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## Ars Longa Vita Brevis: A Critical Study of Dattani's Brief Candle

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**Abstract:** Human beings are merely playthings in the hands of Time and Death. They seem puny creatures in front of colossal Death. Even after that, men pursue their struggle for survival with much bravado. Dattani's *Brief Candle* captures such a struggle of cancer patients who are on the verge of death in a hospice. The protagonist Vikas, a cancer patient, desires to be remembered by his beloved Deepika and fellow cancer patients after his demise. Consequently, he composes a play in which he aesthetically and poignantly treats the lives of his friends. He sticks to the Latin dictum of 'Ars longa vita brevis'. He hopes that his creation will survive him. Interestingly, Vikas writes a comedy, not a tragedy, because in comedies no one dies. His passion for life and the effort to cherish that life even after death find vivid and deft delineation in *Brief Candle*.

The Sahitya Akademi award-winning dramatist Mahesh Dattani holds a unique position in Indian English literature. He has breathed a new life into the lean body of Indian English drama. Dattani is out and out a realist playwright who has deftly delineated the 'invisible' issues of society which are kept hidden behind the camouflage of civilization. Rightly does Prof. Bijoy Kumar Das assess: "Reality and objectivity are the hallmark of Dattani's plays" (10). Dattani has tactfully and aesthetically explored the unexplored areas of human relationships and man's relation to society. Regarding his selection of themes, R. K. Dhawan remarks:

The most charismatic quality of Dattani's plays is the wide range of themes that he deals with in his writing. He depicts mainly the middle-class Indian life and focuses on modern subjects like homosexuality, gender identity, human relationships and communalism. He gives expression to the longings and aspirations of the middle-class Indians. (7)

Dattani is the first Indian dramatist who evinces the courage to treat homosexuality in an Indian context. He has successfully derived the necessary sympathy from his readers for this sexually marginalized community. Dattani has always sought to expose the hypocrisy of patriarchal society and its ceaseless attempt to subjugate the women. The notable theatre critic Tutun Mukherjee critically discerns: Mahesh Dattani does not aim to transform the society but definitely enhance our sensitivities to the less discussed social evils which deserve more public attention and intervention. (31)

An insight into Dattani's dramatic oeuvre explicitly evinces his interest in presenting contemporary middle-class issues and experiences bereft of sentimentalism. M. K. Naik's verdict regarding Dattani's contribution to Indian English drama is worthy to be mentioned here:

Contemporary in tone and spirit, alive to the pressures of the present, and eminently stage-worthy, Dattani's plays squarely give the lie to the popular notion that Indian English drama is at best only a hothouse plant. (210)

Mahesh Dattani's *Brief Candle* is a great work of art which brings forth man's courage to battle against death. In an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Dattani confesses to have a 'personal connection' with the theme of the play:

My experience of pain and suffering—my mother's and mine—inspired *Brief Candle* which looks at life when death is just around the corner. (30)

The title of the play, *Brief Candle*, is indicative of the brevity of candle as well as of human life. Human beings are destined to succumb to the corrosive and pillaging effects of Time. Time seals our destiny with death. Death imagery is quite potent and pervasive in this play. At the beginning of the play, the setting is designed in the following manner:

One curtain partially covers a large 'Face of Cancer'. This is a large three-dimensional mask. A step can take the actor to a position above the head. The lower lip protrudes to become a bench on which an actor can sit.

Note: 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.

Against this backdrop of ever looming death, all the characters resume their struggle. In fact, they are fighting a lost battle. They are bound to be losers. The play takes place in a cancer hospice. The cancer patients are going to enact a play, *Hotel Staylonger*, written by their fellow cancer patient Vikas who is no more with them. The play revolves round their lives. The dreams, desires, and feelings of all the inmates of the hospice have been given tongue by Vikas. Even the doctor Deepika and her male assistant Mahesh participate in the play. While this play through its rehearsals proffers succour to the cancer patients, it brings dead Vikas back to life.

*Ars longa vita brevis* is the Latin rendering of a Greek saying, done by the 'father of medicine' Hippocrates. It generally means 'Art is long, Life is short'. As art is immortal, so also the artist. The artist goes on living even after his physical death sailing

upon his creative works. In Dattani's *Brief Candle*, we discern Vikas to be desirous to live through his play. Even after death, he haunts Dr. Deepika Dave, his onetime beloved, who initially dislikes the idea of enacting a play written by Vikas. He seeks recognition from Deepika as well as from the world. A misunderstanding estranged Vikas from Deepika. He is keen to mend that broken heart through his comedy. He wants to love Deepika again by the help of his play:

VIKAS (caressing her hair). You never touched me once when I was ill.

VIKAS. You can touch me now. Do the play. I long for your touch.

DEEPIKA. I don't want to be touched! (26)

It also indicates the complicated relationship of a writer and his characters. Deepika once pointed out:

DEEPIKA. He was a passionate man with strong views on everything and everybody. He knew he was dying. He felt strongly about each one of us. So he put it all down. (Holding up the script.) This is about him, not us. . . I don't want any of you to live your life through his eyes. (22)

As Deepika was extremely angry with Vikas, she chided him in that sarcastic manner. But interestingly, Deepika is absolutely right. Any piece of literature through characters immortalizes their creator. It is not about the personality of the creator but about his existence. Towards the end of his life, Vikas sought the sympathy of Deepika to exit from his life joyously. His failure to garner Deepika's love encourages him to compose a comedy as Vikas thinks: 'Nobody dies in a comedy' (48). He takes the help of his comedy to perpetuate his love for Deepika and to give vent to his observations of his fellow patients' emotional vicissitudes. The summum bonum of this effort of Vikas is to live in Deepika's eyes as well as his friends'. Vikas ultimately succeeds in his effort as Deepika confesses:

DEEPIKA. 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. VIKAS. Goodbye, Deepika. I won't trouble you anymore. (47)

The ghost of Vikas is quite quiet and happy now, as he can live through the play. Mere physical death can hardly kill an artist. Vikas will live for and through his art. Life is extremely short but Vikas magically perpetuates that life under the aegis of his comedy.

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