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Ravaged Bodies, Embodied Performance: Performativity in Dattani's *Brief Candle*

Samipendra Banerjee

University of Gour Banga, Malda, India

Abstract

Brief Candle, Mahesh Dattani's latest play concerns itself with the plight of cancer patients but in the process takes important strides in performativity. This paper is an attempt to evaluate performance and performativity within the theatrical space through an analysis of the centrally dominant stage prop, the mask or 'Face of Cancer' and performing bodies. Touching upon the genealogy of Performance Studies as a discipline and its intricate and fraught relationship with the theatre I seek to explore performative elements in the play. I also seek to look at the 'derogated', cancerous body as a charged site of performativity and argue that bio-medical and technological intervention crucially transforms the human body. The play could also be read as a space that explores the post-human body and its performative possibilities.

[**Keywords:** Mahesh Dattani; *Brief Candle*; Performance Studies; human body, interdisciplinarity]

Mahesh Dattani's recent play *Brief Candle* deals with the plight of cancer patients. The play's social concern is part of Dattani's response to everyday social problems and the ways in which the urban individual has to live through an array of such hurdles. This paper is not an analysis of the thematic issues and concerns of *Brief Candle*. Rather it is an attempt to see how Dattani evokes these themes through an exploration of the performative within the context of the theatre.

Directed by Lilette Dubey, *Brief Candle* was first performed on the 5th of July 2009 at Mumbai by the Prime Time Theatre Company and the play was published by Penguin in 2010. In the words of Mahesh Dattani, "In the play you have survivors of cancer who are in the process of putting up a comedy play as a fund raiser for their hospice." (Dattani, 3) Hence at the very centre of the play lies another play, a play within the play, rehearsals for it and its staging. The play within is an energetic farce put up by the cancer patients of the hospital and is written by Vikas, an energetic and spirited young man who is also, ironically, a victim of cancer and is already dead by the time his play is staged. Dattani does it through nine brief scenes that alternate between rehearsals for the play and characters in their real life situations. At one level Dattani, seems to have picked up a cause here and is seeking to present the plights of cancer patients, their

gruesome pain and struggle as they carry on with everyday life. But beneath this message of social concern lies his keen sense of the performative and theatre. Hence while the play's message is important, it never overshadows or controls the performative/theatrical dimension of his play. In the manipulation of the rehearsals, in its metatheatricality, in the stagecraft and the use of performative symbols, and finally in its brilliant use of the bio-medical body that tends towards the post human, *Brief Candle* provides an imploring case-study of the performative and the theatrical. I seek to examine the play-text against these preliminary tropes and evaluate the nature of the performative and its intersection with material bodies in *Brief Candle*. I would return to the play but before that it is important to take a closer look at the idea of performance in a contemporary culture and its relation with theatre.

Recent academic activity has increasingly been emphasizing the dynamic multiplicity of performance and performativity in a global culture. In fact the very word 'performance' may mean a lot of things at the same time. A quick look at the etymological origins of 'performance' shows a consistent addition of meanings with the passage of time and any contemporary dictionary entry on performance points to an array of possible meanings suggesting the multiplicity of performance contexts in a contemporary culture. Moreover, even within a particular context, say of cultural performances, it may have a very different set of meanings and effects. For Shannon Jackson:

Performance conventionally employs bodies, motion, space, affect, image, and words; its analysis at times aligns with theories of embodiment, at times with studies of emotion, at times with architectural analysis, at times with studies of visual culture, and at times with critiques of linguistic exchange.... The many registers of performance thus have many registers of meaning. (Jackson, 13-14)

Although as a discipline, Performance studies has its origins in events roughly in the 1960s, it begins its journey as a proper academic discipline in the 1980s with Richard Schechner and the New York University. For Peggy Phelan, however, the origin story of Performance studies was an intriguing one in which "two men gave birth" (Phelan, 3). The other man was of course Victor Turner, and the narrative of the beginning, for Shannon Jackson,

focuses on Schechner's generative interactions with the anthropologist, Victor Turner, who took the study of performance beyond the proscenium stage and into the carnivals, festivals, protests, and other cultural rituals of an intercultural world....It is also a heroic story of disciplinary breaking and remaking, one framed by the language of the rebel, the renegade, and later, incorporating new schools of critical theory, the subversive and the resistant. (Jackson, 8)

For Schechner, '...The world no longer appeared as a book to be read but as a performance to participate in' (Schechner, 19) and that Performance Studies is 'a response to an increasingly performative world' (Schechner, 4). As Simon Shepard and Mick Wallis point out, for Schechner,

While globalisation promotes 'cultural sameness' Performance Studies promotes 'tensions and partialities'. It resists hierarchies of 'ideas, organisations, or people' and is 'sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized'. It works best 'amidst a dense web of connections' (Shepherd, 105).

In *Professing Performance*, Shannon Jackson on the one hand establishes such a 'dense web of connections' and the interdisciplinarity of Performance Studies and on the other warns against easy binarizations in relation to other disciplines, especially theatre studies. In the chapter 'Discipline and Performance: Genealogy and Discontinuity', Jackson refers to the myriad ways in which the emerging discipline of Performance Studies connects and disconnects with other streams and disciplines, pointing to the 'varied and contradictory referentiality of performance'. In terms of reiteration, for example, on the one hand lies theorists like Schechner and Butler who emphasize repetition in performance while for Peggy Phelan, performance is fundamentally non-repeatable. This leads Jackson to observe that

In sum, performance is about doing, and it is about seeing; it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/or orality; it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats; it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real. Performance's many connotations and its varied intellectual kinships ensure that an interdisciplinary conversation around this interdisciplinary site rarely will be neat and straightforward. Perhaps it is time to stop assuming that it should. (Jackson, 15)

It is against this theoretical backdrop that I seek to examine the extremely fraught relation between theatre and performance. While it is evident that a contemporary performance context and hence performance itself seeks to move beyond the limits of theatre, there is also no reason to believe that performance and performativity profess an altogether ideological and ontological disconnect with theatre. Thus any academic engagement with performance would point to multiple possibilities rather than limitations and it is fascinating to observe how drama, theatre and performance extend upon each other in an extremely fraught, contrived and dramatic relationship. Jackson refers to Schechner's analogy of the pie in the context of performances; that

Richard Schechner's proposed "new paradigm" for performance studies positions theatre as "a very small slice of the performance pie," one amongst many instances that could also include "rock concerts, discos,

electioneering, wrestling, con games, and demonstrations, and a panoply of religious rituals.” (Jackson, 80)

It must be understood that since the emergence of performance studies and the fascinating fields of performance was a historical shift away from theatre studies and was the next step from traditional theatre, it had to relegate theatre to the margins. Yet even performance studies cannot actually deny or overlook the signification of performance within theatre, ‘the small slice of the performance pie’. Traversing between the genealogies of literature, drama and cultural studies, Shannon Jackson in the chapter ‘Culture and Performance: Structures of Dramatic Feeling’ hints towards this inherent relationship between theatre and performance suggesting that the project of performance studies is not independent of the project of modern drama. Jackson points out that not only is it difficult to maintain binary oppositions between old theatre studies and new performance studies but also difficult to elide it. It is with this awareness that I suggest that even within the framework of the theatre, the performative can be sought for and that the new inroads into performance studies can only enrich the theatre and theatricality instead of delimiting its concerns. The elements of the theatre, its props, set, lights, music, costumes and characters repeatedly perform and stretch the limits of theatre and performance.

This is all the more true for the plays by Mahesh Dattani. Scholarship on Dattani has been focusing primarily on his evocation of ‘invisible issues’, his attitudes towards gender and the marginalized in the context of the contemporary Indian society. But at the same time his sharp sense of the theatre and performance, of performing bodies in various contexts deserve more attention. Indeed stagecraft has always been an important concern in Dattani. He has been a playwright who has shown a keen awareness of the stage and his sharp use of the stage-space has always celebrated the plurality of theatrical communication. In an interview to Anita Nair, Dattani pointed out that, “I see myself as a craftsman and not as a writer. To me, being a playwright is about seeing myself as part of the process of a production. I write plays for the sheer pleasure of communicating through this dynamic medium” and again, that, “Theatre to me is a reflection of what you observe. To do anything more would be to become didactic and then it ceases to be theatre.” It is this sense of the acute balance between the importance of the message and the performative mode of the theatre that crucially informs Dattani’s plays. The key themes of his plays never turn out to be overly didactic, nor does he seem to be preaching or professing ideas—they emerge softly, underscored by the performative brilliance of the elements onstage.

One particular feature of Dattani’s craft of the stage is the use of a multi-level stage set with different levels connoting different planes in time and space. *Brief Candle* also uses ‘a composite set’ and the stage direction mentions that ‘A gauze curtain will separate spaces’. (Dattani, 7) Dattani keeps the stage direction simple at the beginning and even in the later scenes it is simply a mention of the

changes in the basic set—whether it is the hospice, the hotel room or at the rehearsals. There is a 'Face of Cancer', a large mask, at the very centre and the stage levels are stroked around it. These levels separate the time and space of Vikas and the rehearsals, the hospice and the hotel. Through simple changes in the set and manipulation of the light, the director could suggest separate spaces in a performance.

However, the mask of cancer deserves more critical attention. Within the multi-level set structure, the centrality of the 'Face of Cancer' is too glaring to be missed and it dominates the set in terms of not only its position but also the size. Dattani had used masks elsewhere, for example, in *Final Solutions*, to signify the varying religious attitudes of the chorus. In *Brief Candle* the mask remains onstage throughout the play as a visible reminder to the pain of the cancer patients, their gruesome struggle in putting up a smile. It stays throughout the performance as a silent, persistent symbol, a repository of all the struggles and sorrows the cancer patients are passing through in the play. But the mask does more than simply emerge as a theatrical symbol and I would posit that the static 'Face of Cancer' in the play *performs*. This is also where Dattani extends the limits of his theatrical prop and transforms it, lending a performative edge to an otherwise static prop. In the stage directions, Dattani suggests that the 'Face of Cancer' is 'a large three-dimensional mask' and that 'it could be abstract'. (7) In its almost monumental presence, the mask remains a spectacle and immediately arrests visual attention of the audience. Even in its static presence the mask is thus exhibitionistic and performative. I am using the term 'performative' for the mask in the sense that in its overt, extended rendering, in its huge abstraction, its sheer theatricality and a 'spectacular' presence; the mask is performative—it performs the corporeal pain of the cancer patient and also carries with it the social markings of the pain. In this sense, the mask is akin to what Rebecca Schneider calls the 'explicit body' in performance, although in a different context.

In her monumental work, Schneider looks at feminist performance art and locates layers of signification and 'explication' of the body in such art. She notes that "much explicit body performance replays, across the body of the artist as stage, the historical drama of gender or race (and sometimes, brilliantly, gender and race)." (Schneider, 3) Although *Brief Candle* isn't explicitly about race and gender, the explication of the body on the mask suggests other social inscriptions. The performance of the mask is not only at the level of the materiality of the pain but also at the socio-cultural implications of being a cancer patient—the mask also performs the social stigma of the cancer patient. I am considering the idea of 'explication' with reference to the performative dimension of the mask because of its 'loudly' etched features, the inscription of destruction and ravage on the face itself, the huge abstraction of the face and the hollowness that it carries.

Having said that, I would suggest that there is yet another level to the performative dimension of the mask. This is when the static stage prop of the

mask is transformed as it were, into a dynamic entity and it participates in the dramatic action. At this level, the dynamic mask performs yet again the pain of the cancer patients but equally suggests a movement beyond that, developing intimate connections between different stage entities. This is brilliantly achieved in Scene III of the play. The scene begins with Deepika who makes an effort to sound professional about the play but is unable to conceal her sense of attachment to Vikas, the playwright. As Deepika, Shanti and Amrinder discuss the play and its author, Vikas appears at the higher, non-realistic level of the stage. The stage directions tell us that “Vikas appears strumming a guitar. At the top of the fret is tied a mask similar to the face. It dangles and dances almost to the music, sometimes in front of the actors.” (Dattani, 23) The large, static ‘Face of Cancer’ is thus replicated and transformed into a smaller, mobile mask which is controlled by Vikas and dangles by turns in front of Amrinder, Shanti, Amol and even Deepika. The characters respond to the mask also in turns and gradually unveil their own stories of marginalization, as cancer patients. What is interesting here is that the characters always speak looking at, reacting and responding to the dangling mask. The mask hence is here used as a pointer to the unfolding of the story of each of the character. But again, while it is evident that the characters perform to the mask, I would suggest that the mask also performs to the characters, establishing important connections. If the large mask performs the materiality of the pain of the cancer patients, so does the smaller mask but since the characters reveal their individual truths responding to the mask, the mask acts like a mirror to each of them. Hence the smaller mask performs not only the painful and ravaged body but also those distinct and specific social markings that emerge from their pain. For Amrinder and Shanti it is about the anxiety of their identities and selfhood which is located in their bodies and for Deepika it is about effectively concealing her emotions for Vikas. The mask is performative because in each case it inscribes this specific sense of anxiety and discomfiture onto its body. The visual similarities of the larger static mask and the smaller mask are also evident at the outset and hence the performative dynamism of the dangling mask can be thematically connected to the performance of the larger mask. Having established this connection, the smaller mask then establishes rapport and connections with the other characters and hence by turns performs their pain and social isolation. What emerges in this scene is thus a dense web of connections between various onstage elements including the characters. In this scene, the smaller mobile mask is at the centre of the activity, and it connects at one level with the larger mask and at the other with the individual characters. It is worth mentioning that for Amol, the mask has an altogether different connotation and is a theatrical symbol that makes him recollect the rehearsal. While the mask ‘dangles’ in front of Amrinder, Shanti and Deepika at its, as already suggested, ‘performative’ moments, Amol ‘takes the mask from its string and wears it quickly’. By wearing the mask and not looking at it, Amol has thus transformed it into a theatrical element and Vikas has to ‘take off’ the mask from Amol in order to cast it back into its performative space.

The mask thus assumes a dominant presence and its performativity is marked by its corporeality. I take this as a cue to move on to the next section of my argument—the body and the performative scope of the body. Recent advances in Performance Studies have been immensely enriched by academic discourses on the body. Newer ways of reading performance and performativity have emerged from fresh perspectives on materiality, the corporeal and the body, especially in the context of a digitally advanced and technological environment of the contemporary culture. The body is increasingly emerging as a charged site of representational paradoxes, where an array of experiences is being constantly inscribed. In a recent article, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly identifies this premise of Performance Studies in the context of the body:

At a time when media--and, in particular, digital technologies--have altered our relationship to the material world, including our very own bodies, Performance Studies has much to offer to an understanding of materiality, embodiment, sensory experience, liveness, presence, and personhood as they bear on being-in-the-world and as they are mediated by technologies old and new. As the volume information increases and with it the artificial intelligence necessary to manage it, Performance Studies seeks to understand the kinds of knowledge that are located in the body.

Scholarly intervention in this field have also been diverse, ranging from Foucault and Butler to Otto Sibbum's notion of 'gestural knowledge', Pierre Bourdieu's 'habitus' and Rebecca Schneider's 'explicit body' among others. Foucault's anti-foundationalist histories had already suggested how the body is basically under the influence of 'power' which has been instrumental in later thinking about external agencies at work on the body determining or limiting materiality. Again as early as in 1991, Donna Haraway was already theorizing the cyborg in her monumental 'manifesto' recognizing that "communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies." (164) This has been crucially true in the years to follow as advancements in technology have continued to intervene the body and redefine selfhood and identity in a shift towards the post-human body. Biotechnological interventions like plastic surgery, organ transplants and cloning have significantly altered the body and have raised important questions about control and 'liveness'.¹ However, interventions haven't always yielded positive results and this is probably most evident in the biomedical intervention over the diseased body in an operation theatre. For the cancer patient, such an intervention almost invariably carries with it registers of physical pain, social stigma and a body that throws into tension assumed notions of the self.

It is within this theoretical backdrop that I seek to look at the performing bodies of *Brief Candle*. If the central thematic thrust of *Brief Candle* lies in explicating the plight and pain of cancer patients, then I would argue that the plight and grief is manipulated, controlled and performed through the bodies of the characters. The pain of the cancer patient, physical and otherwise, is inscribed

on their respective bodies and is theatrically performed, across their bodies. The performance, thus, in itself is heavily *embodied*. In a post-colonial context, Helen Gilbert had spoken of 'derogated' and 'diseased' bodies as important sites of representation:

In the theatre, the derogated body is a potent site of representation since the constraints and oppressions it endures can be visually displayed rather than simply described. Moreover, this body plays out a performative contradiction which can be used subversively when the (presumably) powerful physicality of the actor is harnessed in order to convey the disempowered body of the fictional character as colonial subject. (Gilbert, 221-222)

Though Gilbert's premise is post-coloniality and the theatre, the observation is important in a performative context and I would suggest that a play like *Brief Candle* adequately explores the performative potential of the diseased and derogated body. I would return to the 'Face of Cancer' as a point of entry to the text. I have already suggested that the large 'Face of Cancer' or the mask performs not only the materiality of the pain of the cancer patient but also the social markings of being a cancer victim and that its performativity is marked by its corporeality. Now if we take a closer look at the depiction of the mask, we find that the inscription of the body is central to its representation. Let us take a closer look at the stage directions where Dattani carefully describes the mask:

The Face of Cancer could be abstract, maybe an androgynous face that is melting. Hollow eyes, sallow skin, tufts of hair etc. A face that is ravaged by the effects of chemotherapy and is now ready to give up the struggle. (Dattani, 7)

The depiction carries with it significant performative pointers that are also embodied. 'Melting' and 'ravaged' are important markers among others that perform the physical pain of the cancer patient. Also since the 'ravage' is not the result of a human act, rather it is an effect of 'chemotherapy', a biotechnological intervention, I would argue that the visual rendering of the mask tends toward the post-human body. In its abstraction, its exaggerated features, its inscription of pain and intervention, its sheer size, the mask is not only performative; it is also post-human. In fact the theorization of the post-human body is a key concern in studies on body and performance today, especially after the emergence of the cyborg. In a recent book on digital theatres, Gabriella Giannachi locates among others, the crucial links between the post-human body and performance. She points out that 'Although the body presumes an identity, we are striving towards the possibility of becoming at once multiple and fragmented. We live in a post-human world. We are seeking to become trans-human, possibly even transgenic.' (60) The post-human body is also extremely fluid and resists easy categorization. As Giannachi adds:

The terrain of the 'post-human body' is unquestionably unsteady....One of the fundamental characteristics of the post-human body is its ability to exist *beyond* the human. However, while the prefix 'post' indicates that the posthuman comes after the human, i.e. that it is subsequent to the human chronologically, it also suggests that it is in the proximity of the human, in the sense that it still depends on the human ontologically. (Giannachi, 61)

When I am considering the mask as a visual rendering of the post-human body I have its 'unsteady terrain' and the performative links with the bodies of the characters in mind. The link that I have already established between the characters and the replicated mask is a bodied one and the mask could be seen as a rendering of the post-human body by virtue of its intricate yet unstable and unsteady connections with the bodies of the characters. On the one hand lies the physical bodies of the characters and on the other lies an abstract rendering of their 'ravaged' bodies in an unstable relation; this is the premise of the post-human body.

This would also lead us to the actual bodies of the characters in *Brief Candle*, especially those of Amrinder and Shanti. Again it is at the crucial third scene of the play that both characters pour out their secret feelings about being a cancer patient and it is done through a performance of their bodies. It must be noted that both Amrinder and Shanti reveal their 'embodied' pains and anxieties looking at the dangling mask and their bodies perform in response to the performance of the mask. Moreover it is in this climactic moment of the play that the characters incorporate the materiality of their pain and render their bodies visible in certain fine theatrical and performative manipulations. Apart from an extension of Shanti's narrative of the body in Scene V and few other stray moves, such an 'embodied' performance doesn't happen elsewhere in the play. Nevertheless, as both Amrinder and Shanti reveal their bodied anxieties, interesting facts emerge. The bodies of both Amrinder and Shanti are derogated, diseased and even scarred bodies with signatures of biotechnological intervention, intervention that has 'ravaged' not only their bodies but also their privileged sense of gender and identity. Looking at the dangling mask, Amrinder recounts:

They never told me that they will be drilling inside my body. At my core. What made me a man? Climbing a mountain, playing a game of hockey, knowing I could satisfy a woman in bed. All that was under attack with a group of needles probing at my prostrate, through the wall of my rectum. Like being sodomized with metal. (Dattani, 23)

Amrinder's narrative is heavily embodied and the performance of his body has to do with notions of maleness which is at stake owing to biotechnological intervention. The pre-operative body and the post-operative body is never the same. For Amrinder, significant changes have undergone in his body that throws into tension his assumed notions of the male gender and hence questions ideas of his selfhood as well. Similarly for Shanti, a victim of breast cancer, bio-medical

instrumentation has brought about crucial changes in her body. As Shanti recalls:

I lay exposed to the technicians, my breast pushed against the X-ray plate. One of them marked my lumps, treating my breasts as if it were already a piece of dead flesh...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 fully myself. Gone. (Dattani, 32)

For Shanti the effects are similar. Bio-medical treatment takes out her breasts before she has even properly realized and known her body parts. The effect that her changed bodied status has on other men in turn redefines her own awareness about her femininity and gender. For both Amrinder and Shanti, the pain is as much material and physical as social and arrives with the stigma of an embodied social embarrassment. What remains interesting to observe is the contingent nature of such bodies and how the biotechnological intervention over these bodies is repeatedly performed, *acted* out, transforming the nature of such bodies. In an extremely illuminating recent study on cancer 'previval', Coleman Nye suggests 'that the formulation of immaterial disease is a theatrical fact' (108). Drawing upon Rebecca Schneider's ideas of 'reenactment' and 'meantime' she locates theatricality in the biotechnological intervention on the clinical 'fact' of cancer. Nye points out that

Orders of knowing, within this line of thought, are multiple, contingent, and often contradictory. There is no single, rational, empirically knowable *thing* (a disease or a body) that is coherent unto itself. This fact-thing must be continually coaxed into existence, into visibility, into evidence. It must be *enacted*. Time is central to such efforts. (Nye, 108)

Although *Brief Candle* isn't about cancer previval but rather about the grim realities of the disease, the theatrical and performative dimension of the bio-medical and clinical 'fact' in the play cannot be overlooked. In this paper I have attempted to evaluate and enumerate the performativity in Dattani's *Brief Candle* in terms of theatrical bodies on the surface of which biotechnological intervention is scripted. The play-text also emerges as a space that reveals the contingent nature of the bodies throwing open crucial connections between the human and the post-human body. Dattani's play thus crucially explores key performative moments and strides.

Notes

¹ For an introduction to the liveness debate in the context of Cyborg theatre and the post-human body see *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* by Jenifer Parker-Starbuck, p 9-10.

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Samipendra Banerjee is an Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Gour Banga, Malda. He has done his masters from Kalyani University and Mphil from Jadavpur University. He is currently pursuing his PhD at VisvaBharati, Shantiniketan on Post-Independence Indian Drama in English. His areas of interest include Modern Indian Drama and Theatre, Nationhood, Gender and Performance Studies.
