

SEXISM AND MORTALITY IN MAHESH DATTANI'S BRIEF CANDLE

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Abstract

In Mahesh Dattani's Brief Candle, the notions of women as an oppressed class and the fleeting mortality of human life are explored. The play is about Divika's coming to terms with Vikash's absence in her life and eventually through his death as the one love affair that mattered despite Vikash's promiscuity, and at the end of the play they are seen singing together and reunited in spirit if not in flesh. Brief Candle is thus a complex meditation about sexism, death, patriarchy, female oppression and mortality in modern India.

In Mahesh Dattani's Brief Candle, the notions of women as an oppressed class and the fleeting mortality of human life are explored. In the play, cancer patients stage a play about Hotel Staylonger, a comedy written by Vikash, and the contents of the play are an attempt to have a sanguine look at death by making the hospital a hotel instead in which the chief doctor Divika Dave plays the hotel manager.

This is a very apt metaphor for the plight the patients are in. Divika seeks to extend their lives as a doctor and their stays in the play as a hotel manager, and it is made clear that like hotel guests, our time in this life is limited and there is an end date to our life here on earth.

The play revolves around several attempts at sex and romance by the hotel guests, and it is clear the play written by Vikash is the output of one who has an erotic imagination. Attempts to pass around Viagra and make love amidst the chaos of the incoming and outgoing of guests in the hotel show that Vikash views life as an erotic adventure, to be maximised by affairs and lovemaking, which is how he actually lived his life.

As a result, Vikash gets Aids and develops cancer as a result, but in the play he writes the consequences of his sexual promiscuity and downplayed and what is celebrated is love as a form of heightened living.

The charm of this nomadic life of lovemaking is downplayed by Divika, who has suffered as a result of Vikash's promiscuity. She is reluctant to stage the play because she harbours some bitterness against Vikash, who had left her after their affair in medical college to live the life of a nomad and free love. Unlike men in society, Divika does not have the right or the opportunity to pursue a life of affairs and sexual conquests because she is a woman.

Women have to put up with all the polygamy and affairs that men have because of their lesser status in society and because they are at a disadvantage biologically because they can incur pregnancy with sex and have less incentive to go around on a life of nomadic lovemaking. Vikash conquers all the women he can in this life, with the result of abandoning Divika, who dutifully stayed on to complete her medical training and seek to make a living saving lives by being a doctor. However it is not she who suffers AIDS in the end and cancer as a result it is Vikash.

There are thus double standards for women highlighted by the play. At one point, Vikash confronts Divika about seeing someone while they were still together. Divika retorts that she could not comprehend why he was entitled to have all the affairs he had while she had to put up with his promiscuity and remain faithful and chaste while he could sleep around with any woman he wanted. Indeed this is the plight of woman in Indian society.

They are expected to remain chaste and family oriented while the men because of their biological and social advantage can go around having all the affairs that they want. It is clear that women are commodities and sex objects, and Divika is bitter as being just one amidst a string of endless lovers that Vikash can pursue because he is a man.

At another point in the play, this idea of women being sex objects is brought up again when Shanti's disfigured body is exposed. She has had breast cancer and one of her breasts removed. It is revealed that her husband, and now Anaminrader, are horrified by the spectacle and see her as a lesser woman because of the surgery to remove her breast.

The men in the play pass Viagra around like nobody's business and harass females for sex and when it is revealed that they are less than whole, the men have less desire for these females. So indeed, women are expected to be sex objects and the objects of seduction and sexual consumption while the men get away with multiple flings, thinking that women are just objects to be consumed and shrinking from them when their femininity is in question because of the loss of a breast.

The double standards at work for men and women thus come into play. Men are allowed to have multiple flings and be sexually promiscuous while women are required to remain pure for men as well as to be sexually untainted and attractive like Shanti whose husband is now horrified that she has only one breast and is thus no longer sexually whole or sexually attractive.

Indeed, Dattani's critique is not limited to Indian society but is a universal phenomenon. Women are lesser beings because of their status in society, and are reduced to being viewed as sexual objects for consumption because genetically they are programmed to be at the receiving end of sexual aggression while the males can aggressively woo and pursue as well as conquer as many members of the female species as they want. Dattani's grievance is thus the utterly subordinated nature of women to men when it comes to marriage and the need for women to be little more than appendages and sexual and domestic slaves to men .

In Mahesh Dattani's Brief Candle, the female condition is depicted as one which is highly oppressive and subordinated to men, At the heart of the conflict is Dattani's perceived injustice at the double standards at work for men which do not apply to women,

such as Vikash's ability to complacently engage in extramarital sex while Divya is required to remain pure for marriage, and the oppressive cage of marriage as a trap and imprisonment for Plath, who apart from the need to get married, has seen a life of academic achievement, only to be reduced to the need for becoming a domestic slave and child-bearer once she gets encumbered with the need for marriage.

At the heart of it is Dattani's rebellion against the subordinated status of women to men in society, they are expected to be sexually passive and to serve the men whom their lives revolve around completely, only to be repaid with the men they serve having affairs and drinking.

One might say the novel is about Divika's regret that she is not a man with a phallus, because that condition might actually enable her to lead a life of authenticity and freedom. Being female comes with the expectations of eventually becoming a domestic keeper no matter what one has achieved prior to getting married, as Divya mentions when she says men like Vikash intend to serenade her with high romance only to iron her out flat like a mat like after marriage, reduced to a life of menial household chores and work that revolves entirely around the family while Vikash lives a double life of male hypocrisy and is able by virtue of his status as a male to engage in casual sex with many women.

While the Gods did create women as a companion to man and to be his helper, what Dattani seems to imply in the novel is that this being made as an appendage to man is a complete suffocation of women's rights, independence and freedom Divika thus feels that being female is little more than being an appendage to men as they are allowed sexual liberties that are forbidden to women and allowed to pursue money glamour and fame all at the expense of their wives who have to make sacrifices and raise children for them

The idea of marriage appals Divika who finds it little more than an entrapment and imprisonment for someone as talented and full of promise independently as herself. Divika is also revulsed by the idea of females being completely passive, indebted and at the mercy of male desire as females are to be played around with at males's will and mercy. The play thus laments that females are merely sex objects for males, to be used and abandoned when they are disfigured like Shanti who has lost her breast and hence her sexual appeal to men.

The play is also a meditation on mortality. Indeed, it is aptly titled Brief Candle and the patients all eventually succumb to cancer. Ironically they stage a comedy in which there is supposed to be no death, but indeed death is the major leveller and conquerer at the end of the play as one patient after another succumbs to death. Indeed death is the ultimate leveller for the struggle between Divika and Vikash.

He had caused her misery by being unfaithful and sexually promiscuous while he was alive, but as a result he contracts AIDS and subsequently cancer and is put under her control and care in hospital. Her indifference to him as a patient allows her some revenge for the infidelity he had dealt her while he was living. The play then shows that, while gender inequality separates men and women and allow men to reign over women in this life, death is the great leveler.

Both males and females are made equal in death when all the amount of glamour and affairs one has had in this life is reduced to nothing. So while males enjoy the privilege of

being able to enjoy multiple sex partners in this life, at the end this privilege gets evened out when Vikash contracts AIDS as a consequence of sexual licentiousness and having had too many sex partners in this life.

Divika is resentful at the sexual licentiousness Vikash had been able to enjoy simply by his status of being male while she had to play the role of a dutiful doctor in the interim years of his absence because as a female she does not enjoy the license to sexually promiscuous and irresponsible because to have multiple flings just means multiple pregnancies and hence multiple liabilities.

Divika herself is a supreme victim of these standards that her society exacts upon her because she is expected to be remained chaste for Vikash while Vikash has multiple affairs. Women are not allowed to be financially independent and thus are reduced to objects of possession as brides, who must then serve the husband's household they belong to until they are driven to exhaustion as slaves and then subsequently suicide. Women are thus child-bearing slaves to the families they are married into.

To her, he is just another cancer patient at the hospital she is running. The play is also about both of them coming to terms with lost love and time. Indeed, Divika had been cold to Vikash up till his death but it is also revealed that she has missed and pined for him all these years while he had only one person he could think of despite his multiple affairs at the end of his life and that was Divika.

The play is about Divika's coming to terms with Vikash's absence in her life and eventually through his death as the one love affair that mattered despite Vikash's promiscuity, and at the end of the play they are seen singing together and reunited in spirit if not in flesh. Brief Candle is thus a complex meditation about sexism, death, patriarchy, female oppression and mortality in modern India.

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