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Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle*- Psychological Issues: An Overview

Dulal Sarkar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, M.P., India.

ABSTRACT

Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle* is a poignant contemporary play that examines the psychological and emotional consequences of terminal illness, particularly cancer, on patients, caregivers, family members, and medical professionals. Set within a hospital environment, the play explores the complex interplay of hope, despair, fear, grief, loneliness, guilt, and resilience that accompanies life-threatening disease. Dattani presents illness not merely as a physical condition but as a profound psychological and existential experience that transforms human relationships and perceptions of life and death. Through realistic characterization and sensitive dialogue, *Brief Candle* challenges societal attitudes toward illness and death while advocating dignity, hope, and humane care. The study explored that Dattani successfully portrays the psychological dimensions of suffering and demonstrates that emotional resilience and meaningful human relationships are essential in coping with life's uncertainties. Consequently, *Brief Candle* remains an important literary text for understanding the psychological complexities of terminal illness and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

Keywords: *Brief Candle*, *Psychology*, *Mahesh Dattani*.

INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Dattani is one of India's foremost contemporary dramatists, renowned for portraying the psychological, social, and emotional complexities of modern life. His play *Brief Candle* explores the profound psychological experiences of individuals suffering from terminal illnesses, particularly cancer, while also examining the emotional struggles of their caregivers, families, and medical professionals. The title symbolizes the fragile and transient nature of human life, emphasizing how life can be as short-lived as the flame of a candle. The play presents a realistic depiction of psychological issues such as fear, anxiety, depression, grief, denial, loneliness, guilt, and the search for hope amidst suffering. Dattani carefully portrays how patients cope with the emotional burden of illness and how family members experience helplessness, anticipatory grief, and emotional exhaustion. The hospital setting becomes a space where life, death, love, and loss intersect, revealing the hidden psychological conflicts that accompany terminal disease. A significant aspect of *Brief Candle* is its exploration of resilience and the human capacity to find meaning despite inevitable mortality. Through sensitive characterization and emotionally charged dialogues, Dattani highlights the importance of empathy, emotional support, and interpersonal relationships in overcoming psychological distress. The play also exposes the emotional dilemmas faced by doctors and caregivers, who must balance professional responsibilities with compassion while dealing with repeated experiences of death and suffering. From a psychological perspective, *Brief Candle* can be examined through theories of stress, coping, grief, trauma, resilience, and existential psychology. It demonstrates that psychological well-being is deeply influenced by



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emotional support, communication, acceptance, and hope. Ultimately, the play emphasizes that while physical illness may be unavoidable, emotional healing, dignity, and human connection remain essential aspects of the human experience. Thus, *Brief Candle* serves as a powerful literary work that not only portrays the realities of terminal illness but also provides valuable insights into the psychological dimensions of pain, resilience, and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

GESTALT

In Psychology, the phrase “*brief candle*” symbolizes the short and fragile nature of life. It often evokes feelings of anxiety or despair about mortality, as seen in Mahesh Dattani’s play *Brief Candle*, where cancer patients confront the reality of death. The term can also be connected to psychological concepts, such as functional fixedness in problem-solving—where a person’s inability to think beyond conventional solutions is compared to a candle’s limited light—or to the fight-or-flight response, which is triggered by stress and competition.

- Life and Death
- Problem-Solving and Perceptual Processes
- Psychological Issues in Literature and Society

A PSYCHOANALYTIC APPRAISAL OF “BRIEF CANDLE”

Shakespeare’s phrase “*brief candle*,” most famously spoken by Macbeth, has become a metaphor for the fleeting nature of life and the human confrontation with death. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the image of an extinguished candle reflects the psyche’s struggle with mortality, triggering defense mechanisms and unconscious drives when the self faces its ultimate end.

- *Psychoanalytic Themes in Macbeth*
- *Psychoanalytic Themes in Dattani’s Brief Candle*

Mahesh Dattani’s play *Brief Candle* offers a psychological exploration of how cancer patients confront mortality through the lens of existentialism, using the device of a play-within-a-play. It portrays how individuals facing death search for meaning, exercise free will, and pursue authentic existence by staging a farce. Through humor, they create a psychological space where joy can be experienced, helping them resist the overwhelming shadow of life’s end.

THE DESIGNATION AND LEITMOTIFS OF *BRIEF CANDLE*

The title *Brief Candle* symbolizes the fleeting nature of life, which brings people intense and indescribable pain when they realize their end is near. At the same time, it highlights the importance of living a life without regrets, since guilt can be more painful than death itself. The play primarily deals with the theme of death, but also engages with issues such as sexism, free will, women’s oppression, and religion.

Dattani demonstrates his brilliance by using the dramatic device of a “*play within the play*” to explore the struggles of cancer patients living in a hospice. The play begins with this farcical performance, which takes place between the characters Deepika and Mahesh. This farce was written by Vikas, himself a cancer patient, in an attempt to raise funds for the hospice. All the participants, except Deepika (who plays the role of the hotel owner), are suffering from cancer.



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Vikas chooses comedy because he wants to bring some joy to the patients, helping them forget their unbearable pain for a while. However, he passes away before the play is actually staged. The name of the hotel in the farce, *Hotel Staylonger*, clearly alludes to the patients' desire to live longer. The hotel represents the world, while *Staylonger* symbolizes the longing of terminally ill patients to extend their lives despite their condition.

The desires of Sengupta (for alcohol, "*Bloody Mary*") and Amarinder (for *Viagra*) reflect their desperate struggle for strength and relief. On the surface, they seem to crave alcohol and *Viagra*, but in truth, these desires symbolize their need for morphine (*Roxanol*), the only drug strong enough to help them cope with their excruciating pain. In this sense, alcohol and *Viagra* stand for their deeper wish to endure their suffering with dignity.

Amol's words "*Make the most of your stay in Hotel Staylonger, may your stay be long*" are symbolic of life itself. This line; penned by Vikas, expresses his awareness that their time in the world is short and bound to end soon.

Deepika's words "*You will be in trouble. Because the airline is paying for only one night, and you have exceeded your credit-card limit*" hint that God has given them only a few days, and may call them back at any moment.

(*Brief Candle*, P-12)

SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *BRIEF CANDLE*

The notion of sexuality, once directly linked to biological identity, has now become one of the most debated subjects of our era. It has given rise to the contested fields of social and gender research. With the expansion of studies and discussions on issues such as masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality, sexuality is no longer understood as merely an anatomical representation of one's genital organs. Gender, instead of being fixed or normative, has assumed a performative nature. It is not defined by the sex one is born with but by the roles one identifies with, the feelings one harbors, and the behaviors one displays.

To "*perform*" gender means to embody the attitudes, impulses, and expressions that reflect how one feels most comfortable whether consciously or unconsciously. This performance, in turn, shapes the gender role one wishes to inhabit. However, existing in a body while desiring to perform it differently often becomes a site of discomfort and conflict.

In *Brief Candle*, Dattani treads the thin line between comedy and tragedy, reflecting his well-known concern with "*invisible issues*". The play portrays cancer patients staging a performance to raise funds for their treatment. Even in the shadow of their inevitable deaths, they attempt to find joy through role-play. Yet, the female characters Deepika and Shanti repeatedly fall victim to male desire. Male characters pursue or attempt to seduce them, with references to *Viagra* being casually inserted, trivializing the women's discomfort.



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The play-within-a-play is written by Vikas, a character who is already dead by the time of its staging, but who continues to haunt the narrative as a memory and influence. Vikas betrays his partner Deepika, choosing instead a bohemian lifestyle of sexual adventures around the world. His promiscuity leads to AIDS and later cancer. Similarly, Amarinder relentlessly pursues Shanti for sex, but his desire diminishes once he learns she has undergone a mastectomy. Thus, the play unravels layered complexities of sexuality and its representation.

PSYCHOANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS IN *BRIEF CANDLE*

The play takes the form of a farce in which characters many of them terminally ill with cancer create humorous, even absurd situations to entertain themselves and the audience. Within this “play-within-a-play” structure, the characters reflect on their own lives, searching for alternatives to live meaningfully despite their impending deaths.

Most of the characters reveal long-suppressed desires and regrets. They confront the reality that death is inevitable, but rather than succumbing to despair, they attempt to enjoy the little time left to them. Dattani emphasizes that, although cancer patients are often socially written off as “*living corpses*,” they still long to experience joy, desire, and love.

The play opens with the looming face of cancer death itself—but also serves as a reminder that life, though fragile, has value. Dattani critiques society’s obsession with materialism, suggesting that people, in their pursuit of false happiness, forget life’s basic truths. Death reminds us that our bodies are perishable, urging us to recognize our limitations and commit ourselves to noble acts.

The drama features six main characters: Mahesh, Amol, Amarinder, and above all, Vikas (four men), alongside two women, Deepika and Shanti. Each of them is grappling with illness, regret, or loss, but they seek dignity, forgiveness, and authenticity in their final days.

The hotel “*Staylonger*” becomes their shared refuge a space where they attempt to escape societal stigma, mask their suffering, and explore life anew. Their stories are laced with irony: Mahesh clumsily courts Deepika; Amol drowns himself in Bloody Marys to forget his disease; Amarinder, misinterpreting signals, awkwardly pursues Shanti; while Vikas, debilitated by AIDS, longs for the unfulfilled love of Deepika, his former college companion.

Vikas becomes the emotional center of the play. A free spirit who once rejected conventional medical practice, he now finds himself a patient under Deepika’s care. His existential anguish caught between rebellion and regret—fuels his desire to write a comedy where “*nobody dies*.” This becomes his way of affirming life against death, love against despair.

Through Vikas and the others, Dattani highlights profound existential concerns: the tension between freedom and suffering, the inevitability of death, and the human craving for authenticity and love. Despite illness and loss, each character strives to continue their existential journey, negotiating with the past while seeking meaning in the present.



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THEMES AND TECHNIQUE IN MAHESH DATTANI'S *BRIEF CANDLE*

Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle* is unique because it is the only one of his works that uses the narrative device of a *play within a play*. The play has two levels: a main plot and a sub-plot. The main play is set in *Avedna Cancer Research Hospital* and focuses on the real lives of cancer patients, filled with pain, anxiety, and struggle. In contrast, the inner play, titled *Hotel Staylonger*, is written by Vikas, a cancer survivor. It introduces new characters and carries a lighter tone with comedy and humor.

Dattani presents life as a blend of joy and sorrow. No one can live only in suffering or only in happiness both coexist. The "main play" captures the harsh, painful realities of cancer patients, while the "inner play" allows them to dream, laugh, and celebrate life in spite of adversity. Thus, the play suggests that while death is inevitable, positivity and hope can still shape the way we live.

The title *Brief Candle* symbolizes the fleeting nature of life, which brings about deep and inexplicable pain when people realize their time is short. It also emphasizes the importance of living a life without regrets, since guilt at the end of life is far more painful than death itself. While the play primarily explores the theme of death, it also deals with issues such as sexism, free will, women's oppression, and religion.

Dattani demonstrates his brilliance by employing the device of a *play within a play* to portray the struggles of cancer patients in a hospice. The play begins with a farcical skit, a play within the play, featuring a conversation between Deepika and Mahesh. This skit, written by Vikas (a fellow cancer patient), was intended to raise funds for the hospice. Everyone in the play, except Deepika who portrays the hotel owner is afflicted with cancer. Vikas deliberately chooses comedy because he wants patients to spend some joyful moments together, temporarily forgetting their pain. Sadly, Vikas passes away before the skit is performed.

The farce is set in a hotel named *Hotel Staylonger*, which is a symbolic reference to the patients' longing for a longer life. Here, the hotel represents the world, while the name "*Staylonger*" reflects the universal human wish to live beyond the limitations of terminal illness. Sengupta's craving for "Bloody Mary" (alcohol) and Amarinder's longing for "*Viagra*" metaphorically represent their desperate struggle for strength not just through drinks or drugs, but actually for morphine (Roxanol), the medication they need to endure their unbearable suffering.

BRIEF CANDLE- A PSYCHE OF LIFE AND DEATH

The play begins with the rehearsal of *Hotel Staylonger*, a play written by Vikas. The characters, all hospice patients, enact comic yet tragic situations in a Mumbai hotel. Midway, the "*Face of Cancer*" is uncovered, and the ghost of Vikas enters, speaking to Dr. Deepika Dave, a doctor at the hospice and his former lover. Their conversations gradually reveal their past, his struggles, and her inner conflicts.

The ensuing scenes shift between hospice life and the rehearsals of *Hotel Staylonger*. Through these interactions, the patients' personal stories come to light—Shanti's struggle with breast cancer and her strained marriage, Amarinder's fears about his manhood and eventual acceptance, Amol's troubled childhood and decline from lung cancer, and Mahesh the nurse's simple dreams for dignity and recognition. Deepika herself faces both professional and personal conflicts, torn between duty as a doctor and her unresolved relationship with Vikas.



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Vikas, who once abandoned medicine to pursue writing and social reform, reappears as both memory and presence, challenging Deepika's choices and reminding others of his ideals. His character embodies resistance, creativity, and a tragic acceptance of death.

The play ends with the patients enacting Vikas's comedy for the fundraiser. Even as death claims Amol, Deepika addresses the audience, affirming that life, however brief, must be lived with dignity, humor, and courage: This play shows us that we all have the right to live as long as we can and to laugh at our own follies. Vikas Tiwari lives on through this play.

Each character in *Brief Candle* represents a form of social marginality, either ascribed (imposed by birth, gender, or social norms) or acquired (arising from illness, personal choices, or life situations).

Through these characters, Dattani skillfully fuses both types of marginalization, showing how social, personal, and medical realities intertwine. A casual viewer may miss this complexity, but a sensitive reader recognizes his artistic mastery in weaving comedy, tragedy, and the universal confrontation with death.

DISTRESS OF DEATH IN *BRIEF CANDLE*

The play explores the fear of death through several dimensions:

- Quality versus quantity of life
- The play-within-a-play technique
- Fear of loss and dehumanization
- Vikas as a teacher
- Love and death in balance

THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY- *BRIEF CANDLE*

The central coping strategy is the production of a farcical comedy, *Hotel Staylonger*. The title itself is a piece of gallows humor, symbolizing the patients' longing to prolong life despite their fate.

CONCLUSION

Mahesh Dattani's play *Brief Candle* is a poignant work that explores mortality, illness, memory, and relationships through the lens of individuals living with terminal conditions. The play brings together a group of people attending a workshop in a cancer hospice, using theatre as a medium for expression. Dattani employs dark humor, meta-theatre, and sensitive character portrayals to highlight psychological issues that emerge when life confronts its fragile limits.

In "*Brief Candle*," the psychological issues explored such as grief, existential despair, identity confusion, and the fragility of the human mind—highlight the deep emotional and mental struggles individuals face when confronted with mortality, trauma, or loss. The story serves as a poignant examination of how the mind attempts to cope with pain and meaninglessness, often through denial, fantasy, or detachment from reality. Ultimately, "*Brief Candle*" underscores the vulnerability of the human psyche and invites readers to reflect on the complexities of mental health, suggesting that confronting emotional pain directly, rather than escaping it, may be the first step toward healing.



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