

Elements of Feminism in Vijay Tendulkar's Plays *Kamala* and *Silence!* *The Court is in Session*

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Abstract: The present paper aims at critically studying the status of modern women at modern times through the very realistic and naturalistic portrayal of both women and men by the Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar. The purpose of this presentation is to show the realities of life of women in modern India at its grassroots level. A modern, educated, “high-society” woman is presented in contrast to a poor uneducated slave women, though ironically, there is really no contrast. Tendulkar gives no solutions; he only depicts the problem through the innocent and helpless questions uttered by his characters; that are in no way innocent or free from blemishes. Through this realistic portrayal of a contemporary scenario, I endeavour to show that Feminism has a long way to go.

Key words: Women, hypocrisy, chauvinism, patriarchal, feminism, recognition, humanism, subjugate.

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (7 January 1928 – 19 May 2008) was not only one of the leading Indian playwrights of the late sixties, but also one of the strongest radical political voices in Maharashtra. Apart from writing about social issues, he delved deeply into the politics of the contemporary society and exposed the hypocrisies of both individuals as well as institutions. For instance, the rise of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra in 1970s is presented in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the true incident of a journalist who bought a woman from rural sex trade is shown in the play *Kamala*.

Tendulkar has become an important spokesperson for the downtrodden, weak and exploited masses, including the women. Though he does not call himself a feminist, many of his plays present the position of women in the contemporary modern society. Plays like *Kamala* (1981), *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *The Vultures* (1961), *Shakaram Binder* (1972), *Kanyadaan* (1983), *Encounter in Umbugland*, *Mitrachi Ghosta* (2001) and *His Fifth Women* (2004) bitterly critiques the patriarchal values and institutions. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the sham moral standards of the so-called civilized urban middle class society of post-Independence India.

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as Sati. Feminism is the recognition of

‘wholeness’ of existence that encompasses all three – body, mind and soul. And for this recognition it also forces a rethinking on the idea of masculinity.

The two plays under scrutiny i.e. *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session* belongs to the post-independence phase of feminist movement. Tendulkar’s women characters are in the process of evolution and in the course of play they gain knowledge and strive to gain freedom and dignity and the so-called modern, liberal-minded men are stripped naked and their true colours as selfish, hypocrite and chauvinist are brought to forefront.

Kamala is a naturalistic drama, inspired by a real life incident. Jaisingh Jadhav is a career oriented and high paced journalist who is singularly focussed on his promotion and does not care about humanity or any of its values. He tries to sensationalize his news to gain more recognition. Sarita and Kamala are two characters who are used as pawns and objects to be used for his enhancement in status and comfort. Sarita, his wife is an educated woman who looks after the household. In the play she is seen acting as if she is Jaisingh’s secretary and is very careful in noting down his messages and takes care that everything Jaisingh needs is ready. The break in this unquestioned servility comes when Jaisingh brings Kamala home after buying her from flesh market. The ignorant innocent questions that Kamala asks Sarita awaken her to her present status at home. When Kamala asks her, “How much did he buy you for?” (Tendulkar, *Kamala* 34), Sarita realises she is just a fancy slave Jaisingh brought or married and that too after receiving a handsome amount in dowry. She has to be there for him sexually, as a domestic servant and as a well-educated modern wife to show off in society and she has no say in any of it.

Jaisingh is known as a modern liberal husband who lets his wife drink alcohol, but on a deeper level, Sarita is just an object of pleasure and a servant to him. She is not an equal. Jaisingh like other males may be described in Avadhesh Singh’s words:

“Perhaps men are victims of an unnecessarily anxiety at the loss of space, at being deprived of their ability to deprive or suppress. They suffer from the fear of impotence that they feel at the impending loss of their power of suppressing or even when Sarita asserts herself and objects to Jaisingh’s decision of sending Kamala to the orphanage, Jaisingh very firmly shows Sarita her place and tells her like our ancient fathers that it is his home and what he wants will happen here. Simon de Beauvoir says that the men of today show a certain duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women; they are willing on the whole to accept women as a fellow being, an equal but they require her to remain the inessential. Along with the double standards, he is a hypocrite. On the surface he wants to show that he is doing a good thing for Kamala and others like her, but intrinsically his private and selfish motives are what are making him take all the risk, though not well hidden. He is devoid of all humanity and it is apparent in his talk with one Jaspal, where he talks about Kamala in terms like “mission accomplished”, “ekdum Id-ka Chand!” and later while telling Sarita about her, he takes delight in shocking his wife by telling embarrassing details about the flesh trade racket. When it is time to take Kamala to the Press Conference, he does not even allow her to wash herself, let alone wear decent clothes. He takes her there in tatters, to produce a more

dramatic effect. And the way some men behave at the conference is utterly shameful. After coming home drunk with Jain he calls Kamala “evidence”.

People laughed on her expense, he laughs at her expense and thinks it’s no cruelty as she can’t understand anything. He literally tears away every human aspect from Kamala by calling her to have come from the jungle and saying that he has seen these “adivasis clawed to the bone by bears—coming to the Missionary Hospital on their own two feet...operate on them without anaesthetics...They have got natural endurance” . Later when he gets into trouble with the police, he does not hesitate in sending Kamala away from his home, not caring what will happen to her if police gets to her. He talks of the “moral rot” in the society and considers himself someone who “upholds moral principles, moral norms, moral values” .

Tendulkar shows the inhumanness of Jaisingh through Sarita and Kakasaheb. Kakasaheb’s retort that “And you sold a woman to them to do so” (Tendulkar Kamala31) and Sarita’s shock- “So while they were asking her those terrible questions, and making fun of her—you just sat and watched, did you?” .This shows how morally bankrupt Jaisingh is and how he has no respect for a women.

This behaviour of Jaisingh makes Sarita realise who is her husband. She comes to know about her status as his wife. She is beginning to loathe her husband after knowing how he used Kamala. When he asks Sarita to come to bed, she refuses. First he tries to cajole her into coming, after that stresses on his rights as a husband, later abuses her. This is shocking, coming from a liberal man, who, technically, should acknowledge the right of Sarita on her own body.

Sarita finally reaches the decision to live an independent and respectable life. After Kamala, very innocently proposes to her that “The master bought you, he bought me, too. He spent a lot of money on the two of us... We’ll keep the master happy... The master will have children. I’ll do the hard work, and I’ll bring forth the children... You keep accounts... Put on lovely clothes and make merry with the master... Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I’ll sleep with him. Agreed?” . Sarita realises that what Kamala is proposing, she already does all that. She is the slave to her master husband already.

After the lengthy argument on not letting Kamala go to the Orphanage, the shifts in the power balance, Sarita knows that she holds no power, no right in this home. She realises that not just Kamala, even she is a pawn in Jaisingh’s game of chess. It comes as an epiphany to her and her whole life seems bare to her. Finally, she refuses her husband for another thing. She does not go to the party. Their conversation clearly shows that Jaisingh is not interested in his wife’s happiness or sadness. The misunderstanding in the communication is there because he is too intent on going to the party. The reason for not going to the party is not important, but this she should have informed him before so that he would not have accepted the invite for two is more important. This is the final blow to their relationship in Sarita’s eyes. The following dialogue shows her state of mind: “I am going to present a man who in the year 1982 still keeps a slave, right here in Delhi. Jaisingh Jadhav. 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 for free—not just free—the slave's father shelled out the money—a big sum. Ask him what he did with it".

Tendulkar, who presents Kakasaheb in contrast with Jaisingh, at the end of the play, seems to be trying to explain the conduct of Jaisingh. The patriarchal dominance, the institution of marriage, the rights of husband, the duty of the wife, all are stressed in his speech and it shows that though he does not approve of his mercenary journalism, he does not find any fault with how he treats Sarita. He says "Look Sarita, Jaisingh is no different from other men. He is not unusual. You're wrong to think that he is a bad man. A man is always too proud of his achievements..." (Tendulkar Kamala47). Sarita rebels against such an explanation and asks that if a man is great, does that entitle him to keep a slave. Kakasaheb just answers by something which is no answer. He just says "That's why he's a man. And that's why there's manhood in the world..."

Kakasaheb is asking Sarita to accept the way of the world and not try to change the way things are. The unpleasant things are in the share of women only. But Sarita stands her ground and says that this thinking must be changed. The manly ego Kakasaheb stresses upon is demeaning to women, as if they have no self respect. But at the end of the play, Sarita acts as a loving and understanding wife when Jaisingh loses his job and is upset. But this does not mean that Sarita will go back to her old life. She is humane hence can't bring herself to throw another storm on Jaisingh at that moment. She says

"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". The price that Sarita has to pay is to get labelled as a "rebel – a man-made category".

Though there is immediate inaction on her part, but considering her upbringing as a traditional Indian girl, it is difficult to break marriage vows for a woman. Tendulkar does not strip away the feminine from Sarita in lieu of being independent. The play ends on a hopeful note, with determination on Sarita's face.

Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a critique of patriarchal values and institutions and shows how law operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. The word 'silence' in the title has different levels of significations. Literally it means the judge's order for maintaining silence in the court-room but metaphorically it implies legally silencing the weaker sex's plea for justice. The urban middle class society which Tendulkar presents in this play enforces law to subjugate women by maintaining a hypocritical moral code. Though Benare is shown as chirpy and talkative lady, when the mock-trial begins, silence descends on her.

The character of Benare longs to displace and uproot the patriarchal hierarchy. She decides not to pay any attention to what the society says for women, instead live her life in a way she desires. She has learnt it from life that when one dies, only that person dies, no one else is willing to give a little of their lives to that person. Tendulkar, through his plays, asserts that gender has been defined by the patriarchal fathers as a social construct. While sex is a biological phenomenon, the attributes of the masculine and feminine are constructed through gender paradigms which is to give sense of identity to the individual in a society. Gender politics is a universal problem. He shows in his plays the natural instinct of his heroines to rebel when suppressed or exploited. Benare had been used and thrown by her maternal uncle when she was just fourteen. Thinking it to be an affair for life, she falls in love with him but sees the true face of life at such a young age. The mock-court session uses this incident to malign the character of Benare. Nobody once mentions the maternal uncle who must have induced her into that relationship. It is proved to be Benare's fault. Also, she is suspected of having an illegal relationship with Prof. Damle who remains absent throughout the play. Society cannot tolerate this unmarried expectant woman. She has been treated as "a sinful canker on the body of society". All the members condemn her as an evil influence that would dynamite the social structure but not even once is Prof. Damle condemned for being responsible for Benare's wretched condition. Tendulkar here focuses on the hypocritical double standard of the so-called civilized urban middle class society. In this connection, Smita Paul comments in her book *Theatre of Power*:

"The women characters in Tendulkar's theatre undergo a series of sufferings and tortures as the victims of the hegemonic power-structure. In the male-dominated theatre-world they are constantly being 'other-ed'. In *Silence!* The focal point of interest lies in the struggle between women like Benare and her antagonists headed by the orthodox Kashikar and his associates".

Tendulkar in this play very efficiently examines the power relations in life with the view of breaking them down and showing the extent of patriarchy. The court of law, the magistrate and the judge who are supposed to be honourable men, protectors and guardians of law and justice, fail in their duty to protect the innocent girls, in contrast, convict them only. Though Benare shows her independent spirit in the beginning of the play, once she is hounded by each and every member of the theatre group, she falls to the pattern of the centuries of learnt unconscious. She begins to prove her demeanour, rather than attacking those vultures of patriarchy, feeding and having fun on her miserable self. She is made to feel handicapped only because she was a woman. Even Mrs. Kashikar doesn't spare her but gangs up with the rest of the judges and pass the sentence.

MRS KASHIKAR. [...] That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility! [...] It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society.

In this complex psychological play, Tendulkar has very deftly handled the portrayal of all characters. Mrs. Kashikar behaves this way as she is dependent on her husband and is always

snubbed by him. Also the fact that she can't bear any children is a torment enough in an Indian society. The exploiter is in turn the exploited too.

Tendulkar portrays the agents of patriarchy as embodiments of hypocrisy, selfishness and treachery. Men like Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik whose words and deeds expose their inherent malice and hypocrisy. Also a deep psychological study of the characters reveals the reasons for their behaviour. One is obvious, being men, they have to convict Benare who is having a child out of wedlock, and another is their own failures in their life. They lash out against Benare in the most ruthless and inhumane manner.

The psychological violence inherent in this play is shocking. It is a powerful satire on modern society. The Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik of the play emerge as individuals belonging to the middle-class who prove to be ineffectual and discontented. Their words and actions prove, beyond any doubt, that they are neurotic, sadistic, conspiratorial and even treacherous. It is not out of genuine love for drama that they have turned theatre activity, but out of a sheer sense of their own personal failures in real life. Dejected, discontented and still daring, they can only behave cruelly towards one another. To expect them to be refined, truthful and generous is perhaps to ask for the impossible. The play satirizes the respectable facade of middle class men such as Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik. Except Samant, all the male characters try to exercise their power on Benare. Benare tries to resist this by making fun with the characters' personal failures and thus to denigrate their authority.

In this context, Kashikar's comment is very shocking:

KASHIKAR. [...] What I say is, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a full stop. (Tendulkar, SC 98)

Sukhatme's accusation against Benare is equally damaging:

SUKHATME [...] Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed.

Thus the 'fathers' of society give verdict on the behaviour of women and consequently curb their freedom. The frustrated male members of the society try to subjugate women to prove their power and superiority in the social hierarchy. The play also satirizes the values they profess. They praise motherhood with bombastic phrases but try to destroy Benare's infant in the womb. Benare is stigmatized and sacked from her job. But Prof. Damle, the man responsible for her condition, escapes scot-free for he is a male.

And Sukhatme, the brief less barrister, puts the final nail in the coffin of womanhood:

SUKHATME. [...] No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. Woman

bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. 'Na stri swatantryamarhati.' 'Woman is not fit for independence.'

Indian tradition talks about motherhood as something divine. Jasbir Jain stresses that motherhood subjugates the female body and is primarily an asexual relationship without power. The whole burden of tradition is thrown upon Benare and many women like her. She is the sufferer, not the males. She is accused of not being the perfect women, who has the superhuman ability to ignore the self, like Sita.

Though Benare is provided with a long monologue, it is evident that she does not say it aloud. No one hears her. Though she is educated and articulate, she is unable to present her feelings to her prosecutors. The child in her womb, her attempts at suicide, these speak for her.

The play is a dramatic exposition of the latent violence, treachery, sexuality, and immorality that characterize contemporary gender politics of Indian society. It is a powerful dramatic statement of the violence that humans are capable of when actuated by envy, lust, inhumanity and craze for power. It is a totally theatrical play set in an environment of intrigue, hypocrisy, greed and brutality – features inherent in the contemporary power politics. The play dwells on an extremely sensitive social and political issue, namely, the conflict between the male-chauvinists and an individual woman.

Tendulkar is at his best as a dramatist, in the 'mock-trial' he introduces in the play as a 'play-within-the-play' which helps him satirizes effectively the false conventions of the male-dominated society. The dramatist highlights the view that discrimination and gender politics at any level are definitely evil and that everyone has equal right to peaceful life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The male-chauvinists of the Indian society are of the view that everyone has equal right to peaceful life, individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the male-chauvinists of the Indian middle-class society's establishment do not grant these goals and thereby perpetuates discrimination and gender politics. The play is concerned with the life which is close to the crude – the lives of the dispossessed.

Silence! The Court is in Session reflects seriously the actualities of life and tries to reawaken an awareness of the permanent realities of contemporary Indian life. The victim in this process is always a woman, because love is only an episode in man's life but to a woman it is life itself. Jasbir Jain's statement effectively sums up the present state of feminist struggle in India:

...while feminism has generated awareness, created space, intervened in legislation, values and structures continue to be patriarchal and tradition continues to define roles and respectability, especially in traditional societies like ours .

Tendulkar's plays are a satire on the modernism of today's society and the position of women in such a society. He offers no solutions as such, only this that women must awaken to their

rights and that too does not reach its end in his plays. Evidently there is a conflict between the Indian Tradition and the modern feminist theory. Kapil Kapoor proposes that we should take a look at the validity, applicability and efficacy of the Feminist Theory, and at what it would ultimately amount to in terms of Indian social structure and social goals. We should also examine the foundational sociological thinking, the Dharmasastras, to grasp the rationale of the existing social practices, and also evaluate this thought in the context of changing social reality. Finally, we should look at the contemporary legal and societal position of women.

To end the discussion, Chandrakala Padias quoted: ...The freedom for women for which the feminists of today cry is taken to mean equality regarded as mere sameness. The same opportunities for work to women as for men,-this is the battle cry today. But let us pause for a while and consider whether such a view of equality is workable. Would it make sense if two persons of unequal keenness of appetite and digestive powers are expected to eat the same kind and quantity of food? No one would here say, yes. Equality that is proper and workable is really equality of discriminating consideration. What I mean is simply this. Pay equal attention to the different needs and capacities of men and women, and then give them appropriate opportunities for work...

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