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Treatment of Women Characters in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Abstract

Ill-treatment and exploitation of women are the salient features of Indian society for centuries. The whole society is divided on the basis of caste, class, religion, sex, and colour. The division is culturally programmed in the form of caste – system and Varna – system and are transmitted from one generation to another. Ill-treatment, supremacy, ruthlessness, and foul play characterize the contemporary Indian society, at large. Gender prejudice, power-game, and suppression of spontaneity and naturalness are factors responsible for these drawbacks. Vijay Tendulkar deals with the evils and drawbacks of an individual and society and throws light on the relationship, within and outside family and brings out their connectivity and complexity.

Keywords

Treatment of Women; Vijay Tendulkar; *Kamala*; *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

Ill-treatment and exploitation of women are the salient features of Indian society for centuries. The whole society is divided on the basis of caste, class, religion, sex, and colour. The division is culturally programmed in the form of caste – system and Varna – system and are transmitted from one generation to another. Ill-treatment, supremacy, ruthlessness, and foul play characterize the contemporary Indian society, at large. Gender prejudice, power-game, and suppression of spontaneity and naturalness are factors responsible for these drawbacks. Girish Karnad points out: “I think anxiety has become part of existence today; triggered partly by the endemic violence. In India, the more we claim we are spiritual, the more violent we seem to get” (*Frontline* 75).

The plays of Vijay Tendulkar depict the ill treatment of men and women within and outside their houses. They give a sad awareness of the fact that the adherence to feudal values are responsible for the oppressive and exploitative nature of Indian society. That is why, in his plays Vijay Tendulkar tries to bring about a change in the mind-set of people by shocking their sensibility and challenging conventional norms and values. It is in this sense that his plays are not just unconventional or original but new too.

Vijay Tendulkar deals with the evils and drawbacks of an individual and society and throws light on the relationship, within and outside family and brings out their connectivity and complexity. Women are often projected as exploited and losers. In most of his plays, Tendulkar is a bitter critic of the institution of marriage. Tendulkar’s journey in the field of dramatics and dramaturgy from the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* to *A Friend’s Story* exhibits that women have always been treated either as slaves or stepping stones in Indian society.

The action in the plays of Tendulkar revolves around the women characters. Benare in the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Sarita in the play *Kamala*, Jyoti in the play *Kanyadan*, etc., are the characters who occupy the focus of the plays. All of them are educated and sophisticated. Hence, they refuse to accept the outdated and conventional moral values and be cowed down by

men. The women characters are treated with compassion and understanding, though Tendulkar is not a self-acknowledged feminist.

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a satire on male-dominated society. It deals with the problem of unmarried motherhood. A rehearsal of a mock-trial play is arranged. It is actually a “game” cunningly arranged by Benare’s co-actors. In the so-called game, Benare’s private life is exposed, revealing her illicit relationship with Prof. Damle which leads to her pregnancy. Benare is punished without the least compassion. Prof. Damle goes unnoticed and unenquired even though he is the father of a child outside wedlock. L.S. Deshpande states: “Finally, comes the unkindest cut of all, the punishment that the baby in her womb, be killed, i.e.; foeticide (which is, ironically enough, a crime in itself, meted out to Miss. Benare)” (*The Limits of Translatability* 330).

Vijay Tendulkar deals with the theme of exploitation of women in his plays. It is explored more deeply and more elaborately in his play *Kamala*. Tendulkar uses a real-life incident and highlights the position of women in the success-oriented, male-dominated Indian society. The triangular relationship of Sarita – Jaisingh – Kamala exposes the oppressive modern society where house – wives like Sarita are exploited inside their houses, and men too are ill-treated outside their houses by their masters or employers.

Jaisingh works very sincerely for his employer and Sarita for her husband. He used to take risks to expose evils and drawbacks in society. Sarita, too, takes care of his needs and home. She jots down the telephonic messages, keeps delicious food and drinks ready for him. She does all these things promptly to keep her husband refreshed so that he may work efficiently.

The press conference is outwardly held to expose the sexual harassment of the helpless woman. Kamala is exposed physically and psychologically in such press conference. She is presented in tattered clothes and has to answer unpleasant queries such as: “If there is a free sex among you, what do you do with the illegitimate children? How many men have you slept with?” (*Tendulkar* 29) Kamala feels embarrassed, while Jaisingh and his friend Jain, flushed with

wine, enjoy themselves. Greed for money and craze for success render Jaisingh loveless and mindless.

The relationship of Jaisingh and Sarita in the play is similar to that of persecutor – victim. Arundhati Banerjee rightly points out: “Like Kamala, Sarita, too, is an object that provides him domestic comfort, social companionship, and sexual pleasure . . . She, too, in her own way, is as exploited as Kamala. Kamala’s entry into the household reveals to Saritha the selfish hypocrisy of her husband and the insignificance of her own existence.

Kamala’s innocent question to Sarita: “How much did he buy you for?” (Tendulkar 34) makes Sarita introspective. For Kamala, Jaisingh has paid Rs 250 but for Sarita he has paid Rs 700 as dowry. Thus, both of them are “objects” of pleasure, money, and reputation. “It’s I who take decisions in this house and no one else” (Tendulkar 42) this arrogant remark of Jaisingh makes Sarita realize that he is the master and she the slave. Jaisingh is the best example of what an Indian husband is to his wife. Through the character of Kakasaheb, Jaisingh throws light not only on the true ideals of journalism but also on the exploitation of women in society for centuries. Thus we notice when Kakasaheb tries to cool down Sarita by telling: “I gave your aunt a lot of trouble. As if it was my right. I did not care what she felt at all” (Tendulkar 47).

The play *Kamala* presents a critique of the male – dominated society. It illustrates indirectly another important aspect of society that women themselves are responsible for their exploitation. Sarita is conscious of the hypocritical nature of her husband still she provides him emotional support, when he becomes jobless at the end of the play. Kamala represents an educated, sophisticated slave in the household. Both of them lack the guts and courage to rebel against injustice. Therefore, they cannot but become scapegoats in the conspiracy of their male – counterparts.

Similarly, Tendulkar’s other plays such as *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Sakharam Binder*, *The Vultures*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, and *Kanyadan* deal with the theme of exploitation of women. The inhuman treatment meted out to them by

the male – dominated society indicate that they lose their freedom first and their lives later for the sake of men. Ideally speaking, it is sacrifice. But Tendulkar, the realist sees it as a sheer wastage on the part of women. As Manchi Sarat Babu so rightly says;

“Tendulkar successfully brings out the ugly cultural deformity of our society through his plays. He depicts gender deformity in *Kamala* political deformity in *Sakharam Binder*, mental deformity in *Encounter in Umbugland* and *Kanyadan*, and spiritual deformity in *The Vultures*. (*Indian Drama Today*, 51).

Women are ill-treated more than men in Indian society as it remains culturally patriarchal in spite of democracy. Women bear and bring up children, do all the household work and many of them go to work, additionally. They are all ill-treated and tortured by their husbands and in-laws for various reasons. Ambedkar points out: “A woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and Manu allows the husband the right to beat his wife”. Indian society which has accepted the laws of Manu denies women education and thus mental growth. Manu says, “Women have no right to study the Vedas” (431). In modern India. Women are allowed to study so that they may become sophisticated slaves.

Thus women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages. There has been enough literature, both oral and written glorifying this enslaving value and deifying women who observed it faithfully. *The Ramayana* in which Sita undergoes the fire ordeal to prove her chastity to Rama has been the cultural guide to Indians for more than two thousand years. Extramarital sex for women is a taboo even in the ultra-modern age.

In *Silence! The Court is in Session* Leela Benare is a member of a troupe of amateur artists. In her teenage, she is seduced and sexually exploited by her own uncle. He does not marry her and her mother supports him. Benare

overcomes the shock. She becomes a teacher and earns good reputation as a teacher. Her academic interest takes her to Prof. Damle whom she respects for his scholarship and intelligence. Though married, he exploits her sexually and betrays her. She requests Balu Rokde and Ponkshe to marry her and save her from ignominy. But they are neither compassionate nor courageous to help her. Benare ridicules their difference. She is frank and open. She exposes the hypocrisy of people and laughs at their flaws. The other actors of the troupe are victims of her ridicule. So they plan to take it out on her. In the name of mock-trial, they expose her private life, humiliate her and hurt her heart. They do not find fault with Prof. Damle, the real culprit who has spoilt her life. Concluding the trial, Sukhatme, who is counsel for prosecution in the mock-trial, says to Kashikar, the judge:

“Milord, the nature of the charge against the accused, Miss Benare, is truly dreadful. The woman who is accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood which is purer than heaven itself. For that any punishment, however great, that the law may give her, will be too mild. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality. Not only that. 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. Therefore, I say the court must take a very stern, inexorable view of the prisoner’s crime, without being trapped in any sentiment . . . Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. . . No woman is fit for independence . . . That is the rule laid down for us by tradition”. (Tendulkar 114 – 15).

Prof. Damle is not punished for his sexual crime. Though men commit worst sexual crimes, people still say that women spoil the society. Men are tacitly permitted to seek extra-marital sexual pleasure while women’s sexuality is limited to their motherhood within their marriage as Jandhyala points out Leela

Benare strongly protests against this inhuman act and demands freedom and right over her life to live her own way.

Kamala presents the ill-treatment of woman by man. Kamala, a prostitute in the red-light area, is purchased by a selfish journalist, Jaisingh Jadhav and is treated as commodity. She is used as a ladder to promotion and reputation by him. Jaisingh buys Kamala, an Adivasi woman to prove that auctions of prostitutes are a reality. He presents Kamala in a press conference in the same torn Sari that she has been wearing. After proving his point, Jaisingh sends her to women's home. When Sarita, the wife of Jaisingh asks him whether he has thought of Kamala's feelings, he tries to convince her that Kamala will find the home a luxury. The journalist's intention is to create sensationalism at the expense of the poor Adivasi woman. He presents Kamala as an item of entertainment where the press men enjoy vulgar inquiries, about her. In a mode of 'use and throw' Kamala is discharged and forced to seek refuge in a home for destitute. Jaisingh exploits not only Kamala but also his wife, Sarita. Arundhati Banerjee aptly comments, "Like Kamala, Sarita is also an object in Jadhav's life, an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort" ("Introduction", *Five plays of Vijay Tendulkar*, VIII).

Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) is a social satire with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society. Benare is made the prime accused for having pregnancy before marriage. Through this game, the co-actors successfully resort to dissecting Miss. Benare's character upon her private life, for she is held guilty by the mock court that asks the school authorities to dismiss her from the job, and further orders that the babe in her womb be destroyed. During the court proceedings, many a time Benare's denials and objections are seen drowned by the judge's "cry of silence" and "banging of the gravel".

Through the rehearsal of the play, which is ostensibly a game, Tendulkar exposes the double standards of our society. Benares is made a scapegoat and Prof. Damle is allowed to go scot-free, surprisingly. During the trial, he is

summoned just as a witness, while Benare becomes accused. She is not only blamed but humiliated also by her own companions! The very men who give lectures on the dignity of women and motherhood are responsible for inflicting shame and indignity on her. Moreover, Benare appears to be the victim of circumstance. In the depiction of the characters such as Prof. Damle and maternal uncle of Benare, the playwright exposes the excessive sexual lust of her male counter – parts. The tragedy of Benare bears evidence to the fact that in Indian society women becomes helpless and suffers humiliation doubly; first, physically on a personal level and then mentally on a public level.

While projecting the problems of women in his plays, Tendulkar attacks the feudal values that are responsible for the persistence of the male-dominated society even in the 21st century. Women are always humiliated and ill-treated in the so-called cultured society, inside the walls of their houses and outside, by their brothers, fathers, husbands, and masters. Persecutors go on changing, but victims remain the same.

To sum up, Tendulkar probes the cruel reality of injustice to women in the plays. He is concerned with the denial of equal rights, dignity and love to women. While man claims to expand physically, mentally, he seems to shrink by degrading all norms of a civilized society in terms of right and treatment of woman. Tendulkar debunks and defies the male hypocrisy and their supposed authority in his plays.

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