

## Life as a 'Brief Candle' blown out by Death: A Critical Analysis of Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle*

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### Abstract:

Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle* deals with the life of cancer patients and is set in a hospital where cancer patients are about to stage a comic play to raise fund for their hospice. The play-within-the-play is a farce containing explicit sexual overtones, jokes and funny dialogues. In using the play-within-the-play technique Dattani is following a Shakespearean tradition. The research paper makes an in-depth thematic study of the play and analyses the philosophy of life that emerges from the play. Death is the predominant theme of *Brief Candle*. Faced with the fear of oblivion, Vikas, an AIDS patient who dies of cancer, realises the philosophy of life and rightful living and he spreads his understanding of life to everyone onstage and offstage. Every moment lived with enthusiasm, vitality and mirth is every moment denied death.

**Keywords:** Death, cancer, fear, life, laughter

Mahesh Dattani's play *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death* has a clear Shakespearean echo that is hard to miss. The title alludes to Macbeth's famous soliloquy beginning with "tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow" (5. 5. 19) uttered immediately after the death of Lady Macbeth. Macbeth looks back at the life he has lived, burdens of sin, guilt, disappointment and ingratitude he has carried since the murder of Duncan and comes up with his philosophical assessment of life. He realises the nothingness of life, absurdity of meaningless pursuits for fulfilment and says,

Out, out, brief candle!

Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5.23-28)

The title "Brief Candle" encapsulates the theme of the play. The play deals with the life of cancer patients and is set in a hospital where cancer patients are about to stage a comic play to raise fund for their hospice. The play-within-the-play is a farce containing explicit sexual overtones, jokes and funny dialogues. This farcical play-within-the-play heightens the tragedy as the audience knows that the actors enacting the play are cancer patients. Very soon their 'candle' of life will be extinguished. In using the play-within-the-play technique, Mahesh Dattani is also following a Shakespearean tradition. The Bard of Avon used this technique to perfection in many plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labour Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. Use of comic relief containing lewd, sexually explicit dialogues are present in the Drunken Porter Scene (Act II, scene iii) of *Macbeth* as well and the Fool in *King Lear* uses humour to make King Lear aware of his folly. In his seminal essay titled *Tradition and Individual Talent* T. S. Eliot wrote, "Tradition involves... the historical sense...and the historical sense

involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence". Mahesh Dattani makes use of tradition in the Eliotesque sense of the term and uses writes a play that is avant-grade, modern and disturbing. *Brief Candle* was first performed on 5 July 2009 at Sophia Bhabha Hall, Mumbai by Prime Time Theatre Company. The play was produced and directed by Lillete Dubey.

Theatre, for Mahesh Dattani, is not just a medium of entertainment. He acknowledges the close bond that exists between theatre and life. In the Introductory note on *Brief Candle* titled "A Note on the Play" Mahesh Dattani mentions that he is often asked by people, critics and interviewers the reason behind writing disturbing and serious plays. In answer to this oft asked question Dattani provides a fitting reply. He says, "The question implies that the theatre is meant for lighter fare and nobody wants to go to the theatre to experience anything 'heavy' because life is heavy already. So in response to that question I can only ask another-'why do we lead such heavy lives?'" (3).

Mahesh Dattani uses cancer both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Cancer not only refers to the deadly disease that mutilates the human body and often leads to slow, agonising death but is also used as a metaphor for ugliness, abnormality and perversion of thought. The mask called 'Face of Cancer' is present on stage since the beginning of the play to make the audience aware of this truth of life. The 'Face of Cancer' is an "androgynous face that is melting. A face that is ravaged by the effects of chemotherapy and is now ready to give up the struggle" (7). It is more than a stage prop. The use of an "androgynous", diseased face is highly significant. In the play, both men and women admitted to the hospital are patients of cancer. The use of androgynous face is further symbolic as Shanti and Amarinder suffer from breast cancer and prostate cancer respectively. The mask may also symbolise the masked existence of modern men and women in general and more particularly the mask of normalcy and professionalism that Deepika uses to shove aside her feelings for Vikas. The present scholar is reminded of the second Prelude by T. S. Eliot:

With the other masquerades  
That time resumes  
One thinks of all the hands  
That are raising dingy shades  
In a thousand furnished rooms (6-10)

Amarinder recounts his story. It was during his first stay in the hospital that he discovered that he is suffering from prostate cancer. The disease had attacked his manhood. His sexuality was under threat and it made him feel afraid. The fear of losing his manhood is no less disturbing, psychologically shattering than the fear of approaching death:

AMARINDER....I don't know how I allowed it. They never told me they will be drilling inside my body. At my core. What made me a man? Climbing a mountain, playing a game of hockey, knowing I could satisfy a woman in bed. All that was under attack with a group of needles probing at my prostate, through the wall of my rectum (23).

Faced with this threat to his manhood, he refused to perform the surgery choosing to eventually die because of the deadly disease. He preferred death over loss of masculinity.

Shanti, on the other hand, performed the breast removal surgery and is living with the trauma of losing her left breast, a symbol of her beauty and feminine sexuality. She may come across as more courageous when compared to Amarinder but she has her own mental demons that she must fight every single day in order to survive with her ugly, deformed body.

In India, female sexuality is still a taboo topic. Young girls are taught to shy away from it. They are traditionally trained to pay little attention to the curves and contours of their body. Shanti too reveals that she was too ashamed to look at her own breasts in the mirror. "I hadn't seen my own breast in the mirror. In the bathroom, I always took off my blouse when I was away from the mirror (32). As a young bride, she was quite uncomfortable with the intimate caresses of her husband. Shame, discomfort made her move away from his embrace. Then suddenly she was confronted with blood stains on her undergarment. She recounts her horrifying story:

SHANTI. I lay exposed to the technicians, my breast pushed against the X-ray plate. One of them marked my lumps, treating my breast as if it were already a piece of dead flesh...Their job was to invade my body and take out tumours, and they did. But they grew and came back till they took it all out. A part of me that I had barely felt. That I had never seen fully myself. Gone. (32)

Shanti never loved her own body. And now when she wants to embrace her sexuality, love the curves of her body she has to accept the reality of living with ugliness and deformity.

Vikas, an AIDS patient who dies of cancer during the course of the play pin points the horror of living with one's sexuality under threat. It is a fear that is shattering, traumatising both for men and women. And living in constant fear of losing one's sexuality is no less damaging to the body, mind and soul than encountering the fear of death:

VIKAS. It is the fear of losing something that you have and did not even think of the possibility of not having. But now when there is a real danger of losing it, you begin to understand its true worth. And then you are afraid you will have to live without it for the rest of your living moments (24).

Thus, death, fear of death coupled with the fear of loss of normalcy, beauty and sexuality envelops the play. The subtitle "A Dance between Love and Death" further heightens the atmosphere of tension as life is defined in terms of love and death. Vikas wants to spread the message of love, fulfilment, vitality and laughter. He is the ex-lover of Deepika, the doctor of the hospice and had spent his last days in the hospice. He is also the playwright who pens the play-within-the-play titled "Hotel Staylonger". The title is very symbolic as all the patients admitted to the hospice desire to stay alive for long but in reality their lives are cut short by the deadly disease. Vikas wrote a comedy as in comedies, "people don't die" (47). Faced with death, Vikas wanted the inmates of the hospice to forget their fear of death for few hours and live life to the fullest. As a playwright, he makes wonderful casting choices. In reality, Deepika is the doctor in charge of the hospital and Vikas, in his play-within-the-play, makes her the hotel manager who flirts with Mr Kulkarni played by Mahesh. Mahesh was secretly in love with Deepika but could never express his feelings for her as his social status as the ward boy always came as barrier before his emotions. Vikas allows Mahesh to live his dreams although in few fleeting moments of performance. Casting Shanti as Miss Unnikrishnan, a symbol of beauty and object of desire for Mr Malhotra, played by Amarinder, suits both of them as in reality they are pained by their loss of sexuality. Thus, unlike the real world where death is a constant presence Vikas weaves a world full of laughter, love and sensuality. But, there are fissures in the script through which reality seeps in. Amol's credit card limit is about to end in the play. In reality, he has no money to fund his treatment and Shanti's pleasure trip to her world of fantasy and desire abruptly comes to an end during one of the rehearsals as her towel unintentionally slips exposing her hollowness and bodily deformity. Amarinder recoils in horror and Shanti is left in tears of shame, loss and disappointment. Life has failed to keep its promise and hope has turned into a "foul, deceitful thing" (phrase taken from speech of the Second Chorus in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*). Repeated references to arrival and departure also remind the audience of man's journey from dust to dust (Ecclesiastes 3.20).

Music and dance play a very important role in Mahesh Dattani's plays. It is not just a tool used to enhance the mood of the play but has direct thematic links with the text and performance. In *Bravely Fought the Queen*, the thumri creates an atmosphere of love and romance which is in direct contrast with the lived realities of the two sisters Dolly and Alka. In *Brief Candle*, the chanting of the Maha Mrityunjaya mantra to keep off death, reference to Hanuman Chalisa to gain freedom from the cycle of birth and death act as constant reminders that death is the predominant theme of the play. Vikas wants victory over death and suffering. He writes the play to establish his victory over death. He lives through his play and he lives in the memories of all the characters of the play and especially Deepika whom he wants to touch through his play. Deepika, towards the beginning of the text, defines his post-death existence as "a hand from the past...A dead hand" (16) and gradually realises that Vikas may be physically dead but he is alive in her memories. As she decides to perform in his play he allows him to touch her from the dead. She had refused to grant him his last wish of dying with her loving touch. But, she finally, publicly accepts her feelings for him. Before the final performance of the play she speaks to the audience and introduces Vikas Tiwari as someone who has taught them to live "life to the lees" (Tennyson 8) and laugh at human follies. The concluding line, "Vikas Tiwari lives on through this play" (47) marks his victory of death. In

“Brief Candle: Life in Death or Death in Life?” Neha Arora writes, “The ‘candle’ of life may be ‘brief’ but it still lightens the darkness of our world, hence, it should be respected” (3).

The presence of Vikas in the play is a master-stroke of Mahesh Dattani. He never associates his presence with ghostliness or with Deepika’s hallucination. He lives in the memories of all the characters that people *Brief Candle* and hence is a presence throughout the play. In “Ravaged Bodies, Embodied Performance: Performativity in Dattani’s *Brief Candle*” Samipendra Banerjee argues that performative possibilities of the post-human body is one of the key concerns of body and performance theory today and Mahesh Dattani successfully makes use of the same in his recent play *Brief Candle* (243).

Thus, death is the predominant theme of *Brief Candle*. Faced with the fear of oblivion, Vikas realises the philosophy of life and living and he spreads his understanding of life to everyone onstage and offstage. Every moment lived with enthusiasm, vitality and mirth is every moment denied death. Vikas spreads the message of life and true living which alone can save us. Man has come from dust and will return to dust (Ecclesiastes 3.20) but in between his journey he can deny choosing death over life, mourning over laughter.

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