

Predicament of Diseased Life in Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death*

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Abstract

Disease and death are two bitter truths of life. No one can escape from it. Incurable diseases like cancer are emerging as major public health problems in India. The present paper aims at studying Mahesh Dattani's play *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death* (2010) as a reflection on the predicament of diseased life of various cancer patients. It is set in a hospital Avedna, Cancer Research Hospital and Hospice where cancer patients are spending their miserable days in a wish to live long. The play unfolds character's physical and psychological suffering. Both the fear of death and the fear of living with a defective body are troublesome. Suffering from economic problems the patients stage a comic play 'Hotel Staylonger' that encloses their love, disease, death, optimism, wish to live, explicit sexual overtones, philosophy of life and comic treatment towards hardships of life. Dattani has tried to implement optimism and religious attitude in cancer patients. He has succeeded in presenting a universal predicament of the cancer patients through this novel.

Keywords: Disease, cancer, love, sexism, life, death, optimism.

Mahesh Dattani (born 7 August 1958) is a distinguished modern Indian playwright. He has a significant place in the galaxy of famous Indian playwrights such Rabindranath Tagore, Girish Karnad, Asif Currimbhoy, Badal Sircar, Manjula Padmanabhan and Vijay Tendulkar. He is the first Indian playwright who has been awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1998 for one of his best creations *Final Solution and Other Plays*. He has given an immense contribution in the development of Indian-English drama not only as a playwright but also as a stage director, a screen writer, a film-maker and as an actor. His dramas are appreciated to present the burning issues of society like religious clash, gender-discrimination, problems of women, class conflict,

husband-wife relationship, political issues, gay-lesbian relationship, child sexual harassment, matriarchy, generation gap, human relationship, HIV/AIDS and social taboos etc. His plays like *Where There's a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *Do the Needful* (1997), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1999) and *30 Days in September* (2001), *The Girl Who Touched the Stars* (2007), *Brief Candle* (2010), *Where Did I Leave My Purdah* (2012) and *The Big Fat City* (2012) are read and admired for their keen insight, aesthetic sense, variety of themes, stagecraft, technique and appropriate language. He has elected peripheral issues for the centre stage. According to Makwana Ajay, "Mahesh Dattani has opened a new arena in modern Indian theatre by demonstrating social issues of common people having universal appeal and realistic tone" (Ajay 36).

The title of Mahesh Dattani's play *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death* is taken from the soliloquy of Macbeth in William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. It is his understanding of the philosophy of life, absurdity of human existence and the horror of death that he 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 Act 5, Scene 5, p 120)

The title is very symbolic in the sense that all the patients of the hospice desire to stay alive longer but their lives are like brief candles which may be blown anytime by cancer disease. He pin points the horror of losing one's beauty, normalcy and sexuality. It is traumatising experience for both men and women. The fear of loss is more horrible than the death itself. The play-within-the-play 'Hotel Staylonger' is taken from William Shakespeare's tradition of

dramatic technique used in many plays such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labour Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. Dattani has employed jokes, funny dialogues and explicit sexual overtones to lighten the tragic atmosphere of the hospital just as Shakespeare used this technique for comic relief containing fools, humour and sexually explicit dialogues.

The play is set in a hospital where cancer patients are experiencing traumatic moments of the last days of their lives. The play has six characters comprising four men and two women. The male characters are Mahesh Tawade, Amol Ghosh, Amarinder Malhotra and Vikas Tiwari while female characters are Dr. Deepika Dave and Shanti Venkatraman. Vikas, Amrinder, Amol and Shanti are cancer patients. Deepika is the doctor and Mahesh is the ward boy. Some patients are crippled physically after operation and some are taking their last breaths. The realisation that they had become victims of cancer seems to destroy their life. They follow the social decorum to hide their disease from family and society and try to move on with their disability. The social stigma attached to cancer has marginalised them. They are forced to pass their remaining days in a hospital but they still have not loosed their wish to live. They are not disheartened by the disease of cancer and do not die psychologically before their physical death.

Dattani writes about the theme of the play in the Note on the play, "In the play you have survivors of cancer who are in the process of putting up a comedy play as a fund raiser for their hospice" (BC 3). The life of these cancer patients presents the brutal reality of human life. He implicitly hints at the fragility of life which we most often forget in the blind craze for life. Our bodies are prone to disease and perishable yet we waste our precious time in the insignificant values of life. We all are engrossed in seven deadly sins ignoring the final truth of life. The presence of disease acts as a reminder of our frail hold on life. Through the six characters of the play, he makes the reader realise that life is a dance between love and death. We should love each other, enjoy our life and do noble acts because the candle of our life may be blown any time by the reality of disease and death. The realisation of disease speeds our desire for life. It is the time when we consider the importance of the each organ and repent for the neglect of our body. We spend our life in decorating the outer layer of our skin and ignore the early symptoms of our

disease. Many people feel shame to share their disease especially in the cases related to their private parts. They must learn that our existence depends upon the health of our body. The cancer patients in this play are suffering from either disability or constant fight with death to survive. They are in the condition when both the choice between living with deformity or with disease is troublesome. They want to live longer but now they have to be satisfied by enjoying the little life left in them. They have now learnt to respect their bodies, health and their relationships. Neha Arora writes, “The ‘candle’ of life may be ‘brief’ but it still lightens the darkness of our world, hence, it should be respected” (Arora 3).

For Dattani, theatre is a means to mirror the society that is full of anguish, suffering, anxiety, absurdity and uncertainty. His treatment of this serious issue of cancer in a comic way is very much clear in the introductory note when he answers his critics the reason behind writing stressful and staid plays. 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?’” (BC 3). The disease of cancer is one of the most crucial realities that are still challenging human life. Cancer not only refers to a disease that leads to slow death but is also used as a symbol for impairment, mutilation, abnormality, shame, loneliness, marginalisation and horror of life. Tapashree Ghosh writes, “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” (Ghosh 7) . The mask called ‘Face of Cancer’ makes the audience aware of this truth of life. Dattani writes, “The Face of Cancer could be abstract, maybe an androgynous face that is melting. Hollow eyes, sallow skin, tufts of hair, etc. A face that is ravaged by the effects of chemotherapy and is now ready to give up the struggle” (BC 7). The use of androgynous face is further symbolic because it refers to both men and women cancer patients for example Shanti suffers from breast cancer and Amarinder suffers from prostate cancer.

Our sexual organs are the symbol of our gender identity and gender decides our special role in the society. Breast is also a symbol of beauty, pride and feminine sexuality. Breast cancer is a disease that deprives women of their feminine identity. In India, female sexuality is still a taboo to talk. Women are trained to shy and hide the curves of their body. Women themselves feel reluctant to observe their bodies in mirror. The breast cancer has emerged not only just a leading cancer disease but also a realisation of the neglect of women's body by women themselves. It is an attack upon a female sexuality and identity too. Shanti was suffering from breast cancer. She is now living with the trauma of losing her left breast after the breast removal surgery. She 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 (BC 32). She also feels puzzled in her married relationship. One day, she suddenly notices blood stains on her undergarment. She went for test on insistence of her mother-in-law. She recounts her horrifying story:

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. (BC 32)

During the play, Amrinder once knocks at Shanti's door when she is having her bath. When she comes out to answer the knock, he suddenly hugged her driven by desire under the spell of Viagra. She tries to cover her bodily impairment but her towel slips off her breast before Amrinder and he becomes shocked to see a woman without breast. Shanti leaves the scene in tears but Amrinder can understand her feelings. Shanti had never admired her own body earlier but now when she has realised the importance of the curves of her body, she is left with deformity. She shares her emotions with him, "I regret all the years I spent not knowing how to love myself. My body, myself. Now I want to love myself but I don't" (BC 33). Although her femaleness has gone, she is happy to hope about Amarinder who not only sympathises but also desires to spend some warm moments with her.

Just like breast cancer, prostate cancer is an attack on male identity. Amarinder is the character who is suffering from prostate cancer. The disease has attacked his identity, manhood, sexuality, pride and his total life. The fear of losing his manhood is more troublesome than the fear of approaching death. He is in the dilemma whether to “choose to have the surgery and die. Or live without really living” (BC 33). He describes his experience:

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 (BC 23).

He wants to propose to Shanti but he knows that she may also have some expectation that he can never fulfill. He has just one wish, “I wanted to live! With everything I had!” (BC 23).

Vikas is also an AIDS patient. He gets affected by AIDS due to his lustful life. Vikas and Deepika were the friends and lovers in medical college. Deepika was true to her vocation while Vikas was doing medical just to be prosperous. Their likings were different so their roads get parted. It is just a destiny that after so many years he finds himself as a patient of Deepika. His love for her has not died up to yet. Now he just wants to receive her goodbye in order to accomplish his unreciprocated love for her during their college days. He is very much shattered due to the pain of cancer. He has understood mistakes of his life. He writes the play-within-the-play titled ‘Hotel Staylonger’ to give a happy ending to life of cancer patients. It is a comic play that gives everyone a chance to fulfill their unfulfilled desires. As a playwright, he gives certain roles to the members of hospitals. Deepika, the doctor of the hospital, is made the hotel manager who flirts with Mr Kulkarni played by Mahesh, the ward boy. He gives Mahesh a chance to express his secret love for Deepika during the performance. He casts Shanti as Miss Unnikrishnan because she wanted to become a film maker in the early days. He gives Amarinder the role of Mr. Malhotra who really desires for Shanti in form of Unnikrishnan. Taking an optimistic vision from the fear of death, he wants to spread the message of love, joy and laughter.

Vikas dies of cancer in the mid of the story but before it he narrates his own experiences of diseased life:

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. (BC 24)

The fear of separating from dear one's is more frightening than death itself. Vikas expresses his wish to Mahesh, "I want to live" (BC 19). Since little time is left, he keeps optimism in him and all the patients by writing comic play that does not have a tragic end. His action reminds us of what Sartre spoke about Jean Genet:

It is in suffering alone that he can feel himself to be free, because it is the only feeling which can come from within himself. Unless one is a god, one cannot become happy without the co-operation of the universe; but to be unhappy one needs only oneself... He does not seek the motive of his ... actions in an appetite for suffering: he wishes that his actions be the effects of an absolute will which draws its motive from itself alone and not from the world. (Sartre 29)

Vikas dies in the mid of the play but remains alive in the memories of all the people. Deepika admits in the last scene that she loved Vikas who deceived the tragic end of cancer patients. The play proves to be a victory over the fear and marginalisation of cancer patients. In the words of Deepika, "This play also shows, to all of us here, that, all of us have a right to leave as long as we can and to laugh at our own follies. Vikas Tiwary lives on through this play" (BC 47). Through the play-within-the play Dattani has provided a solution to the diseased life in practical way.

Along with physical, psychological and social aspect, diseased person suffer from economic issues too. Through the character of Amol, Dattani wants to focus on the problem that

many people die before their death due to economic crisis. Amol is another helpless cancer patient who even does not have money to pay for his medicines. It is his suffering that he has to pray to Vikas to help him, “If you really want to be of use, do something to help me. I can’t get any more drugs. My insurance won’t pay anymore! I don’t want to die on the streets!” (BC 21). Vikas becomes his benefactor to pay for his treatment. He also gives him the role of Mr. Sengupta who is a drunkard. When Amol’s father gets second marriage, he is banished from the house. He marries Rosy but cancer grips him and he is admitted in cancer hospital. He does not disclose his fatal disease to his wife to keep his love alive. He does not want her to bear his death before her eyes. He tries to forget his disease by being unconsciousness with the help of his favourite drink called Bloody Mary. He knows that his life is like “a rotting tree that is about to fall” (BC 23). When he was taking his last breath, his last wish was, “I don’t want to die” (BC 46).

Mahesh Dattani is famous for his religious attitude towards life. In this novel, he has portrayed Mahesh as an epitome of Robert Browning’s optimism. He is a kind and helpful ward boy in the hospital. He wants to buy a private plane and go at ‘four dham’ pilgrimage places with his grandparents. He loves Deepika could not expressed his feeling to her due to social inequality. He performs as a fictional character of Mr. Kurkarni who has private plane of his own. He not only helps all the cancer patients but also inspires religious hope through the story of ‘Om Trayambkam’ as well as the chanting of Maha Mrityunjaya and Hanuman Chalisa to save from disease and early death. When failure in love for Deepika and the anxiety of death makes Vikas hopeless about life, it was Mahesh who gives solution of the existential crisis of Vikas:

MAHESH: You should not want people to love you when you are going. You won’t want to go then.

VIKAS: Then what, in your opinion, should people who are going want?

MAHESH: Pray for freedom from the cycle of life and death. Do you know the Hanuman Chalisa? If you recite that a hundred times every day you will be free forever. (BC 19)

Thus, Mahesh Dattani has portrayed a true picture of the diseased life of cancer patients through the characters like Vikas, Amrinder, Amol and Shanti. Through the comic play and religious tone, he has brought out elements of love, laughter, hope, enthusiasm, encouragement and optimism amidst the fear of death. Each character has an optimistic vision so they want to enjoy their life till the last drop in the glass of life. Faced with the fear of oblivion, all the characters realise the philosophy of life and spread their understanding of life to everyone onstage and offstage. Dattani has succeeded in presenting a realistic image of his time. In his own words:

I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally. (Dattani XV)

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