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FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVES IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S KAMALA

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at critically studying the status of modern women's predicament and suffering under the hegemony of men. Obviously, Vijay Tendulkar, one of the able torchbearers of feminist voices portrays two different characters i.e. sarita and kamala in a realistic and contrasting way. The purpose of this paper is to exhibit the realities of modern Indian women at its grassroots level. In Vijay Tendulkar's play *kamala*, a modern, educated, "high-society" woman i.e. sarita is presented in contrast to a poor uneducated slave woman i.e. kamala. Tendulkar only raises social issues through his female characters. He never gives solutions for social problems. Through this paper, I make an attempt to show that Feminism flourishes under Vijay Tendulkar.

KEY WORDS: Vijay Tendulkar, Indian, Feminism, Kamala, Hegemony, Predicament, Suffering.

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (7 January 1928 – 19 May 2008) was 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 example, 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*. The real life incident of the ruining of an actress' career inspired Tendulkar to write *Mitrachi Goshta*. So, he acquired the appellation of 'the angry young man' of Marathi theatre.

Vijay Tendulkar expressed himself by saying: As an individual—or rather as a social being—I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society (because I am affected by it though not immediately in some cases or not as much as some other are) and in my own way brood over it. Once in a way I even do something to relieve myself of the

tensions and anxiety and agitation produced by this brooding. I participate in a protest meeting or a dharna or a fast or a morcha or a satyagraha. I align myself with some civil liberty organizations... As a social being I am against all exploitations and I passionately feel that all exploitations must end...I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship...I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end(1) Tendulkar has become an important voice for the downtrodden, weak and exploited masses, including the women. Even though, he does not call himself a feminist (2), many of his plays present the precarious position of women in the contemporary modern society. Plays like *Kamala* (1981), *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *The Vultures* (1961), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kanyadaan* (1983), *Encounter in Umlugland*, *Mitrachi Goshta* (2001) and *Fifth Women* (2004) bitterly critiques the patriarchal values and institutions. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists. He ruthlessly, attacks the shameful moralistic standards of the so-

called civilized urban middle class Indian society of post-Independence era. Feminism in India is a set of movements which focuses on defining, establishing, and defending the equal opportunities for Indian women. In India, there is no gender equality. Indian women are always deprived of their rights. So, like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India also seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to obtain equal access to health and education, and the right to get 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 (Jain, Indigenous Roots of Feminism5).

According to Gail Omvedt, "'Feminism' is not a form of social science nor is it a single consistent ideology. It can best be understood as the developing self-consciousness of women as an oppressed section struggling for liberation"(177-178).(3).

According to Jasbir Jain, feminists approach the problem by questioning, showing suspicion of knowledge as well as history of knowledge. This is a necessary first step, if one wants to stand outside the layers of imposed systems of thought and to comprehend the nature of stereotypes and to stand outside them. The relationship between women and social structures is far more intricate and more deeply embedded in society than any other. Education, marriage, family, morality, linguistic constructs, custom, law – all these are important elements of self-construction. According to her, Feminist theory has several different theoretical approaches and positions but whether it is social-economic, psychological or literary, its two primary concerns are power and freedom. Both have been traditionally denied to women, placing them on the margins. It is these margins which are being redefined or shifted through a shift to post-feminism in literary aesthetics (IndianFeminisms82).She considers the first stage of feminist struggle as mainly as the right to equality in obtaining political

rights and the second with emphasis on alternative perspectives and epistemological structures. Both of these had failed to destroy the binary oppositions. The first still held 'man' as central, with woman being a 'no-man' with aspirations to become one., the second goes for privileged differences, motherhood and the self. The third stage which is the post-feminist stage attempts to demolish these binary oppositions and puts effort to redefine power and freedom (82-83).But the growth of feminism/women's movement has not been a tale of linear progression but of struggles (collective as well as individual), interruptions, setbacks, embroilment in religious conflicts, return to patriarchal constructs, especially during the times of national crisis, and even resort to male models of heroism and leadership. There has been a constant need to negotiate cultural myths which are a part of the socialisation of the girl child and to retell and reinterpret them (Jain, Indigenous Roots of Feminism 3).

The play which I have taken for scrutiny is *Kamala* which belongs to the post-independence phase of feminist movement. Tendulkar's women characters are in the process of evolution. In the course of play, they gain knowledge. They meticulously strive hard to gain freedom and dignity from the so-called modern, liberal-minded men who represent stripped nakedness. The true colours of Indian men such as egoism, selfishness, hypocrisy and chauvinism are brought to the limelight by Vijay Tendulkar. *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. She is very keen in noting down his messages and takes care of everything that Jaisingh needs. The break in this unquestioned servility comes to an end when Jaisingh brings Kamala home after buying her from flesh market as

if she were a commodity. The ignorant as well as innocent questions that Kamala asks Sarita awaken her to realise her present status at home. When Kamala asks her, "How much did he buy you for?" (Tendulkar, Kamala 34), Sarita realises that she is just a fancy slave whom Jaisingh brought or married and that too after receiving a handsome amount as 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 his decisions like Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Jaisingh is known as a modern liberal husband who lets his wife to drink alcohol. But, in fact, on a deeper level, Sarita is just an object of pleasure and a servant to him. She is not an equal human being. 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 oppressing women (120).(4) 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 there.

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.(5) Along with the double standards, he is a hypocrite. On the surface level, 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 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 market. When it is time to take Kamala to the Press Conference, he neither allows her to wash herself nor to 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 as "evidence" (Tendulkar, Kamala 30). Like People who persistently laughed on her expense, he also mocks at her innocence and disability to 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" (Tendulkar Kamala 30). 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" (Tendulkar Kamala 24) in the society and considers himself someone who "upholds moral principles, moral norms, moral values" (Tendulkar Kamala 24).

Tendulkar shows the inhumanness of Jaisingh through Sarita and Kaka saheb. Kaka saheb's retort that "And you sold a woman to them to do so" (Tendulkar Kamala 31) 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?" (Tendulkar Kamala 30) show how morally bankrupt Jaisingh is and how he has no respect for a woman. This behaviour of Jaisingh makes Sarita realise the real colour of 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 he stresses on his rights as a husband, later abuses her sexually. This is really shocking that being a liberal man, who, calls himself as the saviour of women's rights, not even, acknowledge the rights of his own wife 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?" (Tendulkar Kamala 35). Sarita realises that what Kamala is proposing, she had already done all that. Though, Sarita knows that she holds no power, no right in that house, she argues with her husband ferociously on not allowing kamala towards the orphanage. She always treats her nicely as if she were her sister. Further, she realises that not just Kamala alone, but even she is a pawn in Jaisingh's game of chess. The ill-treatment of both women under the hands of Jaisingh served as an emotional shock to her and her whole life seems naked 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 for this, she should have informed him before so that he would not have accepted the invitation. 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 Kamala 46).

Tendulkar, who presents Kaka saheb 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 Kamala 47). Sarita rebels against such an explanation and asks that if a man is great, does that entitle him to keep a slave. Kaka saheb just answers by something which is no answer at all. He just says "That's why he's a man. And that's why there's manhood in the world..." (Tendulkar Kamala 47). Kaka saheb 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 on her own ground and says that this thinking must be changed. The manly ego which Kaka saheb 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 enough to not to throw another tempest on Jaisingh who lost his mental equilibrium 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, Kaka saheb, 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" (Tendulkar Kamala 52). The price that Sarita has to pay is to get labelled as a "rebel – a man-made category" (Singh 121).

Shanta Gokhale in her essay "Tendulkar on his Own Terms" considers Sarita as Nora, Ibsen's heroine:

Sarita is a Nora who has stopped short of the final breaking out. Though she does not make a dramatic exit at the end of the play, however, she has understood her situation as surely as Nora does. (Vijay Tendulkar 93) 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.

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