

An Enactment of the Ascribed and Acquired Marginalization in Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death*

Dr. K. Maheswari

Assistant Professor of English
M.S.S. Wakf Board College
Madurai-625020
Tamil Nadu
maheswari626@gmail.com

Abstract

With a special reference to Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death*, the research article aims at exploring how social marginality is imposed upon cancer patients who face social impositions and adapt themselves to understand a new marginalized condition in society and in relationships. The play hints a transition of a set of characters from the centre to the fold of the "other" or the marginalized. The social marginality marked with the marginalization characteristic of an acquired as well as ascribed one is thinly presented here. The characters who once enjoyed the privilege of being at the centre face a situation of total irredeemable social marginality for being people with terminal illness at a hospice. Through a set of six characters – Dr Deepika Dave, Mahesh Tawade, Vikas Tiwari, Amol Ghosh, Amarinder and Shanti Venkatraman, Dattani dexterously enacts an irredeemable social marginality with a difference touching upon the issues of gender, the meaning of life, the inevitability of death, and the attitude of people towards terminal illness, unambiguously exemplifying both kinds of marginalization: ascribed and acquired. Dattani mixes the reality, the rehearsal of the play penned by one of the characters, Vikas, and the participation of the dead characters in the play, fuses the past, the present and the future, and brings out the irredeemable aspect of social marginality in both aspects – ascribed and acquired - cancer patients experience personally and socially.

Keywords: Mahesh Dattani, *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death*, Marginalization, Ascribed Marginalization, Acquired Marginalization, Social Marginality

Introduction

The term "marginality" was first used in 1928 by Robert Park in his essay "Human Migration and the Marginal Man" where Park described the experience of immigrants (Bernt 14). The term has been used in three different ways in the field of sociology as identified by Janet Macini Billson. First, it refers to cultural marginality concerning the dilemmas of cross-cultural identities and assimilation. Secondly, it focuses on social role marginality describing the tensions occurring when an individual is restricted from belonging to a positive reference group. And

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thirdly, it means a structural marginality, referring to political, social and economic powerlessness and disadvantage. (Bernt 14). Of the three, it is the second reference - the focus on individuals in the society – which the research paper explores with reference to Dattani’s *Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death*. The researcher goes to a step ahead and defines the second reference with an attribute of two specific categories of marginalization – acquired and ascribed marginalization, which is “a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society (Alakhunova et.al 10). To clarify the attribution, individuals experience marginality due to any already existent social phenomenon, in other words, an ascribed marginalization, and due to an acquired social phenomenon such as disability or illness or diseases such as cancer or AIDS. In other words, the characters in the play are all cancer patients, who experience either of the category of marginalization – ascribed or acquired (eGynkosh 51). They all have in fact moved from the centre to the marginal in terms of the kind of illness they “acquired,” and some are already in the marginal. Howitt observes that marginalisation produced by unevenness is a core focus for explaining social experience, and for changing it - marginalisation as a key theoretical issue, and marginalisation as a focus of practical interventions. These two concerns are touched upon by Mahesh Dattani though not very conspicuously (1).

Discussion and Interpretation

Brief Candle: A Dance between Love and Death by Mahesh Dattani is a stage play first performed on 5 July 2009 at Sophia Bhabha Hall, Mumbai, by Prime Time Theatre Company under the direction of Lillete Dubey, and published in 2010. The play is a kind of parody on death presented symbolically through the story of a group of cancer patients waiting for death in a hospice. Dattani in his introduction to his play sums up the essence of the play in a direct dialogue with his readers:

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 play as a fundraiser for their 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 see the play more as a comedy with a flaw. As one of my characters puts it, ‘In comedy, people don’t die.’ 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. (3)

The play has been presented in seven scenes without any interruption. Dattani has used a huge mask, “Face of Cancer” “ravaged by the effects of chemotherapy” (3), set on the stage constantly over which a piano is laid for the character, the dead Vikas, to play.

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A brief sketch on the play is attempted here to create a background to present the analysis of an irredeemable social marginality in the play. The play opens with a rehearsal of a play “Hotel Staylonger” written by the dead cancer patient, Vikas. Dr Deepika Dave playing the character of the hotel manager in the play takes Mahesh Tawade, a nurse in the hospice, playing the role of Mr Kulkarni to Room 206 in the hotel in Mumbai. Mr Kulkarni’s flight is delayed. He has been put in the hotel for the night. He has to share the room with Mr Sengupta played by another cancer patient, Amol. Mr Kulkarni regrets sharing the room with Mr Sengupta who is drinking his wine named “Bloody Mary.” Mr Kulkarni tries to advance towards the hotel manager. She affirms that she is not a call girl or a girl of weak morality, and screams. Mr Malhotra, whose role is played by Amarinder, another cancer patient, enters the room, asks the hotel manager to set him up with Miss Unikrishnan, played by another cancer patient, Shanti Venkatraman, who had bumped into Mr Malhotra. Mr Sengupta with a bloody mary in his hand and a strolley enters where all three – the hotel manager, Mr Kulkarni and Mr Malhotra – are there. Mr Malhotra asks Mr Kulkarni for the pills of Viagra as he is going to propose to Miss Unikrishnan who is leaving for Chennai the next day. Mr Kulkarni says that he has it for himself winking at the hotel manager. Mr Sengupta asks the hotel manager for another drink, and wants her to sleep with him. At this juncture, the covered face of cancer is revealed. The dead Vikas is shown to be alive and seated on the top of the face of death playing a louder chord on the piano. He talks to Deepika about her promise of coming to his death bed to say goodbye. Deepika is placed on a spotlight. The conversation between Deepika and the dead Vikas continues. Other characters just freeze. When other actors unfreeze, Deepika is deeply troubled. She stops all others and engages in a conversation with the dead Vikas, which reveals that Deepika and Vikas were medical students in love with each other, and that Vikas was a dropout with ideas to become a writer to change the lives of the down-trodden and the underprivileged.

The second scene switches to a situation of the hospice in the past. Mahesh (a male nurse) gives tablets to the cancer patients in the ward. He is to give a tablet to Vikas now a patient in the hospice run by Deepika. Vikas has written a play and talks about it to her. He tells her that the play is about their love affair in the past. She reminds him that she is a doctor and that he is her patient, and leaves. Mahesh gives him a tablet (Roxanol). Vikas places it in his shirt. He doesn’t take it. Mahesh insists that he should take it. Vikas threatens to jump out of the window and kill himself. Mahesh insists that Vikas can commit suicide later as he is to go to Bajrang Bali Temple of the Hanuman. Vikas makes fun of Mahesh who can become rich and marry Dr Deepika. Amol comes there carrying a bottle of blood going into him through a tube. Vikas continues to tease with Mahesh. He makes him tell the story of Markandaya, and talk about the Hanuman Chalisa (the Mantra to chant to get liberation from the birth cycle) and the Maha Mrityunjaya (the mantra to chant to live young forever). Vikas gives him a false hope of making him rich. Amol warns Vikas

not to play with his expectations. Vikas gives Amol the tablet he has hid in his shirt. He starts breathing heavily. He is dying. He shouts for the doctor. Mahesh informs Dr Deepika. But she refuses to come to his bed. Vikas dies surrounded by Amol, Mahesh, Amar, and Shanti without a good bye from Deepika.

The third scene presents the suitability of the play “Hotel Staylonger” by the dead Vikas for fund-raising context. Deepika discusses with the patients with reluctance whether the play written by Vikas can be used to raise money for the hospice. The play has taken its characters directly from the real patients of the hospice. Amarinder starts narrating how Vikas understood him better than a doctor to manage his prostate cancer. Shanti too joins Amarinder in presenting how Vikas was there to support her just after chemotherapy. Amol too shares his views on Vikas’ play and proves how funny the play is. Mahesh affirms how Vikas and Amol were keen on staying alive. Amol digs at Dr Deepika for being cold and indifferent to the lives of the patients unlike Vikas. He accuses her of considering patients just as “rotting trees” (Brief candle). Deepika defends that Vikas came to her with the hope of being saved, and argues that the play he has penned is the result of his anger with her. Vikas, being dead, is also a character in the play. He speaks to Deepika and asks her to tell their whole story. Shanti refuses to accept that the play is an angry play, citing the last email he sent her. Deepika suspects that Vikas told their story and relationship to Shanti. Shanti confirms it and says that Vikas had asked Shanti to take care of Deepika when he had gone. This really makes Deepika become sad.

The fourth scene presents the rehearsal of Vikas’s play. Shanti (Miss Unikrishnan) is in her room. She is waiting for a room service. Amarinder (Mr Malhotra) enters with a pill in his hand. He takes it. Mahesh (Mr Kulkarni) comes there to stop Amarinder saying that it is not Viagra but a cyanide capsule. Shanti faints in Mahesh’s arms. Amarinder runs to the restroom and tries to empty his stomach. Amol (Mr. Sengupta) enters to ask Mahesh (Mr. Kulkarni) for the door key. He searches Mahesh’s dress and almost wrestles with him. Amarinder (Mr Malhotra) comes out of the rest room to see them fight. They just stop seeing Amarinder. Mahesh (Mr. Kulkarni) tells him that the capsule was really a Viagra not a cyanide capsule. Amol (Mr. Sengupta) and Mahesh (Mr Kulkarni) go to their room leaving Amarinder (Mr. Malhotra) and Shanti (Miss Unikrishnan) in the room. Deepika (Hotel Manager) comes there for a room service. Shanthi (Miss Unikrishnan) sneezes and her towel around her slips off to show her breastless condition to Amarinder (Mr Malhotra), who just leaves the room in pain.

In the fifth scene Shanthi narrates the events which led her to identify her breast cancer, and how immediately after her marriage she could face this problem and had chemotherapy three times and lost her hope and shape. She also acknowledges how Amarinder helped her feel important and regain her hope for life. Now she can see herself in the mirror without any fear or

strange feeling. Amarinder too reciprocates her care for him. He explains how the mutual care helped him accept the effects of the operation he has to undergo, and reasons out why he accepted to be part of the play Vikas has written.

The sixth scene presents the continuation of the rehearsal of the play. Amarinder (Mr. Malhotra) dances with Shanti (Miss Unikrishnan), and faints. Shanti screams for help. Amol (Mr. Sengupta) and Mahesh (Mr. Kulkarni) rush in, and blame Shanti for almost killing Amarinder (Mr. Malhotra). Deepika enters to understand the situation. Mahesh asks Deepika to kiss Amarinder and save him. But Deepika asks Shanti to do it. Shanti does it and Amarinder gets up. They all dance. The dead Vikas watches all and joins the dance. Mahesh leads Deepika and joins her hands with those of the dead Vikas. They all dance. All through the play a death mask is moving to all different characters. Amol starts narrating how he suffered with his mother rejected by his father who married another woman after moving from Calcutta to Delhi, how he fell in love with Rosalyn and married her, how he reached the hospice with his lung cancer. Deepika announces that Amol has to leave the hospice, as his insurance expires. Then she tells Amol that she has found a benefactor who supports Amol's treatment. Amol understands who the benefactor is and thanks him. Deepika and the dead Vikas are spotlighted. Deepika admires the good-natured Vikas who worked for the upliftment of farmers, labourers and field workers all around the world from Kamtipura in Mumbai, Faulkland Street in the UK and the Dharavi, the largest slum in Mumbai. The dead Vikas accuses Deepika of being unfaithful to him. She defends that it was Vikas's love for an adventurous wandering life which made her make a decision. But the dead Vikas confesses that when he had got infected with HIV and later it developed into cancer, he understood his end and wanted to reach his destination, Deepika.

The seventh scene again presents the rehearsal of the play. Deepika (Hotel Manager) is trying to placate the angry Mahesh (Mr. Kulkarni) and Amol (Mr. Sengupta). Shanti (Miss Unikrishnan) is found weeping. Amarinder (Mr. Malhotra) is dancing by himself. Deepika (Hotel Manager) is talking to the husband of Shanti (Miss Unikrishnan) over the phone and gives the phone to Shanti (Miss Unikrishnan), who then talks to her husband and plainly asks him to find a new doctor-nurse for him. She refuses to dance with him, as she has got Amarinder (Mr. Malhotra) to dance with. She simply rejects her husband boldly. Deepika (Hotel manager) talks boldly to her customer who is in love with her and bids farewell to him. They both feel triumphant at settling their issues with their own men. Mahesh (Mr. Kulkarni) and Amol (Mr. Sengupta) rush to the room and kneel before Deepika (Hotel Manager) and say "I love you." Deepika (Hotel Manager) is shocked and all freeze. The play "Hotel Staylonger" ends. They all appreciate Shanti for directing the play. Amarinder talks to Shanti who is leaving for Chennai after the play is enacted the next day at 7 p.m. Shanti thanks Deepika for allowing the enactment of the play. Amol, in the meantime, coughs blood and becomes weak. Deepika instructs Mahesh to bring a stretcher for Amol and to

take him to the ICU. Amol is laid on the bed. All are around him. Even the dead Vikas is there. Amol asks Mahesh to improvise and suggests that Mr. Sengupta the role he plays in “Hotel Staylonger” dies in the corridor drinking too much of the wine “bloody mary.” But Vikas does not want to accept it as he has designed it to be a comedy. Deepika returns with a syringe but Amol dies with a weak laugh.

Deepika is spotlighted. She talks to the audience directly. She thanks the audience for watching the play “Hotel Staylonger” written by Vikas and performed in two acts by the cancer patients of Avedna, Cancer Research Hospital and Hospices. She sums up: “This play also shows, to all of us here, that all of us have a right to live as long as we can and to laugh at our own follies. Vikas Tiwari lives on through this play” (Brief Candle 47). She announces that the role of Mr Sengupta planned to be played by Amol Ghosh was not included here in the play as he died the previous night. The dead Vikas thanks her. The play “Hotel Staylonger” is fast forwarded with select scenes and closes with the dance of Amarinder and Shanti, the dead Vikas and Deepika singing a duet, and Mahesh and Amol pretending to play an orchestra. The play “Brief Candle” ends.

Conclusion

Each of the six characters has faced their social marginality. Dr Deepika Dave represents an acquired marginalization choosing to run a hospice which is unusual in the profession of medicine. It is this way Dr Deepika though socially part of a privileged group experiences marginality with her service to cancer patients despite a conspicuous lack of financial support. Moreover, her experience as a woman medical student clearly indicates the marginality of women in the society however socially high the profession may be. Dr Deepika experiences an ascribed marginalization. In her case it is a double marginalization - as a woman (ascribed) and as a doctor of a hospice (acquired). The dead Vikas is an obvious illustration of social marginality. First, he was a medical dropout. He nurtured his revolutionary ideas and established himself as a writer with a strong reforming vein. His strong passion to uplift the underprivileged wherever they are – local or abroad – is a sure form of an acquired marginalization. He shows no regrets when he acquired AIDS which led him to suffer from cancer. He feels triumphant about his life and his career as a writer and a social reformer. Though he could live in the centre of the society, he was marooned to the hospice as a marginal other, and died. His marginality is the one he chose for himself rather – that is, “acquired” rather than the one imposed upon him – “ascribed.” In other words, his life and end illustrates more of an acquired marginalization and less of an ascribed marginalization.

Amol Ghosh is an unambiguous character representing social marginality. The sufferings of his mother at the hands of his father who chased Amol’s mother and him away to face the

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hardships of life with no concrete support illustrate an ascribed marginalization of women in the society. Yet, Amol comes up in life and manages all odds of life till he develops his lung cancer and faces an acquired marginalization as a cancer patient though his wife, Rosalynd, does not want him to die in a hospice. The background to the life of Amarinder has not been developed adequately in the play. His brand of social marginality is marked with an acquired marginalization as a cancer patient. However, his strong concern about his possible loss of virility or manliness shows his strong anxiety about the ascribed marginalization of the impotent in the society. His acceptance of his condition at the end of the play and his unconventional love for Shanti, a wife of another man, clearly marks his position of social marginalization both ascribed and acquired.

The character of Shanti Venkatraman is a form of social marginality marked with ascribed marginalization. Her meticulous adoption of every prescription of her mother before marriage and just after marriage and the treatment she receives from her mother-in-law are all the result of her ascribed marginalization. When she becomes a cancer patient, she understands her acquired marginalization, which becomes acute when she admits her love for Amarinder and cares for him. She is a sharp contrast to Dr Deepika Dave. Yet, just like her, she too experiences both ascribed and acquired marginalization. Mahesh Tawade, the male nurse in the hospice, is the only character which openly talks about the kind of ascribed marginalization he and his family experience at his hometown. When he talks to Vikas about his dream of buying an aeroplane and taking his family around his village, it becomes very clear. His choice of service in the hospice is so rare that he has chosen to be the other.

In conclusion, Mahesh Dattani has presented a set of characters who exemplify their social marginality in both aspects of marginalization – ascribed and acquired. He achieved this difficult fusion effortlessly. A peripheral eye can very easily miss this brand of marginalization. A very conscious reader can become sensitive to this fused marginalization and understand the artistic dexterity of Mahesh Dattani.

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