

Gender Discrimination in Vijay Tendulkar's '*Kamala*'

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Abstract

The play *Kamala* expresses Vijay Tendulkar's grasp of the harsh realities in our social fabric. In this play Tendulkar uses his pen to expose the predicament of woman in the male dominated social structure. It is said *Kamala* is an indictment of the success-oriented male society in which women find themselves as mere stepping stones for a man. The play *Kamala* is uncontroversial an exposition of male chauvinism that inspires sexual colonialism in Indian society. The life story of Kamala and Sarita is a testimony to the fact that woman cannot think of her own spaces in gender determined social structure.

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Vijay Tendulkar through his plays projects the social reality but it is not a photographic representation of social forces but a lively communication in which the whole environment becomes alive to expose the inner self of the characters. On certain occasions, Tendulkar uses the markers of verbal violence and even nonverbal violence as the potent tool to govern and guide the actions in the play. The play *Kamala* expresses Vijay Tendulkar's grasp of the harsh realities in our social fabric. In this play Tendulkar uses his pen to expose the predicament of woman in the male dominated social structure. It is said *Kamala* is an indictment of the success-oriented male society in which women find themselves as mere stepping stones for a man. It is a dramatic representation of the plight of poor and educated woman who can be called 'oppression incarnated'. Her suffering is being used as a material for the success of a journalist—who wants to represent Kamala's case as a 'hot news' for the press conference. Arundhati Benerjee in her introduction to the play, *Kamala* writes:

Though not a political play in any sense, *Kamala* too..... ready to sacrifice human values even in the name of humanity itself (581).

The play *Kamala* is uncontroversial an exposition of male chauvinism that inspires sexual colonialism in Indian society. The life story of Kamala and Sarita is a testimony to the fact that woman cannot think

of her own spaces in gender determined social structure. It is through Sarita that Tendulkar exposes the “chauvinism intrinsic in the modern male who believes himself to be liberal minded” (Benerjee 72).

The play *Kamala* is divided in two acts. The central action in the play takes place in the fashionable drawing room of Jaisingh, a well known journalist working as an Associate Editor in an English language daily. In the play *Kamala*, Tendulkar uses telephonic talks as the major backdrop of the dramatic action. The play begins with the telephonic conversation Kakasaheb, who was the uncle of Sarita. It was a call for Jaisingh who was out of station. Like other women characters of Tendulkar, Sarita survives in her kitchen spaces and appears only with a tray of breakfast. Sarita is supposed to attend all telephone calls and to note down the details of them to communicate them to her husband. Kakasaheb does not like this mechanical exercise of Sarita but she has no courage to assert her choices. Sarita is projected as an image of ideal Indian wife who has to survive within the periphery of her husband's decisions. She accepts, “That's the way you see it my husband sees it differently. If I say they didn't tell me their names he gets angry with me for not asking” (3). The repeated calls and the mechanical response of Sarita makes Kakasaheb irritated. He is a man guided by Gandhian ideology and he believes in the dignity of spirit. For him Sarita's mechanical response reflects her slavish mentality. Kakasaheb is associated with the cause of the suffering of poor but he never thought of using the power of press for his personal success and cheap public popularity. In his observation on the passion of new journalists, there is an echo of the deterioration of the values related with those who are associated with Press. He confesses, “I am a back number—a remnant of times past. A dead journalist—who is just about staying alive! Now it is the day of your husband's type of journalism. The high-speed type”(5). Like a devoted wife, Sarita tries her best to defend her husband. In modern journalism, the news related with rape, murder, bloodshed and atrocity have become the basis of public popularity. Kakasaheb as a sincere guardian tries to warn Santa against the impending perils in the threats against the enthusiasm of Jaisingh.

The movement in the play *Kamala* begins with the arrival of Jaisingh along with Kamala who appears in her rags with a bundle in the corner of her arm. Jaisingh is a journalist and for him professional success is the culmination of his desires. Ever since his return, he is engaged in attending telephonic calls and reading the newspapers. He remains absolutely indifferent to the domestic worries that have been the prime concern of Sarita. In this respect, Tendulkar through the experiences of Jaisingh and Sarita presents two distinctive spaces both at mental and physical level. Kakasaheb wants to convince him to leave his enthusiasm and to be careful about the murderous calls. It is again through a telephonic call that Kakasaheb came to know that he bought that poor woman only for her

exhibition in the Press Conference. For him the poverty and exploitation of Kamala was the material for his own applaud at the Press conference. The whole description is presented in such a way that exposes Kamala only as a mute and silent object without any choice, voice and identity of her own. The obscene comment made by Jaisingh, “Why don’t you come and see for yourself, yaar? Ek dum—Eid ka Chaand” (9) only highlights the cruelty and crudity existing in the mind of males like Jaisingh. Sarita out of human considerations serves tea to Kamala who sips tea but her face is still veiled. This is a method of mental cruelty imposed on woman.

Both Sarita and Kamala are expected to bear the commands of Jaisingh in perpetual silence. Tendulkar through the relationship of Sarita with her husband seems to agree that in social order there is no space for equality of sexes. Jaisingh’s ideology as a journalist is certainly awkward but it gives an insight into the oddity existing in the mind of those who are associated with Press. For them Press is no longer a voice of people but is a method to monopolize the resources of power in which there is no space for the safety and sentiments of the people. If for Kakasaheb, journalism was a method to establish the spirit of nationalism, for Jaisingh it was a method to ensure personal success. For Tendulkar, Press is an instrument of power for the imposition of authority on those who are powerless. He admits, “Not on people, on bad trends. I have no obligation no concern with individuals”(11). Kakasaheb is interested in knowing the whereabouts of Kamala but Jaisingh makes a very short and casual remark. Sarita as a devoted wife gets an insight into the restlessness of her husband. Kamala is still hidden in veil with all her ragged appearance. Both Sarita and Kamala maintain silence and move on the commands of Jaisingh. He reveals Sarita that Kamala has been bought from the auction market where people make bid of women. He admits, “For two hundred and fifty rupees. Even a bullock costs more than that”(14). It was the first exposure of Sarita to the cruelty and humiliation done to women.

The position of women in poverty-stricken area is no better than that of bonded labour. The description of auctioned subject in the play *Kamala* is amazing. The horrors of it are not confined to the idea of gender discrimination only but it also exposes the evil and cruelty existing within the power domination in society. On the amazement of Sarita, he further elaborates, “The men who want to bid handle the women to inspect them whether they are firm or flabby, young or old. How they feel in the breast, in their waist in their thighs and...” (14). The exposition of social reality with the touch of sarcasm in the shadow of suppressed tears make Tendulkar’s dramatic situations highly poignant to grip the consciousness of audience.

In the play *Kamala* both Sarita and Kamala remain marginalized and appear only as the silent subjects. However, Tendulkar accepts that every woman is an individual with a distinctive identity of her own and

her identity cannot be shadowed in the male identity. Therefore, Tendulkar makes her women to redefine their self and to make protest against the humiliations and cruelty done to them. In the second act both Kamala and Sarita recollect their powers to pour out their resistance and the panting of emotions. Tendulkar accepts that woman can shift her position from 'essence' to 'position'. In symbolic order femininity is not a perpetual sign of weakness.

Hence, gradually Kamala and Sarita start reconstructing their own images of life from the state of 'essence' to that of 'position'. The post Press conference discussion between Jain and Jaisingh affirms that they have no reverence and respect for women. The nature of questions presented by Kamala by the congregation of dignitaries at Press Conference suggests that they are no better than the auctioneers at the flesh market. Jain without caring for the sentiments of Kamala presents a very obscene question, "How many men have you slept with?" With such questions the suppressed rage of Sarita starts seeking its manifestation. With a naked display of masculine sexuality, she cries out, "Weren't they ashamed to ask such questions?" (29). The obscene discussion between Jain and Jaisingh makes Kakasaheb restless. He interrogates, "This is your Press conference" (29). The humour, satire and light discussions at the cost of the respect and the dignity of an innocent woman appear crude and vulgar. Jaisingh's casual comment on the position of Kamala is an explicit indication of the sadism existing in the personality of every woman. Jaisingh shamelessly admits, "She couldn't understand a word." He further comments, "Please don't misunderstand—she laughed too, just because the others were laughing. She hadn't understood a thing. And I didn't expect her to. I just wanted to present her as evidence. And that was done" (30). The cruelty implicit in this statement is so intense in the innocent laughter of Kamala and violent move of Jaisingh, the image of seduction symbolized through Eve and serpent becomes alive.

The representation of this mode of cruelty imposed by Jaisingh over Kamala makes this play highly sensational. Jaisingh's passion for success becomes violent and sadistic. Kakasaheb gets irritated with the obscenity of the situation. The fury accumulated out of the interchange of Jaisingh and Kakasaheb transfers to Sarita. He imposes his authority on his wife, as if she is a mute as dead property, a stone image without any choice. Jaisingh admits, "I must know. Don't I have the right to have my wife when I feel like it?" (32). In the subsequent scenes, the interchange of the personal sentiments of Sarita and Kamala, Tendulkar suggests that woman can have better realization of their fellow woman. Kamala is amazed to see the big house but in this house Sarita has no sense of belongingness. From the point of the view of stage craft, the contrast of the wretchedness and humiliation of Kamala amid the luxury of the house of Jaisingh is apparently corresponds with the dilemma of the characters entangled in the situation.

Sarita shares her loneliness with Kamala. She ironically comments on the ignorance of Kamala, "Yes! Kamala. The house ... it devours us. It's so empty..." (34). The emptiness of the house becomes an objective correlative of the conditions existing within the consciousness of Sarita. Kamala expresses her sympathy on the barrenness of Sarita and blesses her that she, must have children. In this confession we find the sublimation of Kamala's thwarted femininity. However in her ignorance Kamala shakes the consciousness of Sarita. In her silence and extreme submissiveness, Kamala finds Sarita no better than a bonded labour. Kamala interrogates, "How much did he buy you for?" (34). Sarita instead of being annoyed innocently replied, "For seven hundred." Kamala continues with her own amazement, "It was an expensive bargain, memsahib. If you pay seven hundred and there are no children..." (34). Sarita with her sympathy makes Kamala to reveal the reality of her life. Kamala plans her future in the company of Sarita. She wants to be a co-partner in the family of Sarita and also intends to share the family responsibility collectively. Even she gives a comprehensive suggestion to share the sexual life with Jaisingh on contractual basis. The suggestion of Kamala is a mockery of the entire patriarchal social structure. In her innocence, she challenges the chauvinisms of Jaisingh. Moreover, it is exclusively an indication to the fact that Kamala maintains her own autonomy of self. She could be a slave in the flesh market but she could retain her own freedom of thought even better than Sarita. The one single suggestion of Kamala inspires Sarita to make a reassessment of her own position in the family of Jaisingh. The suggestion of Kamala of the common sharing of Jaisingh's household is an indication of the radical conversion in the society. The subjugation of Kamala transforms into a new current of life that is beyond all conventions and the restrictions of institutions. Tendulkar's vision echoes the ideology of Omved who admitted, "Feminist studies aim to present a vital and living portrait of Indian womanhood which supplants the mythic and idealized 'Indian womanhood' of the nationalists or 'objectified' woman of orthodox anthropology" (4). The voice of Kamala that reflects her consciousness reveals that at mental level she does not accept the conditions in which she had been placed. She said:

Memsahib, if you won't misunderstand, tell you. The master bought you; he bought me too.Fifteen days of the month you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I sleep with him" (35).

This radical approach of Kamala brings a new consciousness in Sarita. She realizes that the cooperative existence is the only solution to resist the forces of patriarchy. Jaisingh makes his own plan to send Kamala to an orphanage. Sarita recollects her courage and tries to articulate her voice. The vision of Kamala becomes the strength of Sarita. She becomes conscious

of her slave like position in the family of Jaisingh. Sarita protests, “You’re deceiving her?” (41). She proposes that Kamala would stay with her in her family. Sarita with assertive tone admits, “I’m telling you this very seriously. Kamala is going to stay here” (41). In this resolution of Sarita, Jaisingh fears of her own imprisonment. He exercises his own authority, “It’s I who take decisions in this house and no one else” (42). Under the pressure of this autocratic attitude Kamala is forced to leave the place. Kakasaheb realizes the hollowness of the situation and admits, “You see, Kamala is just a pawn in his game of chess” (43). Sarita became impatient and with great trouble confesses, “No just Kamala, not just Kamala, Kaasaheb, me too... me too” (43). On his return, Jaisingh under the fit of same pressure, orders that Sarita must be ready for party. Sarita at mental level withdraws herself from the mental spaces of Jaisingh and his authority lost its meaning and significance in her life. Instead of Jaisingh’s hypocrisy and obstinacy, Kamala’s image grips her consciousness. Ignoring all his romantic talks, she emphatically asks, “What happened about Kamala”(44). The dialogues arranged at this stage suggest that for the first time, Sarita makes her own spaces. She rejects the idea of being a pawn in the game of sexes. It is attributed, “Kamla opens the real life of Sarita, Jaisingh’s wife, who considers herself to be in the same situation” (Das 14). The denial, the revolt and even violence is a sign of retaliation of violence—may it be physical or mental. In following dialog, Sarita affirms her identity. Fear transforms into retaliation:

Jaisingh	:	Do you want to come to the party?
Sarita	:	No.
Jaisingh	:	You don't want to come? Why?
Sarita	:	That’s my will.
Jaisingh	:	Your will.
		(Rather surprised)
Sarita	:	Aren't I allowed to have a will of my own? (45)

The conversion of Sarita becomes a new experience both: for Jaisingh and Kakasaheb. None of them is serious about the terrible havoc going on within the mind of Sarita. Both of them ignore her as insane. It is not an expression of insanity but is an expression of common human sensibility. It is said “If woman speaks outside order, they will either not be heard or be heard as insane” (Sutherland 129). In order to compensate her loss, she too becomes aggressive and violent. She plans to arrange a Press conference at the Press Club. With excessive of contempt and the anguish of self torture, she wants to tear the veil of hypocrisy of her husband in the public. She burst out:

I am going to present a man who in the year 1962 still keeps a slave, right herethe story of how he bought the slave Kamala and made use of her...(46).

Kakasaheb tries to defend and to pacify the anger of Sarita in the name of the institution of marriage. Sarita gets a realization of her own position and she also realizes the loss done to her 'self dignity' in the name of the institution of marriage. In Sarita's life, Kamala appears as an instrument of awakening against the burden of oppression and injustice. Tendulkar like many feminist thinkers establishes that the 'humanity' of woman can't be suppressed for a long time but it cannot be ignored eternally.

The end of the play *Kamala* is hasty but it is convincing to justify the message integrated in the text. Suddenly it is intimated by Jain that Jaisingh has been sacked by the editor. The effort to unveil the filth of the flesh market through Kamala was an attack on some great politicians and financiers. For the interest of selfish dignitaries, it was resolved that Jaisingh must be jailed. It was an attack on the freedom of press. Jaisingh loses control over him and accuses the editor who has been lost in corruption. In this moment of crisis, Jaisingh expects the sympathy of his wife Sarita. Kakasaheb becomes tense regarding the anticipation of the reactions of Sarita. However, the response of Sarita is unconventional and unusual. She takes a very calculative step. As a wife for a while she overcomes her anger but as a woman she retains her own arguments. For a while the defeat of Jaisingh becomes a relief for Sarita. She takes the path of 'quiet determination' and comments: "I'll go on feeling it. 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. No longer be an object to be used and thrown away. Do what I wish and no one will rule over me. That day has to come. And pay whatever price I have to pay for it" (52).

The play *Kamala* throws light on the victim position women play as they are exploited in multiple ways. *Kamala* remains very subtle in its attitude of subjugating women. Patriarchal hegemony is established as Kakasaheb observes how men have to prove their manhood in multiple ways – be it to one's wife or slave.

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