



Carnavalesque and Grotesque Realism: Stage as Carnival Space in Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle*

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Abstract

The present research paper aims to analyze the play Brief Candle using Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of 'Carnavalesque' and 'Grotesque.' The researchers argue that the play has 'Carnival Space,' where the reality is subverted momentarily through the metadrama. Moreover, the researchers use grotesque ideas to focus on the exhibition of gross bodily elements that happen because of medical treatment. The object of abhorrence is masked by disfiguration and roleplay. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's work, Rabelais and His World, the paper attempts to delineate various characteristics of Carnavalesque with instances from the text. The researcher also argues that the play creates a carnival space by adopting the subversions and other characteristics of Bakhtin's concepts.

Keywords: Carnival, Drama, Stage, Space, and Grotesque.

Introduction

Bakhtin's idea of carnival appears in *Rabelais and His World* [RHW] and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin first uses the concept in RHW, his Ph.D. thesis, to demonstrate a subversive trope prevalent in the works of Rabelais, a French writer. Bakhtin mentions the serio-comic genre when discussing the genres developed during the Hellenistic period. He identifies the 'carnival sense of the world' as one of the chief characteristics of Serio-comic writings. He categorizes 'carnivalized literature' as having elements of carnivalistic folklore. Bakhtin defines various characteristics of the serio-comic genre. Bakhtin moves on to talk about characteristic features of carnival while discussing the problems of carnivalization in literature. This is a temporary breakdown of orderly society hierarchy, where authorities are reversed, and there comes grotesque body parts, wit, comedy, mockery, and dialogue. The carnival turns all kinds of standards on their heads: the accepted notions of beauty and grace involve exaggerated body functions and pictures. The existing notions of beauty and grace imply overdrawn corporeal acts and symbols. In this regard, laughter and satire are very significant forms of social criticism through which people mock and criticise existing societal setups. In addition, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism highlights this process of dialogue among different voices in languages and literatures, where carnivals become a space for the collision or exchange of those voices.

The term carnivalesque, used by Mikhail Bakhtin refers to a mode of literature that undermines and frees the presumptions of the mainstream style

or climate through humor and bedlam. This idea is represented in numerous literary works, which show that the authors implement carnivalesque features to undermine social standards and orders. For instance, Nugraha discusses how Taufiq Al-Chakim uses profanation and comic elements as well as multiple tones to feature the carnivalesque in his story 'Asy-Syahiid'. Mahdi et al., investigate Shakespeare's play through Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque positing that the dramatic creation is 'a bombastic where rules are broken and excess acts occur full to Medieval festival symbology' (56). Through these studies, the carnivalesque appears as a literary device that allows for critique and satire of society's structures and norms.

Free and Familiar Contact among People

Bakhtin remarks that 'Carnival itself (we repeat: in the sense of a sum total of all diverse festivities of the carnival type) is not, of course, a literary phenomenon' (*Rabelais* 122). Bakhtin points out certain characteristics of carnival. The first characteristic of a carnival is that it's a place where the division between spectator and performer gets blurred. There is no clear distinction between the performer and viewer; everyone performs and lives within the mode of carnival. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure in society is distorted, and free contact between people of various classes is encouraged. Bakhtin remarks, 'What is suspended first of all is a hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it - that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)' (123) thus, Bakhtin proposes a space where '... to some extent 'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world'.' (122).

Throughout the play, the mingling of high and low is evident, and there is no distinction between the performer and the spectator. The patients are the spectators, and they are the actors as well. The fact that Deepika, the nurse, also participates in the meta-drama makes it a perfect carnival space where hierarchies are suspended momentarily. The characters Vikas and Deepika are both lovers and actors. The mixing of characters in real and stage

provides a carnival space where class hierarchy is deconstructed. Bakhtin's idea of coming together of opposite elements upholds 'the contact of everything with everything else mixing of up and down, of the sacred and the profane, contact crisscrosses (and crosses up) all hierarchies' (54).

Social hierarchy based on estate, rank, age, and property are blurred in carnival space, and a new model of the interrelationship between individuals is initiated. In the carnival square, everyone is considered equal. Bakhtin observes, 'The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life' (123) thus, carnival permits eccentric behaviors and allows hidden sides of human nature to reveal and express freely. As Bakhtin articulates, 'Eccentricity is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits - in concretely sensuous form - the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves' (123).

Carnivalistic Mesalliances and Profanation

The third category of carnival sense of the world is carnivalistic mesalliance. Bakhtin talks about a free spirit that is prevalent in the carnival square, where every traditionally disunified and distanced thing is combined lucidly. As Bakhtin puts it, 'Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.' (123). The binary oppositions are treated equally in the carnival sense of the world. The fourth characteristic of carnival is profanation. Bakhtin, by profanation, means bringing sacred values down and parodying the things that ought not to be parodied. He defines the characteristics of profanation thus: 'Connected with this is yet a fourth carnivalistic category, profanation: carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasing and bringing down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings, etc.' (123) Bakhtin does not see these four characteristics as just interrelating, freedom-oriented, equality-based, and unity of the opposite.

He situates these qualities as thoughts that survived for thousands of years in human nature. That's what makes it a 'genre-shaping' influence.

Bakhtin explains blurring the distinction between actor and spectator as another characteristic of carnival. For Bakhtin, a carnival square is a space where everyone performs, and no one watches the festival as a spectator. Bakhtin explains,

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it (7).

Carnival as a Second Life

Bakhtin even calls carnival a second life, which is characterized by laughter. He links the carnival with the feast of the church, which is commemorated the day before the beginning of Lent. Bakhtin even connects the feast with Mardi Gras, which is celebrated in New Orleans (8). Bakhtin even elevates carnival to a liberating force, saying, 'Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.' (10) Bakhtin discusses another important characteristic of carnival to encourage social equality by disrupting social hierarchy. Bakhtin explains, 'The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. ... all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.' (10).

Another important quality of carnivalesque is a special form of communication. Usually, the communication between high and low-ranking people is register-based, polite, and formal. In the carnival square, the communication between the two classes is more liberated and informal. Bakhtin thus explains the form of communication possible in the carnival square: 'This temporary suspension, both

ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.' (10).

The Universality of Carnival Laughter

After explaining carnival idioms, Bakhtin moves further to explain 'Carnival Laughter'. Bakhtin delineates three qualities of carnival laughter. First, for Bakhtin, carnival laughter is festive laughter. Therefore, it is collectively experienced by the people. Second, it is universal and experienced by the whole world. Thirdly, Carnival laughter is ambivalent. It mocks and triumphs at the same time. Bakhtin differentiates between satire and festive laughter. For him, festive laughter is universal, whereas satire targets one person. Bakhtin distinguishes satire from carnival laughter; thus, 'The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.' (12).

Grotesque

Bakhtin identifies another predominant theme, the gross materiality of the body, in the works of Rabelais. The body plays a vital role in Rabelais' works, according to Bakhtin. Sexual life, food, drink, and the act of digestion are other dominant themes featured in Rabelais's works. He defines the theme of Grotesque Realism as a form of folk humor thus: 'Actually, the images of the material bodily principle in the work of Rabelais (and of the other writers of the Renaissance) are the heritage, only somewhat modified by the Renaissance, of the culture of folk humor. We shall call it conditionally the concept of grotesque realism' (18). Bakhtin explains that the bodily elements in grotesque realism are positive. For Bakhtin, the material bodily principle is universal and exhibited as 'grandiose, exaggerated,

immeasurable.’ (19). Another characteristic of grotesque realism is the degradation of what is regarded as ‘high’. Bakhtin explains, ‘The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.’ (19). For Bakhtin, ‘lowering’ is associated with the lower part of the body, ‘higher’ is associated with the head, and other parts are associated with the higher part of the body. Bakhtin explains that degradation is not a negative aspect; for him, degradation is not the complete destruction of the object but is associated with renewal and new life.

Contradictory Bodily Elements

The grotesque imagery merges two bodies in one for Bakhtin. He explains that two bodily elements, dying and giving birth, are merged together. Bakhtin explains the image thus: ‘One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body, or at least a body ready for conception and fertilization, the stress being laid on the phallus or the genital organs. From one body a new body always emerges in some form or other.’ (27). Another considerable quality of the concept of the grotesque body is, it has the language of curses and abuse. Furthermore, Bakhtin elaborates that the abusive language is not at all offensive in the realm of carnival and it is isolated from the contemporary usage of the language. Bakhtin elaborates, ‘these expressions are completely isolated in the system of meaning and values of modern languages and in the modern picture of the world; they are fragments of an alien language in which certain things could be said in the past but which at present conveys nothing but senseless abuse.’ (28). The actual meaning of the abusive words is not taken seriously and literally but turned into something common and an expression of the mouth, not of the heart.

Romantic Grotesque

Bakhtin differentiates Renaissance Grotesque from Romantic Grotesque. In the Romantic Grotesque [RG], the laughter lost its significance.

The theme of madness is prevalent in Romantic Grotesque literature. Bakhtin explains the reason for the existence of madness in the RG literature thus: ‘... the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by ‘normal’, that is by commonplace ideas and judgments.’ (39). Bakhtin identifies another theme associated with grotesque, wearing a mask. The traditional carnival mask is associated with change and reincarnation. Mask also indicates a violation of demarcations and limits. In Romantic Grotesque, for Bakhtin, the mask has lost its original meaning. Mask becomes a symbol of secret in the Romantic Grotesque. Bakhtin delineates, ‘now the mask hides something, keeps a secret, deceives. Such a meaning would not be possible as long as the mask functioned within folk culture’s organic whole. The Romantic mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a somber hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it’ (40).

Puppet is another important theme related to grotesque realism. Bakhtin emphasizes the instance where humans are treated as puppets and controlled by the power structure. Bakhtin delineates, ‘The theme of the marionette plays an important part in Romanticism. This theme is of course also found in folk culture, but in romanticism, the accent is placed on the puppet as the victim of an alien inhuman force, which rules over men by turning them into marionettes. This image is completely unknown in folk culture.’ (40). Furthermore, Bakhtin compares the grotesque with monstrosity. He asserts that ‘The essential aspect of this form is monstrous; the aesthetics of the grotesque are to a certain extent the aesthetics of the monstrous’ (43). Bakhtin analyses the grotesque and argues that human necessity is dismissed and made insignificant before the grotesque. Bakhtin explains, ‘In the grotesque world the id is uncrowned and transformed into a ‘funny monster’.’ (49). Bakhtin furthermore identifies that grotesque, contrastive elements are inseparable. Grotesque changes serious subjects into flat and distorted (51). After explaining the characteristic traits of the grotesque he moves on to talk about the Realism of the Grotesque.

The concept of grotesque is further elaborated by other critics who have used the concept in various domains. Kerr in his research article, explains that ‘the grotesque also incorporates the ugly and the bizarre, the diseased and horrific processes of decay and death.’ (97). Edwards and Graulund, in their book *Grotesque*, argue that ‘Bakhtin calls attention to a text that overflows with farts, feces, piss, gluttonous feasts, adultery, geese used as toilet paper, sex, cannibalism, cannonballs made from hair, as well as other passages that rely on modes of exaggeration, silliness, crudeness, and indecency. Bakhtin points out that the orthodox critical tendency has been to dismiss these sections as ‘low material’ or ‘inappropriate’ or ‘absurd.’ (36). They figure out the gross bodily functions Bakhtin emphasizes.

Ottl, in her essay, points out that ‘Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body is very different, favoring body parts and body actions which were taboo in National Socialist aesthetics: the mouth, anus, phallus, sexuality, digestion’ (91) Bakhtin, by favoring lower body parts, creates a subversive paradigm where anything considered taboo can be spoken. Czachesz, in his book, traces the origin of the word ‘grotesque’ to ‘grotto’, an Italian palace that was decorated. Furthermore, he defines grotesque as ‘a playful, attention-grabbing, and often humorous component, on the one hand, and a confusing, repulsive, and often fearful component, on the other hand. In many (but not all) of its appearances, the grotesque can be aptly described as ‘laughing in pain’.’ (2). Furthermore, Czachesz argues that grotesque is a form of body aesthetics. Moreover, he asserts that the image of the body is inseparable from the world. He defines grotesque elements thus: ‘The grotesque representation of the body focuses on the apertures, convexities, and offshoots: the mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, and the nose. Those bodily phenomena are emphasized in which the body exceeds its limits, such as copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, agony, eating, drinking, and defecation’ (3).

Chao, in his book, discusses various definitions of grotesque given by Wolfgang Kayser, Victor Hugo, and Ruskin. Chao also talks about the Bakhtinian grotesque, for, which is ‘full of carnivalesque laughter and devoid of fear’ (3). He mentions the

metamorphosis of bodily organs through the technique of exaggeration. Seda, in his research article, argues that the concept of grotesque has multiple meanings, and the primary concern that unites all the definitions of grotesque is ‘physical embodiment. He further notes, ‘Broadly speaking, the grotesque combines the communal with the individual. The grotesque is reposed within individualized characters who operate within a collective. The grotesque character is often physically and mentally disfigured. Such figures are often outcasts or misfits who are largely alienated from society, even as they operate from within that society’ (99).

Grotesque also indicates a spirit of rejuvenation. Christenson, in his article, discusses Bakhtin’s idea of a new order thus: Bakhtin further insisted that grotesque realism is necessarily socially regenerative and offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.’ (258). Kimiagari, in his research article, argues that carnival space is created through the exhibition of the second self.

Stage as a Carnival Space

The concept of carnival space by Mikhail Bakhtin is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that has been used in several studies. It is about the carnival of Bakhtin that Folch-Serra talks for a symbolic representation change, death, and rebirth ‘similar to those rituals like festivals in popular culture’ (254). This idea is related to spatial inquiry which would where landscapes are not only visual but loaded with narratives. In addition, Bakhtin’s carnival space is the democratic vision of culture and literature through non-hierarchical plural systems. The notion is examined by Zhang, who sees carnivalization as ‘a reciprocity between different kinds of literary productions’ yet absent from the polarity of high/low or central/marginal and consequently leaving behind simple binary frameworks (24).

The play-within-a-play *Hotel Stay*, which is longer enacted by the cancer patients in the hospice, subverts various hierarchies among them. It serves as an alternative space to express the suppressed feeling. One of the cancer patients, Vikas, is the writer of this play-within-a-play. The medical assistant of

the hospice, Mahesh Tawarde, hesitates to express his love for the Doctor due to his professional and economic inequity. Vikas subverts their role in such a way as Mahesh is a wealthy person owning a private plane, and his sexual approaches are appreciated by Deepika, the manager of the lodge where the play is set.

It is possible to suggest that the drama stage can be regarded as a space of carnival, which assumption is supported by many research works and discussions among scholars. For instance, Harrison et al., consider the drama stage as a place where African roots in drama are examined arising from ritualistic nature of performance along with its carnival-like elements. Cameron describes the revelations observed through synchronous rehearsal and collaboration in theatre as similar to lives altered by a carnival: unpredictable but transformative. Tam's study uses the Carnival theory developed by Mikhail Bakhtin and in doing so investigates how laughter, noise, jokes and frolic relate to classrooms as represented through drama pedagogy that suggests such elements of carnival belong on stage; Prentki reveals how these qualities can also be used for political theatre to argue a space besides time.

Amarinder is diagnosed with Prostate cancer, and his gland needs to be removed. He feels embarrassed that his 'maleness' is taken away from him. In the play, he is shown as being sexually active; he even takes supplements to prove himself a 'real man'. Shanti, who loses one of her breasts because of cancer, is given the role of a seductive female who is wooed by Amarinder. The blood bag, which Amol, another dying patient, always carries, is replaced by a liquor named Bloody Mary in the same posture of how he carries his blood. Amol, who has no money to pay for his treatment, is made to act as if he is a wealthy drunkard wooing women.

The title of the play within the play itself is an irony. Even though the patients knew that their lifespan was short, they named the play *Hotel Stay Longer*. All the characters in the play are given an ironic role in the play within the play. Their roles are assigned to be the exact opposite of what they are in real life. Doctor Deepika is the manager of a lodge, and the poor attender Mahesh is a rich traveler. Doctor Deepika, who refused to pay special attention

to her ex-lover Vikas is given a role to flirt with the lodgers. Patients who have undergone traumatic amputation and lost a part of their body are given a role that highlights the employment of the amputated part. All the patients are on the threshold of death, clinging on to life. Though they are on the verge of death, living a tragic life they are determined to bring happiness to the onlookers. Vikas, the writer of the play *Hotel Staylonger*, chose to write a comedy. He says, 'it's a comedy you see. In comedies, people don't die, that's why I wrote one.' (47)

Obscenity

The play features obscene incidents to make it more carnivalesque. The first conversation between Deepika and Mahesh slightly provides obscene tones. When Deepika says, 'Mr. Sengupta is downstairs having Bloody Mary' (8), Mahesh misunderstands that Mary is a woman. This invokes a string of obscenities. The conversation further becomes obscene when Deepika asks whether Mahesh wants her to set up Miss Unnikrishnan for the night. Mahesh's analogy of Sengupta with Mary and Malhotra with Miss Unnikrishnan further leads to his own assertion of 'having the manager' (9). Furthermore, the discussion between Amarinder and Mahesh about Viagra pills also indicates the author's interest in provoking obscenity. The incident where Shanti 'covers her left breast with a hand towel' (9) also provides obscenity. Thus, various incidents in the play provide obscene content. The obscenity, aimed as catharsis, not only provides bawdy humor but also turns the stage into a carnival, as obscenity is one of the characteristics of a carnival.

Coda

Thus the paper elucidates that the stage in Mahesh Dattani's play *Brief Candle* embodies the characteristics of a carnival space, as conceptualized by Mikhail Bakhtin. This carnival space is marked by a temporary suspension of social hierarchies, norms, and conventions, allowing characters to explore identities and express truths that are otherwise suppressed in their everyday lives. In *Brief Candle*, the stage becomes a transformative arena where traditional roles and societal expectations are subverted, creating an atmosphere of liberation and

fluidity. This environment enables the characters to engage in a deeper reflection on life, death, and the human condition, mirroring the carnival's function as a space for critical self-examination and renewal.

In *Brief Candle*, the stage becomes a carnival space, particularly through the play-within-a-play structure of *Hotel Stay*, written and performed by cancer patients in a hospice. This metadrama allows the characters to subvert their real-life roles and express their suppressed feelings, creating a temporary suspension of the social hierarchies that usually govern their lives.

For instance, Mahesh Tawarde, a medical assistant, is typically unable to express his love for the Doctor due to their professional and economic disparities. However, in the play-within-a-play, Vikas, one of the patients, reimagines Mahesh as a wealthy man whose advances are welcomed by Deepika, a character within the play. This reversal of roles and the merging of real and stage life create a carnival atmosphere where social norms are momentarily discarded. The grotesque elements in the play are also highlighted through the portrayal of the patients' bodies, which, due to medical treatments, exhibit gross and exaggerated features. These bodily transformations align with Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque, where the focus on the material body serves to both degrade and renew, challenging the traditional notions of beauty and order.

On the whole, this paper has managed to investigate how carnivalesque and grotesque realism are used in Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle* through Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas. It shows how the play provides a 'Carnival Space' thus subverting the reality through metadrama and bringing grotesque aspects of human nature, particularly in medical treatment. The analysis highlights how the play breaks down social orders and conventions, giving a rarer vision of human experience as well as pain. Not only does the paper give a detailed analysis of Dattani's work but also contributes successfully to understanding Bakhtin theories in recent literature. Hence, this paper contributes to the discourse pertaining as how theater can become an influential means of social criticism and human interaction.

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