to Dolly and Alka, to Baa, to Daksha, to Dolly and Alka’s mother, to the Re-Va-Tee model and ironically to Lalitha also. All of them at the hands of males around them have curtailed their full growth and allowed themselves to become artificial, aesthetically appealing bonsais. Through all these characters Dattani exposes the invisible process of social acculturation whereby which society wires, twists, clips of a woman to make her fit into tradition. Lalitha further explains the making of Bonsai that is almost metaphorical of the way in which patriarchy stunts the growth of women to suits its purpose “…you plant the sapling in a shallow tray—you’ve got to make sure the roots don’t have enough space to spread. You still have to keep trimming them as they grow” (*Collected Plays* 246).

Dattani unveils the liberated women of the urban bourgeois by a simple instance of women and alcohol, which is seen as a taboo or at best, a social requirement. The two conflicting attitudes are reflected in the conversation between Alka and Lalitha:

ALKA. Oh. In that case ... let me just add some in mine. (*She picks up the bottle of rum and brings it to where her glass is.*) I have an occasional one. It’s good for digestion. (*pours a stiff one.*)

LALITHA. I have not- so-occasional one at parties. It’s nice to get high once in a while.
ALKA (guardedly). Your husband doesn’t mind?

LALITHA. No. I don’t think so. (Drinking). As long as he’s around when it happens, he doesn’t mind. You must do a bit of social drinking too. (Collected Plays 244)

The process of policing the actions of women and their behaviour pattern works in a devious manner in the lives of the female characters. According to Payal Nagpal:

In the multicultural globalised metropolitan pockets of the country, it is believed that violence against women is on the decline. Women are more liberated and share equal footing with men. However, Dattani uses naturalistic theatre to present the reality of the social scenario in the urban sectors to depict how culture and refinement colour the eyes of the people and prevent them from looking into the insidious working of the power structures in society. (93)

The plays discussed in the present chapter deflate the myth that women in the urban space are emancipated and liberated in the true sense. In fact, these plays provoke us to examine how urban spaces sometimes hide the sordid reality of women as victims of even a more dangerous form of aggression, which is covered under the goal of pseudo-civilized exterior of the city space.