



# Themes and Technique in Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle*

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**Abstract**— *The present paper has been designed to study themes and technique in the selected play of Mahesh Dattani. The paper primarily focuses to examine the thematic aspects and the narrative technique called 'play within a play' successfully employed by Dattani in Brief Candle. Indian English Literature is an independent academic body of writing enriched by Indian writers. Its early literary graph goes back to the works of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Michael Madhusudan Dutta which was subsequently followed by Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. Indian drama has acquired a profound consideration since older time. Contemporary Indian drama is vigorous, innovative and experimentative. Girish Karnad in Kannada, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali and Mahesh Dattani in English have made notable contribution to the Indian literary canon. Mahesh Dattani is an iconic literary figure in modern Indian theatre. He has employed 'Theatre' as a tool to bring forth some hidden burning issues of modern Indian society. Dattani's plays are chiefly concern with the sensitive issues of middle class society. Dattani's play Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death is a saga of various cancer patients. The plot unfold characters inner frustration and physical suffering. Love and death are dominant themes of the play. Through the narrative technique 'play within a play' Dattani has presented one minor play to generate twin aspects of life.*

**Keywords**— *theatre, Indian English Literature, sexism, love, death, suffering.*

## INTRODUCTION

In Indian literary canon, Drama has been written in many regional languages with indigenous sense. It has been a well liked genre since classical era to the present day. The roots of Indian drama are founded in ancient Vedantic history. *Natyasastra* which is considered as the 'Fifth Veda' is a monumental work on Indian dramaturgy. It is the oldest vast anthology on the theory of drama which vigorously depicts the vital aspects of Indian dramatic art. It is the only classic document in which the fundamental aspect of drama has been restored. Hareshwar Roy defines the status of contemporary Indian drama in the following words.

Contemporary Indian drama is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not an off spring of any specific tradition and it has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of

world drama by reinvestigating history, legend, myth, religion and folk love with context to contemporary socio-political issues. A cumulative theatrical tradition evolved by Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, prepared the background of contemporary Indian English theatre. Recently Indian English drama has produced two brilliant playwrights like Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani who elevate Indian English drama at its summit of success. Both of them raise English drama not only in Indian theatre but also in the world theatre in rich quality and thematic presentation. Manjula Padmanabhan is the first Indian to earn international fame

with her play *Harvest*, a futuristic play.  
(Web)

Contemporary Indian Drama would be incomplete without acknowledging the name of Mahesh Dattani. Mahesh Dattani is a prolific playwright of contemporary Indian English literature, such an iconic literary figure in the realm of modern Indian theatre who has earned a literary fame at global level. Dattani's plays are not written for entertainment or amusement, they are written to address some hidden issues being existed in Indian society. For him, theatre became a significant medium to deliver his message to the Indian audiences; he used theatre as a platform to expose harsh reality. Dattani is specifically known for treating sensitive affairs, he has picked up the living issues of modern Indian society with realistic touch. Vishwanath Bite appreciate his dramatic talent in the following way,

Dattani has been appreciated widely for the use of naturalistic theatre to decline the problems of the urban Indian bourgeoisie in the twentieth century. Naturalistic theatre allows for a discussion of complex and intricate matters with ease in the confines of drawing room. In the hands of Dattani, naturalistic theatre lays bare the hypocrisies and the entrenched of the middle and upper classes. (Bite: 9)

Mahesh Dattani is the Sahitya Akademi award winning playwright (for his *Final Solutions*) whose voice is raised to address some critical issues of middle class people. He has treated many sensitive issues of modern Indian society through his writing. His plays deal with the issues like gender discrimination, child sexual harassment, gay-lesbian (LGBT) relationship, class conflict, matriarchy, generation gap etc. Dattani's plays touches to the reality; his characters are living and optimistic in nature. The main vision of his dramatic pieces is to address the taboo issues.

Mahesh Dattani has opened a new arena in modern Indian theatre by demonstrating social issues of common people having universal appeal and realistic tone. Dattani's literary productions include *Where There's A Will Final*, *Dance like a Man*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, *Seven steps around the Fire*, *The murder That Never Was*, *30 Days in September*, *Brief Candle*, *Where did I leave My Parda?*, *The Big Fat City*.

Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death* was published in 2009 and performed in Mumbai city under the guideline of Prime theatre company. Dattani introduce *Brief Candle* in his own words as follows,

In *Brief Candle* I have in fact attempted to work on that thin line that defines comedy from tragedy. In the play you have survivors of cancer who are in the process of putting up a comedy as a fundraiser for the hospice. Usually it is the mask of comedy that we tend to hide behind. In the play the mask of death is predominant almost to the point of ridicule. In that sense I do the play more as a comedy with a flow. However, if we can view death with the same distance as we do comedy then maybe it is not a comedy with a flaw anymore. (Dattani:3)

The above quote implies the basic theme of *Brief Candle* (comedy and tragedy). *Brief Candle* is one of the significant productions of Dattani's career in which he has treated life, love and death. Dattani has rightly chosen the title of the play because on the one hand it is an incomplete love story of Vikas and Deepika, on the other hand it is the plight of many cancer patients who constantly fight with death to survive. Both pathetic and comic elements are mingled in plot. Dattani asserts that though death is profoundly persisted in plot but he has brought out some positive aspects like hope, encouragement, enthusiasm and motivation by creating excessive comic situations.

## THEMES IN BRIEF CANDLE

### Love:

Basically, the theme of love is primarily concerned with Vikas and Deepika. They were perusing an M.B.B.S degree from the same college; they fall in love with each other within a short period. Vikas was a fanciful, careless, moody, fun loving while Deepika was sensible, bold and goal achiever. Although they were possessing alternative temperament but their love was pure and genuine. In scene one Vikas sinks into his past memories which reduce passionate feeling respectively,

Deepika: I love you know .You know that.

Vikas: What? (Laughing)

Deepika: Kiss me.

*They kiss.*

*Vikas breaks away first after her the joint.* (Dattani: 14)

The above dialogues express the intimacy of Vikas and Deepika which reflect that they were pleasantly enjoying their loveable relationship. However, due to Vikas's misconduct activity he was discarded by the college authority. After the separation, Vikas lives a life in his own way while Deepika concentrate on her ambition and become a doctor.

#### Death:

It is declared by Dattani himself that death is the predominant theme of the play. Vikas, a centre figure of the story himself is a dead person. In the play, we see Vikas as a plight of HIV patient. He wants a final reunion with Deepika, so he writes a comedy named Hotel Staylonger in which Deepika plays the role of Hotel Manager. At the end, Vikas loss his life due to fatal HIV decease. Deepika delivered the last speech in which she mourns the death of Mr.Sengupta is basically concerned with the pathetic sentiment.

Deepika:Mr.Sengupta does not appear onstage. He...well actually,

Amol Ghosh, who was supposed to play Mr.Sengupta, is no longer

With us.I am sorry, I wanted to announce that he died last night but,

But we are presenting this play to you for your entertainment. (Dattani: 48)

#### Sexism

The play revolves around several attempts at sex and romance by the hotel guests, Vikas himself involves in relationship with many girls. He possesses an erotic imagination and view life as an adventure. The reference of Viagra medicine imparts the sense of adultery and sexism. There is a chance of abusive sexual harassment in the play which signifies that women have been objectified from the sexual angle in this modernized Indian society. Women face a charge of sexual molestation by erotic men; women are oppressed under the authorial power of men. Shanti and Deepika are the selected victims in Brief Candle.

Amairinder clutches at his heart and collapses after a long drawn out grown

Shanti: I scam (Louder), scam!Amol and Mahesh come in.

Amol: What happened?

Mahesh: We are here to protect you. Where is the bastard?I will kill him

Shanti: (Getting into the act) Oh no! He vanished before he could rob my youth

(Dattani: 34)

The above conversions exemplify the charge of sexual oppression. Women become a victim of seduction by lusty men. Women are dominated under the manhood power; they do not have adequate accessibility to raise their voice against such maltreatment due to their lower strata in a society. Vikas himself is a lusty man who has full of eroticism in his nature .He falls in love with number of girls and as a result he becomes the patient of AIDS. The reference of Viagra medicine also promotes the sexual aspect in the play.

#### Suffering:

Brief Candle is the saga of many cancer victims. Sense of losing a life makes their life dim and colorless. In the play, Vikas is an HIV patient, Shanti is a victim of breast cancer, and Amol is having a problem with protestant. Vikas involves in relationship with many girls and as a result he becomes the patient of HIV. All of them suffer physically as well as mentally. Vikas explores the dilemma of Shanti and other cancer patients through the following statement,

It is the fear of losing something that you have and did not even think of the possibility of not having. But now n 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. (Dattani: 24)

#### Narrative Technique of 'Play within a Play' in Brief Candle:

Narrative technique or device works as a technical tool through which a writer narrates his or her story. Dramatic monologues, stream of consciousness, first person, third person are some of the well used techniques across the world literature.' Play within a Play' is such a wonderful narrative technique in which one minor plot (play) takes place during the course of main play. The minor play shares some striking thematic similarities with the main plot. In western literature, it was initially practiced by Elizabethan writer Thomas Kyd in his work The Spanish Tragedy (1579). Later on, William Shakespeare had employed it in his several works. Shakespeare had gracefully utilized this narrative technique in *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Taming of Shrew*. However, in the case of Indian literature, it was initially practiced by Bhavbhuti, a classical Sanskrit dramatist. Bhavbhuti had employed this device in his celebrated work Uttarr-Ramcharit. Contemporary Indian dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnard have also utilized this literary device in their works. Tendulkar's

play *Silence! The Court is in Session* and Karnard's *Naga-Mandala* are conspicuous work in that direction.

Brief Candle is the only literary composition of Mahesh Dattani in which he has used the narrative technique of Play within Play. The structure of the play is divided into main and sub (minor) plot. Vikas, a cancer survivor writes a comedy and creates new characters for his play. The action of main play takes place in Avedna Cancer Research Hospital while inner play is set in Hotel Staylonger. The main play contains pathos and anxiety while inner play deals with fun and comic elements. Deepika, Mahesh, Amol, Shanti, Amrinder belong to main play while Mr. Kulkarni, Mr. Sengupta, Mr. Malhotra, Miss Unnikrishnan and Hotel manager belong to minor play.

Mahesh works as a ward boy in the hospital. He is kind, helpful and witty. He wants to be rich and wish to buy a private plane for him. He wants to go at 'four dham' pilgrimage places with his grandparents. He loves Deepika but because of social as well professional inequality he could not expressed his feeling to her. Vikas assures him, 'you are wise, wonderful for that my friend, I will make you a rich man'. (Dattani: 20). He creates fictional character of Mr. Kurkarni who is rich and is having a private plane of his own. He attracts towards hotel manager and tries to impress her. At the end, he wins her heart.

Amol is another cancer survivor who is financially weak and homeless. He does not have enough money for his treatment. On the similar ground, Vikas draws the character of Mr. Sengupta who is drunkard and belong to middle class. When Amol's father gets second marriage, his father banishes him from the house. Amol develops relationship with Rosy and gets wedding with her. But cancer grips him and is admitted in the hospital for treatment. Mr. Sengupta is looking up for a single room but he does not get as the hotel was full. Flight was also cancelled due to bad weather. He does not have money to go somewhere else. Hotel manager requests him to share a room with Mr. Kulkarni. He has last bottle of Bloody Marry in his hand. Hotel manager offers him the last bottle of Bloody Marry to him. 'The airline is paying for only one night'. (Dattani: 10). He repeatedly expresses his worries to hotel manager. 'Where do i go? What do i do? (Dattani:10) Mr. Sengupta is in need of one wine bottle while Amol needs one more blood bottle. Both of them do not have money and shelter.

Amrinder is another cancer victim who suffers from carcinoma of prostate. Doctor removes his prostate during surgery. He loses his maleness and can't have sex. Vikas creates the character of Mr. Malhotra. He wants to propose

Miss Unnikrishnan. He suffers from erectile dysfunction. He needs Viagra tablet to enjoy sex. Similarly both Amrinder and Mr. Sengupta have problems with their sex organ.

Shanti is a breast cancer patient in the play. She was ill treated by her husband and abandoned ruthlessly. She struggles in life lonely. She wanted the presence of her husband and sister during surgery but nobody was present. Doctor removes her one breast to save her life. She wanted to be film maker in early days but cancer snatches that dream from her life. Vikas draft his play and request her to direct it. Vikas creates the character of Miss Unnikrishnan. She is married but hides her marital status publicly. Mr. Malhotra tries to propose her as he considers her as a spinster. Miss Unnikrishnan performs and directs the play Hotel Staylonger. Vikas gives a chance to Shanti to live her dream through the character of Miss Unnikrishnan.

### Conclusion:

Mahesh Dattani has deliberately expressed two aspects of life through this present play: life is neither fully cheerful nor sorrowful, but it is a mixture of these two. He says everyone has entry and exit on this earth. Life can't be live under the horizon of darkness and negativity, positivity should also be generated. Simultaneously, the characters of inner play channelize the emotions and desires of main play. Both main and inner play characters have many adversities but their dealing method is apparently different. The main play characters take life in a bland form while inner play characters spread joyful moods of life despite of having complexities.

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