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Re-situating Irony in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*

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Abstract

Tendulkar's play *Kamala* is steeped in ironies— verbal, situational and structural. In the play Jaisingh is a busy journalist intent on describing blood-thirsty events. But it is ironical that what he gets for describing these events is threat for murder over the phone. It is far more ironical that most of the threatening calls come from the police. His frantic search for sensational news would create such uproar as to compel the editor to hand him the dismissal letter. It is indeed ironical that, though Jaisingh is a warrior against exploitation, he is exploiting his own wife. Tendulkar mocks at the modern concept of journalism which stresses the sensational. Ironically, Jaisingh does not practice what he teaches. The irony becomes much more poignant when Kamala learns that even after buying Sarita for seven hundred rupees she has failed to make her master happy by giving birth to children. Kamala's dream of forming a happy family fails as she is taken to the Destitute Women's Home. Jaisingh's wife Sarita also realises his true self. He in the name of eradicating

tyranny, himself tyrannizes his own wife. The greatest irony lies in Jaisingh's misconception and improper handling of things. The entire play is thus an irony of fate for however intelligent a man may think he is just a puny plaything in front of circumstances.

Keywords

Irony; Verbal; Situational; Structural; Dramatic; Cosmic.

The discrepancy or the incongruity between appearance and reality, facade and actuality, emotion and action is one of the principle themes in the Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar's (1928-2008) social drama *Kamala* translated by Priya Adarkar. In the play irony consists in the gap between what the characters say and what they actually mean, between actions and results, what the characters expect to happen and what actually happens, what seems to be real and what is real. Irony is often aimed at a particular situation rather than at a specific person. Irony differs from sarcasm in that the former is less vitriolic, less hurtful than the latter. Sarcasm is an exaggerated form of irony. Irony is also different from satire that ridicules human folly with a view to rectifying it.

Mainly three types of irony exist – verbal, situational and structural. In verbal irony what is said, the opposite is meant. In situational irony the gap between words and actions arises out of the events or situations. Dramatic irony, tragic irony and Socratic irony also belong to the domain of situational irony. In dramatic irony the result is not immediately got as the character does not recognize the true meaning of his words. Tragic irony, also a type of dramatic irony, is tinged with a sense of foreboding. Socratic irony deriving its name from Socrates is dialectical and situational in nature. Structural irony is concerned with the structural contradiction within a work.

In the play the protagonist Jaisingh Jadhav is a reputed journalist. He is working as an Associate Editor in an English language daily. Sarita is his devoted wife who has to write down each and every phone call that comes in search of Jaisingh. When Kakasaheb, Sarita's uncle, points out that it is really preposterous and nonsensical to remember the particulars of all phone calls, Sarita acknowledges the fact that if she does not write down the details she is rebuffed by her husband. It is indeed ironical that the husband who should show empathy towards his wife, his life-partner, his partner in misfortune, is exploiting her. He is not in a position to spend some memorable moments with his wife as he is busy seeking sensational news items. Kakasaheb defines Jaisingh's journalism as 'The High-Speed type':

Now it is the day of your husband's type of journalism. The High-Speed type! Something catches fire –and there he runs! There is a riot somewhere else –and off he flies. There's an atrocity in the heavens or a ministry topples in the sky -why, there he is. Eye-witness report! Being on the spot-that's what's important! Never mind what you write. (5)

Jaisingh is nescient of the fact that his high-speed type of journalism would be the cause of his doom. His is a case of dramatic irony for in case of dramatic irony what the character does is not understood immediately. His words are understood only towards the end, though the reader or audience knows what is going to happen. Kakasaheb, that is Shivajirao Mohite, is a retired journalist. But his is a different type of journalism. According to him it is the facts of an occurrence that are not important but the topic is. But Jaisingh is intent on describing murder, rape, bloodshed etc. But it is ironical that what he gets for describing blood-thirsty events is murder threat on the phone. Yet he is determined to write everything under his own name. It is far more ironical to note that half of the phone calls are from the police who ought to be the

protector and the preserver of the public. So it is of no use informing the police about the murder threat.

When Sarita tries to pacify her husband by threatening that she would go back to Phaltan, her paternal house, Jaisingh, instead of showing any compunction for his words, started booking her ticket. This is an example of verbal irony as the speaker (Sarita) does not mean what she says. Jaisingh is very much happy when his target is accomplished. He brings a woman from a bazaar at Luhardaga beyond Ranchi. He buys her for two hundred and fifty rupees. He knows it very well that even a bullock costs more than that. A social reformer that Tendulkar is, he satirizes the savagery and hypocrisy of those who are associated with the barbarous business of selling human beings. At the bazaar there is an open auction for women of all sorts of ages. Men pay money as per the standard of those women whether they are healthy or diseased, strong or weak. Jaisingh commits such heinous action of buying a woman only to prove that such auctions are taking place. The bold step adopted by Jaisingh would turn out to be fatal albeit he is not least aware of it for the present moment. This is also an example of dramatic irony for the result is known only towards the end. Materialistic in attitude Jaisingh hankers after publicity. He always wants to make a nice front page news item. He avers that “We’ll make them dance like monkeys this time” (9)! He immediately changes his language by saying “Oh no, not just me, it was the whole team. All of us. All because of your support ... Does Sethji know? ... Right let it be a surprise for the old man [Laughs loudly.]” (9). Audience knows it very well that instead of giving surprises to others he himself will get a big surprise when he will be dismissed from his job.

Jaisingh wants to turn the world upside down with sensational news. He is proud of his success for he is the first journalist to smack with the news of the commodification of women. He vehemently asserts that he is to throw the whole caboodle in the government’s lap - along with the evidence. He wants to

keep the entire matter into absolute secrecy. He admits that he has to go through arduous and assiduous way of achieving his goal:

The point is how we project Luhardaga – the technique of it. The art lies in presenting the case – not in the case itself! Keep watching. See how we'll blast out this shameful affair. There will be high drama at today's press conference. It'll create an uproar! (15)

Jaisingh's words are indeed ironical in that what he thinks does not actually happen. The matter creates such uproar as to compel the editor to hand him the dismissal letter.

Jaisingh is a warrior against exploitation. He is the champion of liberty. But the irony lies in the fact that the so called upholder of morality is exploiting his wife. Tendulkar raises some cardinal questions concerning the value system of a modern success-oriented society which is ready to sacrifice human values in the name of humanity itself. The adventurous journalist Jaisingh Jadhav does daring work in order to get promotion in his job and reputation in his professional life. The real self of Jaisingh comes out only after the entry of Kamala into the household. Sarita understands the selfish hypocrisy of her husband. Jain, Jaisingh's co-worker, is quick to note the deceitful attitude of Jaisingh – "Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife" (17)! Jaisingh pesters Kamala to accompany him to his destination. But Kamala is absolutely reluctant to go with him for the present moment. The adroit journalist is prompt to give the reply: "We will be given a grand reception. People will clap, they will congratulate us. There will be a special chair for you to seat on" (20). Further, Jaisingh wants to make her appear before the Press in the same clothes as she is wearing. Kakasaheb, Sarita's uncle defines Jaisingh's work as another type of mercenary journalism:

... five years ago you were living in the shed outside a house in Karol Bagh. And today you're in a bungalow in Neeti Bagh – even if it is a small one. You have servants, you have a car. You travel by

plane all over the country. You stay in five star hotels. You get invitations from foreign embassies. You have access to ministers and Chief Ministers –or even to the Prime Minister! ... The moral is: there's no harm in this game – if you know how to play it right. (23)

A perceptive reader can easily discern the ironical overtone in Kakasaheb's words. Thus Tendulkar lays bare the chauvinistic attitude of some men who has the facade of being liberal-minded.

Jaisingh is a socialist. On his own admission whatever he does, there remains a social concern behind it. A purveyor of morality, he feels the necessity of protesting against the immorality, instability and the mercantile attitude of modern society. He openly criticizes the inequality between the haves and the have-nots in the society, between the sophisticated and the unsophisticated. The ordinary section of the society is in great difficulty. Therefore, he feels the need for advocating social change. His words are ironical in that what he preaches does not practice. There lies a great gap between his thought and his action. It is Kakasaheb who notes the lacuna, the irony inherent in Jaisingh's scheme:

But you're doing all this for the small percentage of the common people who have the good fortune of knowing English. And these fortunate people are going to effect a change in the government of this country. The rest of the population – the majority – poor things – are going to carry on in their haze. Because they don't know English. And can't read what you write. (24)

Kakasaheb is absolutely right in assessing the real motive behind Jaisingh's business. According to him it is the inordinate greed for money that is of utmost importance to Jaisingh. He, therefore, cannot but advice his son-in-law –“Arre, write the people's language first. Speak it. Then try and teach them” (24).

When Kamala is presented at the Press Conference she is confronted with numerous ridiculous questions like the important social problems in her area, her personal opinion regarding the economic exploitation on the tribal groups. They even go to the extent of asking such inscrutable and intricate expressions like “Above the poverty line and below the poverty line” (28) as if Kamala is an expert in Economics. Further the reporters ask some puzzling questions like the practice of free sex among the Adivasis, the liaison between Jaisingh and Kamala. Instead of showing sympathy towards a helpless village girl the pseudo conscience keepers of the society pin her down, dissect her and ultimately kill her inner self. When Kakasaheb protests against these imposters at the Press Conference Jaisingh is prompt to repay it, thereby arguing that “We people ask serious and good questions too” (29). In the process of making Kamala a laughing stock the false conductors of society themselves become the butt of ridicule.

A born opportunist like Jaisingh sometimes commits inhuman cruelty in order to satisfy his own hunger. Without having any real concerns concerning the burning problems of society he engages himself in the mud-flinging game of commodifying a poor and illiterate woman. The irony becomes much more poignant as Kamala learns that even after buying Sarita for seven hundred she has failed to make her master happy by giving birth to children. It is far more ironical when Kamala gives a sound proposal of making the master happy by bringing forth the children and bringing them up. She tells Sarita her plan of lighting Jaisingh’s family. She is even ready to do hard work for her master. This is nothing but situational irony for she will not be given any chance to participate in the formation of a new family. All her dreams are shattered when audience or reader knows that she is to be taken to the Women’s Home. When Sarita insists that Kamala should stay with them, Jaisingh readily gives the explanation, thereby saying that he cannot keep Kamala at home as there is a high possibility of his imprisonment. It is Sarita’s uncle who provides a just

assessment of Kamala's position commenting "Kamala is just a pawn in his game of chess". Sarita admits that she is also a victim of his husband's negligence albeit she has the right to be equal with him.

It is only at the end that Sarita judges her husband properly. She is determined to unmask her husband's real nature. She accuses that in spite of being a great advocate of freedom, he brings home a slave and exploits her in the name of giving freedom. The anger in her finds its adequate expression as she diagnoses the nudity and ferocity of Jaisingh who does not consider a slave as a human being. She further says:

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. (46)

Sarita realizes that she was asleep. It is Kamala who wakes her up from her slumber which had henceforth sealed up her spirits. She understands that the man whom she thought her partner was actually her lord, her master –the ring-master who only makes her dance according to his whim. This is a cosmic irony or irony of fate as she is nothing but a bundle of bestial instincts.

Ultimately, Jaisingh's boss dismisses him from his job. This heart-rending news is given to Sarita by Jain, the journalist. A man who has done such a wonderful job and has made his paper famous has to lose his job. This is a great example of situational irony for the man who risks his own life in search of sensational news has to lose his job for the risk involved in it. Jaisingh's only mistake was to cross the path of the wrong people and to jeopardize the wrong friends. Sarita's words are soaked in irony when she openly says –"Your owner is pleased with you and he's decided to relieve you from your job" (49). Even though Jain assures him that the draft is ready and he will very soon receive the dismissal letter, he cannot believe his words. The frustrated journalist exposes his angry self. But gradually his voice is weakening. His restraint over his limbs is decreasing. He at last collapses onto

the sofa. When Jain avers that he wanted to do some sensible plans for his partner, Sarita ironically comments: “He must have drunk a lot already at the party, I think. And then this shock. He must never have dreamt that anyone would ever sack him” (51). The transformation of Sarita is complete when she emphatically asserts that one day she will stop being a slave and thus she will be her original self.

Thus the play abounds in irony. Various types of irony – verbal irony, dramatic irony, tragic irony pervade the text. The greatest dramatic irony lies in Jaisingh’s misconception, mismanagement and improper handling of things. Thus the huge hiatus between expectation and achievement, conception and actualization, project and the work, promise and fulfilment forms the purport and quintessence of the play. The entire play turns out to be an irony of fate for however smart a man may think, he is just a puppet in the hands of situations or circumstances.

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