

## Existential Concerns in Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle*

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**Abstract.** Indian writing in English, of late, has established its reputation not only because of Indian poets and novelists, but also because of some dramatists making their mark worldwide because of their delineation of contemporary realities. Mahesh Dattani is one such dramatist who has always been in limelight because of the selection of his themes, which unlike other creative artists, are neither Indian myths nor about history but about certain intangible issues which the civilized world may call 'taboos'. A dramatist with a difference, Dattani, a multi-dimensional genius and a winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, he touches upon various pertinent issues such as sexuality, religious tension, gender inequality and themes that affect human relationships in everyday lives. The deviant nature of his plays gets affirmed in author's own words when he calls his plays as "heavy". The heaviness of his dramatic world emanates from his creative easel that comprises issues ranging from women, minorities, gays and transsexuals. The present paper attempts at examining the heaviness that the playwright is often charged with. The play under discussion is Dattani's *Brief Candle*, which will be explored with an existentialist perspective on the lives of its characters who happen to be 'cancer patients'. Though on the verge of 'death', these characters don't allow their lives to terminate under the awful 'black aura' of death. This complicates the nature of the play which escapes the easy categorization of 'tragedy' or 'comedy'. What makes the play outstanding is the characters' determination to extract happiness and stand against death, using the freedom of choice and authentic existence in a world that is going to collapse for them.

**Keywords :** Brevity of life; death; existentialism; freedom of choice; happiness.

Indian writing in English, despite its vast expanse, seems unable to provide a viable space to drama as compared to fiction. While a lot has been done in poetry and novels, short stories and dramas have been paid scant critical attention. In this regard we come across some significant theatre actors turned dramatists whose contribution to Indian English literature has created milestones. Mahesh Dattani is one such name that has created ripples in every sensitive heart by his daredevil spirit to touch upon social issues which very few creative minds can often ponder over. With plays like *Where There is a Will* (1988), *Dance Like a Man* (1989), *Tara* (1990), *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991), *Final Solutions* (1993), *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998), *Seven Steps Around the Fire* (1998), *The Murder that Never Was* (2000), *30 Days in September* (2001), *Brief Candle* (2009), *Where Did I Leave My Purda* (2012), and *Big Fat City* (2012), Dattani has claimed a respectable place in his readers' heart. Every play of Dattani is an attempt at finding meaning and purpose in life as they deal with psychological explorations in some way or the other. Because of his exposure to acting and his felicity at performing

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Received : 27<sup>th</sup> Feb., 2019; Accepted : 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2019

art, Dattani has an edge over other contemporary playwrights whether as a screen, stage or radio play writer. The selection of his themes on which his plays border makes him controversial though his audience find meaning in his plays as majority of them depict issues that may forbid others to tread on. What makes him serious as a playwright is his depiction of certain social stigmas which ordinary mortals would even hesitate to talk about.

Dattani, besides being a leading Indian English dramatist, combines in himself an actor and director portraying some of the burning issues of contemporary Indian society. Winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, he touches upon various pertinent issues such as sexuality, religious tension, gender inequality and themes that affect human relationships in their everyday lives. Despite the fact that his plays deviate from the normal view of a play simply as a medium of entertainment, he has been successful as a playwright. The deviant nature of his plays finds a strong confirmation in author's own words when he calls his plays as "heavy". The heaviness of his dramatic world comes from the thematic canvas that he uses for his plays which encompass issues ranging from women, minorities, gays to transsexuals etc.

The present paper attempts to unravel the heaviness that the playwright is often charged with. The play under discussion is Dattani's *Brief Candle*, which will be explored with an existentialist perspective on the lives of the play's characters who happen to be 'cancer patients'. The paper will examine existential concerns of the dramatist through the study of his characters' behaviour, who, though on the verge of 'death', don't allow their lives to terminate under the awful 'black aura' of death complicating the nature of the play which escapes the easy categorization of 'tragedy' or 'comedy'. Death, of course, is a certainty but to be obsessed with it throughout may kill us before it really comes. Life, small or big, has a purpose and meaning for which majority of us are striving. The thought that the beautiful people and beautiful moments we spend with them can ease off all dangers, makes life meaningful.

The play *Brief Candle* (2009) focuses on the transitoriness of human life. Though I am unaware of the genesis of the play's title yet the word 'brief candle' reminds me of Macbeth, who in William Shakespeare's play says:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's 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. (*Macbeth*, V.v, 19-28)

One can find Macbeth losing his hold on life after the sound and fury he creates by becoming the king. He has of late realized that the unending ambition can lead humans only to death and nothing else. The candle, which symbolizes life, is also transitory and hence it should always keep us aware of the ephemeral nature of human lives. But in Dattani's play, the word 'brief candle' symbolizes hope against hope, little though it may be. Human life, like candle, may be short living, yet it has its own glow and can prove to be enlightening for others.

The play *Brief Candle* is in the form of a farce in which the characters create funny and ridiculous situations and very skillfully entertain the audience. There is a play within the play and the characters are found introspecting within to search alternatives to live their lives cut short by Cancer. Majority of characters in this play exhibit the repressed desires of their olden days which they couldn't realize then. The dramatist touches upon a very crucial theme of death in this play. The characters of the play stage a drama which reveals every individual's desire of life. While most of the characters—the Cancer patients, who are most often written off as dead bodies before their actual death, in truth, want to live and enjoy the little life left in them. They know well that death is at hand yet they try to spend their remaining time in realizing their foibles which should not admit any impediment in the light of impending death. They realize too late that there is something amiss before they die. The dramatist, with the inclusion of masque in the play, prompts his characters to make it explicit that they blindly follow the materialistic culture and in doing so skip the bare truths. In order to hide the crudities of life, humans are found changing their paths simply to make life Elysium. Our choices most often relegate under the diktat of societal pressure and materialistic happiness.

The opening scene of the play shows the face of Cancer, which symbolizes death. Dattani implicitly hints at the certainty of death which we most often forget in the blind craze for life. The inevitability of death not only implies that our bodies are perishable but it also acts as a reminder of our frail hold on life. Since death is the ultimate destination, as humans we are expected to realize our limitations and devote ourselves to noble acts.

The play has six characters comprising four men and two women. The male characters are Mahesh, Amol, Amarinder and most importantly Vikas, around whom the entire play moves. Majority of them wanted their life to become meaningful and in their desperate search for happiness invited trouble for themselves. The realization that they had become victims of Cancer seems to eat away the little hope they had. Yet they follow the social decorum to hide their impairment from their near kinsmen and try to move on with their disability. The social stigma attached to Cancer has made them seek shelters outside society and explore alternatives within to pass their remaining days, learning to forgive and to see themselves as themselves and love themselves.

These characters find themselves in Hotel Staylonger where amid hide and seek, they make their advances towards women but fail in their frantic effort to fructify their so-called love. They try to forget their past life and endeavour to move on with the present in their search for existence. Mahesh tries to woo Deepika without knowing the latter's mind. Amol tries to put himself into oblivion with the help of his favourite drink called Bloody Mary. He doesn't want his wife Rose to know about his fatal disease merely to keep his love intact. It is Amarinder who wants to propose to Shanti under the impression that an inadvertent bump into her was a sign of her romantic advances. Vikas, who is tired of the onslaughts of the incurable disease, simply wants to receive Deepika's goodbye in order to consummate his unrequited love for her during their college days. Vikas and Deepika, the classmates in medical college though friends and lovers to each other differ in their choices. While Deepika stands true to her vocation, Vikas follows his own ideology and thinks medical degree to be an appendage and a license which will confine him to 'some shiny shitty building'. The following conversation makes it very clear:

VIKAS: Do you really see me as a doctor? I mean healing people is cool, but all this medical degree and stuff. For what? Start a clinic? You and I bound till eternity to some shitty building? I'd rather just go where I want to or where I am needed.

DEEPIKA: So you joined medical college because your father wanted you to? What happened to your rebellion then?

VIKAS: It seemed like a good idea at that time. I do want to help the world move. But I can do that now. Why waste three years in this shithole? (*Brief Candle*, 14-15)

It's rather a freak of destiny that years after Vikas finds himself admitted as a patient in the hospice where Deepika treats him as a doctor. The germs of love that had affected these lovers continue, and despite the distance that time, place, and their priorities create, they are unable to relieve themselves of their infatuation for each other. Having spent a life full of lust and orgy, Vikas had contracted AIDS and yet he longed for Deepika's caresses which could have renewed his sensations and attenuated his pains that had made him feel neglected, uncared and unacknowledged. It is his unfulfilled desire for life that prompts him to write a comedy which doesn't have a tragic end. He suffers from the angst of having lost the opportunity to be loved and cared. His preference for free life rather than a life of commitment had resulted in nothingness and negation 'where but to think was to be full of sorrow' (Ode to a Nightingale, 43) His failed and frustrated desire fueled him to write a comic play only to be loved and cared even after his death. The anxiety of death makes him realize that life had been useless and hence he wants to live to do something useful. His light-hearted exchange with Mahesh reveals the existential crisis that Vikas was undergoing:

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 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.

VIKAS: But I want to live. (*Brief Candle*, 19)

Vikas finds ample substance in Mahesh's narration of 'Om Trayambakam' story and assures him full help him in return so that the latter could fulfil his wishes of outshining his grandfather's political rival. The large-hearted Vikas wanted to help everyone in need. He didn't want anyone to suffer the way he had suffered. The idea to raise everyone's hope, despite all odds, clearly indicates Vikas' love for life. His adversities had emboldened him to an extent that death didn't frighten him. Death to him was not as frightening as separating from one's dear ones. We can see his craving for life and anxiety of loss in the following:

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 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)

Vikas visualizes too late that by following his freedom of choice, he had turned a rebel in the eyes of society. Like an existentialist, he allows himself to follow an unconventional path though for a meaningful and authentic existence. He knows that his predilection towards an unusual life will result into suffering. His action reminds us of what Sartre, while speaking of Jean Genet says:

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's freedom of choice deviated him from his destination and led him to misunderstand Deepika. Deepika had also felt cheated initially and had moved on with her crooked fate to melt his lover yet one cannot deny her lost longings clouded in her angry outbursts. Her anger is symbolical of her camouflaged feelings for Vikas and the dramatist records the melancholic exchange between the lovers in the following:

VIKAS: I will move. I will move towards you! I swore I will. Last stop. I couldn't abandon the journey without reaching my destination. I should have understood how difficult it must have been.

DEEPIKA: No. No, no, no!.. I couldn't let you see... that I didn't love you. Any more. I couldn't hurt you. I just didn't love you...

*Silence*

DEEPIKA: It is my turn to wander. (*Brief Candle*, 41)

Deepika finally admits in the last scene that she loved Vikas who wanted no one to die and hence wrote the play as a comedy. She had been quite instrumental in bringing Shanti and Amarinder close. While Shanti receives a call from her husband but it was perhaps too late. What she says in the following is not only an anguished self- cry but also applause for Vikas:

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. (47)

A doctor by profession, Deepika enacts the role of the hotel manager to see that everyone was taken proper care of. And in doing so she has been successful. Vikas receives the encomium which could dissolve all his pains when Deepika announces to the audience at last:

DEEPIKA: .... we are presenting this play to you for entertainment. A comedy. And like a person I once knew told me... Nobody dies in a comedy. That's why people like them... I just want the person to know that I love him very much. (48)

Apart from males, the female characters of the play too, have their untold sufferings. Deepika, the doctor has her own qualms about not being shown true love by the man for whom she had been waiting. Likewise, Shanti, another female character, also suffers because of her own ailment. She discovered soon after marriage that she was a patient of Cancer. Soon after, she lost hope in her life. It is rather a coincidence that a sudden unintentional bump into Amarinder makes her sensitive. Amarinder, on the contrary, nurses an illusion to have some warm moments with Shanti. He takes Viagra to embolden himself for such occasions. With the pretext of seeking apology, he once knocks at Shanti's door. Shanti was having her bath and she came out to answer the knock. Seeing Amarinder standing before her surprised her but his beseeching tone comforted her as she started giggling. Driven by desire under the spell of Viagra, Amarinder suddenly hugged Shanti who started gasping. She tried to cover her bodily impairment but unveiled it in embarrassment and was soon in tears. It is revealed later that she had to undergo a mastectomy because of Cancer soon after her marriage. The recollection of her first interaction with her husband had medically exposed her to realize that she had to be divested of the symbol of her female coyness and pride. The sheer remembrance of that sad incident makes her sick and full of remorse. She says:

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... At least I could say no to Mukund, but the doctors, the lab technicians... 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 myself. Gone. (32)

Shanti had been ashamed of her loss since then and thought no man would show interest in her as the symbol of femaleness was gone forever. Although she could foresee some hope in Amarinder yet she was scared that he too would be like other men. Amarinder, on the other hand, was in doubt regarding Shanti's decision since he suffered from prostate Cancer. But his craving for life with whatever he had, made her understand Shanti's dithering. He doesn't feel comfortable with Shanti's remark of him as 'a man eaten by fear' and hence says disapprovingly:

AMARINDER: .... I thought I was strong now. Yes, I am afraid, even more so than before. Not of dying. I have to deal with it. I admire you. At least you are taking a good look in the mirror now. That is why I want to do this play. To take a good look at myself... whether I choose to have the surgery and die. Or live without really living. I thought you would help me make my decision. But you have your own needs. That's why I feel I can understand. It is not me who you see as insensitive. It is still about your husband. (33)

The spell of Viagra, however, shows its effect on Amarinder during the dance scene and he collapses. It's only after Shanti's kiss that he regains his consciousness. While Shanti kisses him as a life-saving measure suggested by Amol and Mahesh yet one can find in this act an initiation of her intimacy towards her suitor.

Thus, all the characters in this play despite their despair try to move out and expedite the choices available before them. Dattani makes subtle use of past and present in this play and through the help of mask, the characters reveal the realities. In addition, he delineates human's craving for happiness and makes most of his characters existential. Despite their disabilities, the characters want to continue their existential sojourn. It seems apt to mention the observations of Robert G. Olson, who in his book *Introduction to Existentialism* says:

For the existentialists it is neither external political circumstances, nor a lack of technological knowledge, nor a want of wisdom, nor an imperfect moral development of the race which prevents the attainment of human happiness. It is the human condition itself which does so. Man could not become happy without causing to be man. (Olson, 15)

The existential searches of most of the characters in the play affect them heavily yet their determination to live makes them memorable. Vikas proves his mettle not only by helping others but also by fulfilling his individual choice whether it is by reclaiming Deepika's love or by paying Amol's medication and assuring

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full support to Mahesh in outshining his grandfather's neighbour. Amarinder and Shanti also negotiate with each other and start a new journey, leaving the hangovers of their past. Suffering brings alienation, no doubt, but also paves way for exploring authenticity though at the cost of anxiety. As humans we are caught up in systems but we have to create choices in order to make life meaningful.

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