

**VIJAY TENDULKAR'S KAMALA: A CRITIQUE OF THE MALE - DOMINATED SOCIETY**

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"Tendulkar successfully brings out the ugly cultural deformity of our society through his plays. He depicts gender deformity in *Kamala*, political deformity in *Ghashiram Kotwal*, physical deformity in *Sakharam Binder*, mental deformity in *Encounter in Umbugland* and *Kanyadan* and spiritual deformity in *The Vultures*."

--Manchi Sarath Babu

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Exploitation and oppression are the characteristic features of Indian society for centuries. Tendulkar's plays illustrate, more or less, how women are exploited in various ways. The inhuman treatment that they receive from the male-dominated society indicates that they lose their freedom first and their lives later for the sake of men. The playwright deals with the theme of gender deformity in his plays. It is noticeable in almost all the plays. However, it is exposed more deeply and more elaborately in the play *Kamala*. Using a real life incident, Tendulkar highlights the position of women in the male-dominated Indian society. The playwright is inspired in writing this play by a real life incident reported in *The Indian Express* by Ashwin Sarin, a journalist, who really bought a woman in a rural flesh market and presented her at the press-conference to expose the inhuman flesh trade. He modified it to suit his play. Tendulkar attacks the field of journalism and the institution of the marriage. He exposes self-centeredness and narrow-mindedness of the modern careerist young generation. The real life incident in the play highlights the unbearable fact that a newspaper, the so called means of social reform, is transformed into an object of getting name, position and money. In the play we are given a clear account of how woman internalise the principles of patriarchy.

Keywords: Exploitation, Marriage, Male-domination, Slavery, Social reform.

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In the words of Dhyaneswar Nadkarni:

*Vijay Tendulkar leads the vanguard of avant-garde theatre that developed as a movement separate from the main stream. Tendulkar and his colleagues were dissatisfied with the decadent professional theatre that characterised the Thirties and Forties. They wanted to give theatre a new form and therefore experimented with all aspects of it including content, acting, decor and audience communication.*¹

Vijay Tendulkar not only pioneered the experimental theatre movement in Marathi but also guided it. Tendulkar was actively associated with civil liberties movements in Maharashtra. All this shows his great concern for his country and society. He exposes the flaws and the inevitable failure of unrealistic reforms and movements in his plays. He started writing plays while he worked as a journalist. Tendulkar wrote *Kamala* which is characteristically topical and intensely sentimental. It is based on a newspaper story and Tendulkar has used the world of journalism to drive his point home. It is about the girl Kamala, who is bought by a journalist Jaidev Singh to show the world that this kind of bondage still persists in India. But Kamala opens the real life of Sarita, Jaidev Singh's wife, who considers herself to be in the same situation. Sarita's uncle Kakasaheb plays an important role in the play, as he represents the older generation and stands as a controller of many odd situations that take place in their home. The play, *Kamala*, as a film, succeeded in creating an impact on the Indian social scene. Sudhir Sonalker opines that:

Almost all the characters in Kamala are hastily drawn. It is almost as though Tendulkar saw a dramatic potential in a newspaper story and wanted to pounce on it before anyone else did. But there is almost an inexplicable element in the play. The journalist wife detests the whole incident and says that the Kamala incident has taught her that she too is a slave. The connection is very weakly brought out. The play is hurriedly written. But what

*is this about after all? Nothing is developed. No character becomes a focal point and the play leaves you simply untouched.*²

As the curtain rises Kakasaheb, Sarita's uncle and Sarita, Jaisingh's wife are seen in a small bungalow in the fashionable New Delhi neighbourhood of Neeti Bagh. Jaisingh Jadav is a well-known young journalist working as an associate editor in an English language daily. He lives there with his wife Sarita. A woman plays a central role in Tendulkar's plays. It is through this portrayal of female characters that Tendulkar exposes vices and weaknesses of society. Women are often projected as exploited and losers. Tendulkar says in an interview:

*When I show the struggle of a woman, it is not one woman's fight. The individual must have name and identity and caste and background to be credible, but she is not just a woman on stage, in a particular play. I am, in writing of her situation, showing that the possibility of a struggle against it exists. . . . By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take. When the members of my audience go home and chew on the situation, they might be able to see their daughter or sister in the woman's position and come with a way of changing the situation for her advantage.*³

The play exposes slavery of women in the male-dominated society in India. The play incorporates a bitter critique on the institution of the marriage. Jaisingh has bought Kamala for rupees 250 only but received rupees 700 as a dowry from Sarita's father years ago, in addition to Sarita's services as a woman-servant in the name of wife. This is seen in Sarita's words:

SARITA. I am going to present a man who in the year 1982 still keeps a slave, right here in Delhi. Jaisingh Jadav. I'm going to say: this man's a great advocate of freedom. And he brings home a slave and exploits her. He



doesn't consider a slave a human being—just a useful object. One you can use and throw away. He gets people to call him a sworn enemy of tyranny. But he tyrannizes his own slave as much as he likes, and doesn't think anything of it—nothing at all. Listen to the story of how he bought the slave Kamala and made use of her. The other slave he got free—not just free—the slave's father shelled out the money—a big sum. Ask him what he did with it. [An uncontrollable sob bursts from her. She controls it.] Sorry. (P. 46)

Jaisingh is a kind of slave-driver. The play is as much about Kamala as it is about Sarita, Jaisingh's educated and intelligent wife. But the skill of the playwright lies not only in making Sarita's identity with Kamala, but in driving home to his readers/audience the crucial understanding that there are many Kamalas living their cursed lives across our society, constantly being consumed through exploitation and pushed to the fringe of their endurance in a typically patriarchal set-up. In the first act, we see Sarita keeping an alert note of the telephone calls for her husband, ordering the maid servant to tidy up things before the master makes his entry into the house after his professional ordeal. Sarita does all these things without any fuss. In her view it is something that a wife must do out of her sense of love and duty for her husband. She brushes aside Kakasaheb's queries about her discomfiture very casually. She defends her husband against Kakasaheb's volley of verbal outbursts on the motivation of modern-day-journalism of which her husband is a representative. Jaisingh Jadav treats his wife Sarita as any male- chauvinist does with his wife though he champions freedom and equality. Sarita looks after all his needs at home. She helps her husband do his works to the best of her ability. She does not realise that she is also a slave when Jain, her husband's friend calls her a slave for fun. Jain says:

JAIN: *Hi Bhabhiji, I mean, an English 'hi' to him, and a Marathi 'hai'* to you. The warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. Hai, hai! [Theatrically, to Jaisingh.] Shame on you!*

Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife! [Glancing at the watch on his wrist.] My, my! It's already two. [To Jaisingh] Bye. [To Sarita.] Bye, lovely bonded labourer—[recollecting, to Jaisingh] See you in the evening, at the Press Conference.

[Exit Jain. Jaisingh breathes a sigh of relief. He is still somewhat tensed.] (p. 17)

The play demonstrates the force embedded in the binaries of master-slave and victor-victim. Kamala, an unprivileged an Adivasi woman finds her way into Jaisingh's house. She takes servitude willingly. To her femininity is servility. She thinks that are women are bought and even Sarita should not be an exception. Kamala is shocked to know that Sarita is a barren woman. She cannot reconcile herself to the fact that a woman bought at expensive price cannot even deliver a child to the master:

KAMALA. *Then the room upstairs must be the finest of all . . . No little ones?*

SARITA. *What little ones?*

KAMALA. *Children.*

SARITA. *We don't have any. [Kamala falls silent.] Why? Why are you silent?*

KAMALA. *No reason. [Pause.] God's ways are strange, such a big house . . . and . . .*

SARITA *[Theatrically, enjoying herself]. Yes, Kamala. The house . . . it devours us. It's so empty . . .*

KAMALA. *Did you take any treatment? . . .*

SARITA. *Yes. No effect.*

KAMALA *[Pauses]. The Sahib must be very upset.*

SARITA. *Of course!*

[Kamala silent again for a while.]

KAMALA. *Can I ask you something? You won't be angry?*

SARITA. *No. Go on.*

KAMALA. *How much did he buy you for?*

[Sarita is confused at first]

SARITA. *What?*

KAMALA. *I said, how much did he buy you for?*

SARITA *[Recovering]. Me? Look here, Kamala. [Changes her mind, and sits down besides her.] For seven hundred.*

KAMALA. *My god! Seven hundred?*



SARITA. *Why? Was it too little?*

KAMALA [*Pause*]. *It was an expensive bargain, memsahib. If you pay seven hundred, and there are no children . . .*

[*Sarita assumes a sad expression.*]

Then he has to pay for clothes, and for food.

He must be very unhappy. Really. (p. 34, Act II)

The triangular relationship of Sarita-Jaisingh-Kamala exposes the oppressive modern society where house wives like Sarita are exploited inside their houses by their husbands, and men, too are exploited outside their houses by their masters or employers. Woman is entrusted with the household responsibilities, particularly those of cooking food and rearing children. This leads to the formation of exploitative and oppressive society of men as against the exploited and oppressed society of women. Kamala's views on the subject how both of them have to adjust with Jaisingh are like a revelation for Sarita. Kamala says:

KAMALA [*Prepares herself mentally. Then speaks very seriously*]. *Memsahib, if you won't misunderstand, I'll tell you. The master bought you; he bought me, too. He spent a lot of money on the two of us. Didn't he? It isn't easy to earn money. A man has to labour like an ox to do it. So, memsahib, both of us must say here together like sisters. We'll keep the master happy. We'll make him prosperous. The master will have children. I'll do the hard work, and I'll bring forth the children, I'll bring them up. You are educated woman. You keep the accounts and run the house. Put on lovely clothes and make merry with the master. Go out with him on holidays and feast-days. Like today. I can't manage all that. And we must have land of our own. Don't worry about it, that's my responsibility. Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed?* (p. 35, Act II)

Both Kamala and Sarita are not treated as human beings but as objects of exhibition. Sarita and Kamala bring promotion in his job and reputation in his professional career. They also provide him with domestic comfort, social companionship and sexual

pleasure. Jaisingh and Sarita are both devoted to their respective causes. There is a lot of difference in their spirit of devotion. He works for money, reputation and fame but Sarita works for her husband's pleasure and satisfaction without any personal interests or interior motive. By introducing the character of Kakasaheb, the playwright throws light not only on the true ideals of journalism but also on the exploitation of women in society for centuries. Not only Jaisingh but Kakasaheb also behaved recklessly with his wife. When he was young he did not care for her feelings. He marched forward with a confidence that she would follow him even if she could not. Kakasaheb's recapitulation of his cruelty of his wife proves that cruelty to a woman is an eternal manifestation in man's life and woman is still in the modern world a symbol of Victorian womanhood—an embodiment of service, slavery and sacrifice. Jaisingh buys Kamala at the flesh market of Luhardaga beyond Ranchi with an intention to procure for him a promotion in his job and a reputation in his professional life. By doing so he becomes a criminal. He does not take the risk of going to the bazaar of Luhardaga to redeem the lives of Adivasis or in sympathy with their lot. He argues with his wife, Sarita, that there is nothing unusual about Luhardaga flesh market because women are sold in many places like that all over the country. There is cruelty in his heart. There is still the savageness of primitive man in him. With savage selfishness he does not allow Kamala to take bath before the press conference, where as he enjoys the luxury of bath after the tedious journey. He rejoices in the fact that Adivasis are used to that kind of stinking life:

SARITA. *We've put her in Kamalabai's room for the moment. I'll just give her some hot water for her bath.*

JAISINGH [*Loudly*]. *No!*

[*Sarita is uneasy once more.*]

I mean, she can have her bath tonight or tomorrow morning. And people of her kind don't have a bath for days on end. It's a famine area. Where would they get the water? And you'll be surprised—she'll feel dirtier after her bath. Please don't do anything



concerning her without asking me first. For god's sake!

SARITA. *[Obediently, but looking astonished]. All right, I won't. (p. 18, Act I)*

Jaisingh creates sensationalism at the expense of Kamala. He presents her before the pressmen for their amusement. She has been a laughing stock. Jaisingh exposes her to their vulgar inquiries. In the press conference which is still, which is outwardly held to expose the sexual harassment of the helpless woman is exposed physically and psychologically. She is presented in tattered clothes and has to answer unpleasant queries such as:

Some of us are absolutely donkeys. But some of us are brilliant. They are a match for anyone who comes in front of them. There was one question—if there is free sex among you, what do you do with the illegitimate children?

JAISINGH. *He thought all Adivasis indulged in free sex day and night. What nonsense!*

JAIN. *With that, another one began to itch to ask a question. He asked, you must be having free sex too. How many men have you slept with?*

SARITA. *[She can't help it]. Weren't they ashamed to ask such questions?*

JAIN. *If they had any shame, they would be.*

JAISINGH *[Drinking]. But listen—there's more. [Sarita has sprung to her feet. Kakasaheb makes her sit down again.]*

JAIN. *Our Chand Vaswani got up, gesticulating. He said, threateningly—'Kamala-tell me where he—where Jaisingh Jadav bought you. Tell me the truth. Was it in the bazaar? Or did he come home? Don't be afraid. Swear by God before you answer.' That Vaswani-he's a reporter—but when he asks questions he thinks he's cross-examining someone in Court. (p. 29, Act II)*

Jaisingh exploits not only Kamala but also his wife Sarita. Arundhati Banerjee aptly comments:

*Like Kamala, Sarita is also an object in Jadav's life, an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort.*⁴

Sarita is treated as Jaisingh's personal secretary. In his absence she has to receive a number of phone calls for him and note down the names of those who call upon him, if they don't give their names she has to enquire and note down. She receives a message of his expected return. She at once becomes alert and hastens preparations to receive him as if some chief guest, not her husband, not her life partner, is arriving. Sarita calls herself one of the parts of chess game, which can be grabbed and consumed, when Kakasaheb reminds her of Kamala's role as a puppet. It is Jain one of the characters in the play points towards the change in identity and her behaviour. He blames Sarita's husband for turning her into a slave. Jain ridicules the issue of shattered identity of Sarita and does not mention it sincerely. He is interested in defeating Jaisingh as he is competitor in journalism. His concern is to insult Jaisingh by raising identity issue and not speak for Sarita but whatever may be his reason, he speaks Sarita's mind. Marriage is one of the social institutions which morally and socially legalise man woman relationship by following certain social norms. It is woman who makes changes herself according to the wishes of her husband. New home awaits her as soon as her marriage ceremony is over. Even her maternal identity comes to an end. Sarita is unable to bear with her husband's irregular activities. When she warned him that she would go to her native place without any hesitation he started booking a ticket for her. He doesn't express any concern for her. He demands comforts only for himself. He deliberately insults her. Jain holds a mirror up to his nature jestingly. Kamalabai, the maid servant, is too ensnared in such power game. The message that comes across is that the modern-day sensational journalism is enmeshed very often with the filthy politics and that both subsist on the frequency of the various forms of social injustice, be it the exploitation of women or else. However, this also alludes to the hegemonic construction of our society in which every individual is compelled to view himself/herself in relation to the rubrics of master-slave or victor-victim. The result is that Jaisingh, who wields absolute power in the family, appears to be at the mercy of the forces above him. The lofty cause of



exposing the grubby social practice shouldered by Jaisingh ultimately turns out to be no more than an instrument of his own self-aggrandizement as a journalist, designed to promote the circulation of the daily. The whole mission of travelling to the dismal Luhadaga and 'buying' Kamala to use it as a launching pad to expose the covert nexus between the police and the politicians is, however, carefully contrived. The self-seeking journalist is ready to endanger his life and those of his family only if the case he is entering holds the promise of recognition. Jaisingh's pseudo-socialist concern for Kamala wears out as soon as he is done with the Press Conference. Having successfully, to quote Kakasaheb, 'sold' the 'poor and illiterate woman' to the press, he quietly sends her over to a *nari ashram*. Kamala is a symbol of slavery. Sarita is a symbol of sophisticated slavery. Kamalbai is a slave to her master and mistress. Jaisingh is a slave to his employer. So no one is free from the cruelty of their oppressors in our society. His role shifts to that of the victim and he is persecuted by his proprietor, the persecutor. Tendulkar's aggressive woman though they accept patriarchy, raised their voices against the social inequality on the basis of gender. Sarita's denial to attend the party along with Jaisingh exemplifies her nature. Woman is the victim of capitalist ideology. It is woman who has been just a commodity which is auctioned, shared and consumed throughout all the ages of human history. Tendulkar may be called a feminist who rejects the hegemony of the male and goes a long way to free his female characters from their ugly clutches. He shows and brings awareness to his woman characters in putting them in such situations of life that show them the traps into which they have fallen. Then again he brings them face to face with a choice which either they choose or reject. At the end of the play, Sarita, the wife of Jaisingh, feels that a wife is the least-paid prostitute. She motivates herself from a stereo typed woman to a bold, audacious lady. She declares:

But at present I'm going to lock all that up in a corner of my mind and forget about it. But a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave. I'll no longer be an object to be

used and thrown away. I'll do what I wish, and no one will rule over me. That day has to come. And I'll pay whatever price I have to pay for it. (p. 52, Act II)

Sarita feels enraged at the behaviour of her husband and she proposes to hold a press conference to expose the hypocrisy of her husband. She refuses to accompany him to the party in the evening. Jain informs Jaisingh that Jaisingh has been sacked by his employer under the influence of very big people involved in the flesh trade. Jaisingh, intoxicated with drinks and fury, proposes a press conference to expose all the illegal affairs that his employer is involved in and collapses on to the sofa and falls asleep. Sarita postpones her press conference. The play, thus, shows how a woman is oppressed and exploited at home by her master (husband) while a man is oppressed and exploited by his master (employer). Sarita lacks the spirit to rebel against her husband. Instead, she provides him with an emotional support when he is sacked. The concept of newspaper reporting is shown in some critical light. The real-life incident in the play highlights the unbearable fact that a newspaper, the so called means of social reform, is transformed into an object of getting name, position and money.

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