



THUS THEY CLAIM THEIR VISIBILITY: A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS FROM VIJAY TENDULKAR'S PLAYS

(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO "SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION, KAMALA AND SAKHARAM BINDER")

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to study women characters against a hostile patriarchal set-up with special reference to the famous Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar's plays. Five women characters from three Tendulkar plays (*SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*, *KAMALA* and *SAKHARAM BINDER*) are here under scrutiny. Benare (from *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*) is a young economically independent woman who wants to live a life of her own but she was not allowed to do that. Moreover her private matters of life is disgracefully discussed publicly and society uses every ploy to make her 'own life' crushed. In case of Sarita, a middleclass housewife from *KAMALA*, a shocking revelation comes out in a crucial moment and this poses a very important question regarding the actual position of a woman and her share of respect in family and society dominated by men. The two quite different and contrasting characters from *SAKHARAM BINDER* offer the same picture of dominated female versus dominating male against a lower class social background. The purpose of this paper is to investigate these issues like a woman's freedom of her choice regarding private matters, her effort of carving an identity of her own and also role of patriarchy in this respect. The scope of emancipation envisaged by Tendulkar in the women characters of his plays is also discussed here with their obvious limitations in a patriarchal social structure.

Key Words - position of women, patriarchy, and scope for emancipation.

Traditionally Indian literature viewed women as role-bound possessions whose sacrifices preserved the sanctity and well-being of the family. The roles allotted to women in the patriarchal set-up are purely domestic — daughter, wife, and mother. Often her role is sentimentalized and idealized but she is, almost everywhere, largely ignored as a human being, being denied of her individual distinctive visibility. Women as Shakuntala or Sita are passive objects bearing the brunt of male injustice but remained entrenched within the codes of patriarchy. This picture of Indian women as meek, submissive, patient who subordinated their will and desires to those of the male unselfishly and never

questioning to the patriarchal moral codes dominated the literary scenario. Though Rabindranath Tagore created women characters like Binodini, Bimala who claimed visibility through their deviance from society-allotted role, their deviance from mores is often shown as destructive and somehow negative. The indication of change creeps in with the emergence of women novelist like Ashapura Devi. In her trilogy *Prothom Protistruti*, *Subarnalata* and *Bokulkatha* we find exploring the Indian version of feminism which does not seriously challenge the male order yet tries to carve out a distinctive identity. However, the picture of the women in the post-independent India has

changed radically. In the field of drama this emergence is first noticed in Marathi theatre in 1950s. Tara Varanese's *Kaksha* portrays the emergence of the New Indian Women who abandon the stereotypical icon of femininity and express themselves as dissenters questioning the patriarchal moral codes and demanding liberation from patriarchal oppression. The same attitude is seen in Vijay Tendulkar. The first major play of Vijay Tendulkar, *Srimant (The Rich)*, was written in 1955. Since then up to 1983, up to *Kanyadan*, he has written many significant, controversial and much debated plays which have brought to the fore the Women's Question, her dumb agony, her harassment and helplessness. The accusing figure of Benare at the males in society in *Silence! The court is in Session*, Sarita's emancipated vision about the actual position of a wife in a household and her voice against the dominance and oppression of the house in *Kamala*, the strong challenge to manhood in the form of Champa in *Sakharam Binder*—all these varied facets of women characters appear in Tendulkar.

Deviance from the Code: case of Benare

Silence! The Court is in Session is the most eloquent in depicting a woman's claiming her visibility. Leela Benare is young, intelligent, educated and economically independent. She boldly asserts her individuality—

BENARE. " my life is my own...my will is my own...I'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide..."(p-58)

But ironically it is not she but the 'system' that ultimately decides her fate.

It is significant that among the other member of the theatre group she alone can claim success in her professional field (others are proved failure in their jobs); but that she is a successful teacher never accounts for to judge her as her private sexual behavior accounts for. Female sexuality is a taboo and sexual independence of women is regarded dangerous and destabilizing. In fact, the icon of womanhood is build round the virtues of sexual fidelity and sacrifice. To allow Benare is to allow her breaking the myth of womanhood as represented by Savitri, Sita, Shakuntala, etc. Kate millet in her *Sexual Politics* argues that patriarchy rules over the woman and constructs a type for woman — an icon that

serves its ends and the subservience to which feeds and perpetuates the sway of patriarchy. Feminist rebels challenged this clever ploy from 19th century itself and Benare in this play characterizes this revolt. "She has, by her actions, dethroned the mischievous and deep-seated myth of femininity and deromanticized the body politic of falsification."¹She emphatically declares her independence and claims visibility by choosing to respect the demands of her body.

Significantly, Benare is claiming visibility not of her own alone but also of her son/child growing in her womb. It is noticeable that she does not challenge male authority but seeks satisfaction in it ("...a father to call his own...") but it is also a fact that Tendulkar is writing of a woman of fundamentally orthodox middle class of mid 20th Century. It would be to some extent unreliable in the existing social circumstances had Tendulkar allowed Benare to decide something as single motherhood. It is easy to understand that society does not allow her to be a mother .It sees her love child as a dangerous force threatening to pull apart the very fabric of the tradition Kashikar and Sukhatmes are so fanatically protecting. So Kashikar gets angry with Benare—

KASHIKAR. A sinful canker on the body of society... (P-112)

And at the news of the dismissal of Benare from her school, Sukhatme like a sadist gets pleasure—

SUKHATME. Tit for tat! As you sow, so shall you reap... (P-113)

Thus, male dominated society always wishes to suppress the visibility of a woman as an individual identity and also cherishes viewing her on trial. Interestingly, despite the fact that the society indicts Benare for immorality, it is silent about the role played by Damle .Simon de Beavoir calls this the "erotic fate" of the woman in her celebrated *The Second Sex*. Therefore the punishment falls on Benare for an act which is accomplished by two. The sentence follows as such—

KASHIKAR. No memento of your sin should remain for future generations...the child in your womb shall be destroyed. (P-119)

Thus, "the accusation brought against her at the beginning of the trial— that of infanticide— turns into the verdict at the conclusion "and "this very reversal in the attitude of the 'authorities' expresses the

basic hypocrisy and double standards on which our society is founded.”²

“Na striswatantryamarhati” is the attitude of society towards woman. Benare is not fitting in it. She from the very beginning is very much active, full of life. We find her taking an active part in wooing for marriage and that too for mercenary reasons. Most importantly her effort to enjoyment and contentment out of life (Nilanjan Chatterjee views her laughter as her Bakhtinesque attempt to defy authority and denigrate order with its Carnavalesque quality³) is not going with the typical image of reticent, bashful Indian woman and thus claims attention. But as we see, her claiming of visibility is ignored by society represented by characters like Kashikar and Sukhatme and she is silenced metaphorically like that of Stanley in *The Birthday Party* by the State Apparatus. She is accused, betrayed and insulted. The patriarchy that presented woman as ‘shakti’ or an archetype of power, the spring well of creativity when threatened by female sexuality, responds by counterattacking with a rare ruthlessness. And so the lines reverberate in the mind of the audience—

“And the wound that’s born to bleed
Bleeds on forever, faithfully.
There is a battle sometimes, where
Defeat is destined as the end.
Some experiences are meant
No taste, then just to waste and spend...”⁴(p-

63)

Nilanjan Chatterjee puts Benare’s situation in following words—

“Benare is therefore a victim of a revengeful and myopic society that does not tolerate deviance from its mores...the system does not tolerate her efforts to be an individual. She does not commit any sin by aspiring not to be conventional. Rather convention is at fault for dogmatically following crusty rules and for giving tradition a primacy over life and its desires”⁵.

Therefore, she remains the ‘poor little sparrow’ like that of one mentioned in her poem. About Benare’s long famous soliloquy, Sulabha Deshpande argues that “the monologue is full of Benare’s internal turbulence, her worldview, her rebelliousness, her rage against a society that is happy to live in a rut without aim or purpose, her bitterness at the harassment she has suffered at its hands.”⁶

To conclude, it is significant that Samant during the trial could not find the page one time—

SAMANT. “It’s quite a problem. I just can’t find the page—” (p-93)

Possibly the problem is also faced by Tendulkar. He also could not find the solution especially in that very societal set-up and could not grant Benare her claiming visibility. Only a slight hope is envisaged by him with the symbol of ‘green parrot’ placed forward by Samant, the only one who doesn’t take up the cause of patriarchy and who sympathizes for her.

Another female character of the play Mrs. Kashikar, on the other hand, is middle aged, married, and a housewife, conventional and disapproving of “free” women like Benare. There are ample references of her effort to come to forefront but repeatedly her effort is suppressed by her husband .Mrs. Kashikar does not take such suppression of her mind and spirit quietly. She mutters angrily. One suspects that, had she had the economic power that Benare has, she might have protested more actively. However, the way things are, there is no choice for her but to be a participant in the patriarchal system.

From within their Imposed Invisibility: Kamala and Sarita

In Tendulkar’s *Kamala* also, the theme of claiming visibility by women in society is too much evident. It rises to the surface through the discussion of Jaising and his mercenary journalism, seemingly the focal point of the play. Kamala is bought by Jaising, the flamboyant investigative journalist of English daily from Luhardaga bazaar in Bihar to enhance the publicity of his newspaper and in turn his own name. Kamala is actually used by Jaising in the way a capitalist society uses a commodity for profit. That Kamala is commodified is very much palpable in Jaising’s speech:

JAISING. ‘...I bought her dirt cheap.’(P-14)

Even her basic human need is denied for the sake of materialistic gain. Sleep is denied to her lest it could bring any change to the image suitable for the presentation of such ‘piece’. Jaising expects Kamala to appear at the press conference in her soiled and torn cloths to suit his sense of dramatic.

Kamala in the press conference arranged by Jaising presents herself and narrates herself during the interaction with other journalists. It is Kamala’s

claiming visibility but according to the pattern set and desired by Jaising. It is thus the male version of women's claiming which in turn accentuates the visibility of Jaising as an able journalist. So far his interest remains, Kamala is paid attention, but after that she must leave the scenario and gets invisible.

JAINING. "...she must go there tomorrow. Once today's press conference is over, she has no business. It's all been arranged." (P-26)

So, the constructed nature of Kamala's becoming visible is explicit. Patriarchy for their own sake keeps women invisible and only brings them in visibility when they themselves need to cash on it. For example Jaising's wife Sarita is all the time when the play opens is seen to be a 'husband's wife' doing daily drudgery and carrying out her husband's orders. She is also used by Jaising but she can't understand it at first. Jain first makes this point visible, but not very much reaching to Sarita's understanding as much appealing for the intellect of the audience/reader.

JAIN. "Hai, Bhabhiji, I mean, an English 'hi' to him, and a Marathi 'hai'*to you. This warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. Hai, hai! [theatrically, to Jaising]Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife!" (P-17)

Sarita is an educated 'slave'. Basically there's no essential difference between Kamala and Sarita, between an auction of an illiterate rural woman and the marriage transaction of an educated urban woman. Infact the language proves so many things. The use of 'must' is noticeable—

JAINING. "You must tell me. I must know. Don't I have the right to have my wife when I feel like it?" (P-52)

In the mutual relationship of love a husband is asserting his right as a husband whereas his wife's right as a human being (her will to have or not have sex) is not even thought of. Actually in our patriarchal social set-up, women are taken for granted to have no other opinion than their male counterpart. That they may have any opinion and more importantly that theirs may clash with them is a thing which makes them surprised and not happy.

JAINING. You don't want to come? Why?

SARITA. That's my will.

JAINING. [Rather surprised]Your will? (P-44)

The most significant and climactic scene is the conversation between Kamala and Sarita. It is through this conversation that Sarita comes to a new vision. Now she realizes, because of an innocent question asked by a scared, illiterate village woman Kamala, "How much did he buy you for?" (P-34) how close their respective positions in society are underneath the surface difference of class. Sarita admits-

SARITA. I was asleep...Kamala woke me up. With a shock...Because of her, I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I'm a slave...dance to their master's whim. Laugh, when he says, (p-46)

And so when Kakasaheb in chitchat with Sarita says that 'You see, Kamala is just a pawn in his game of chess' (p-43), Sarita claims—

SARITA. ...not just Kamala, Kakasaheb. Me too...me too. (P-43)

Again in a later conversation she says—

SARITA. ...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...listen the story of how he bought the slave Kamala and made use of her The other slave he got free not just free the slave's father shelled out the money a big sum.(p-46)['other slave' means Sarita herself]

Two important issues come out here .One is that woman is treated as useful commodity in market, voraciously devoured by 'public' and the other issue is the traffic in woman, as propounded by Gayle Rubin in her *The Traffic of Women: 'The political Economy' of Sex*.

Kakasaheb, though promises to be different, ultimately he also is not ready to welcome Sarita's now emancipated vision. I would like to cite Vikram Gokhale's (the actor who played Jadhav in *Kamala*) question concerning Kakasaheb "Why does the old man who argues against exploitative journalism, not argue equally vehemently against exploitative husbands?"⁷ When Sarita asks for a change of the 'system', Kakasaheb finds no option but to plead for power of understanding from Sarita when actually (and ironically) he seeks the blinding of it because power of understanding leads Sarita to this vision.

Actually what he wants is 'compromising' because the language of understanding for women is the language of compromising with the 'system'.

The ending of the play, however, does not indicate Sarita compromising with her understanding as we see her in the stage direction bracketed at the end of the play—

[...Her gaze is calm, steadily looking ahead of the future. Determination on her face.]

So, the ending promises and positively reasserts Sarita's claiming of visibility and like Kakasaheb, we, the readers, also are 'fascinated and impressed'.

Sparks of Courage from the Pit

Tendulkar's another play *Sakharam Binder* also perpetuates this theme of invisibility of woman versus too much visible male figure. In Act-1, Sakharam is solely visible. Laxmi, his 'new bird', is always under his instructions and his will. The inhumanity with which her invisibility is guaranteed and individual will or spontaneity is crushed is evident in the following extract—

SAKHARAM. Now laugh. Are you going to laugh or not?

LAXMI. No.

... ..

LAXMI. My whole body is throbbing with pain. Such gnawing pain. (moans)...

SAKHARAM. So what? You have to laugh...

LAXMI. I'll die!

SAKHARAM. Laugh, and then die! (P-145)

Spontaneity of laugh (when Laxmi talks with a black ant and laughs lively) or energy of such is directed not to any self-nourishment but for the sake of master. They are bound to make themselves not visible and any unintelligible affair on part of them is tagged as madness ('crazy nonsense', p-139) just the way Foucault discusses the construction of madness in *Civilization and Madness*.

When, the margin (because that is the position of the women) challenges or resists the Centre (i.e. male and his position), as for example the following extract—

LAXMI. (suddenly bursts out)...I haven't had a single day's rest. Whether I'm sick or whether it's a festal day. Nothing but work, work; work all the time. You torture me the whole day, you torture me at night... (P-146)

then what is done to keep the Centre intact is the total exclusion. Another explanation of Laxmi's exclusion by Sakharam may be that she is less useful in the sex market if compared to the next 'bird' Champa who visibly refuses to be kept invisible. She is bold and straightforward in asserting her presence. She almost tends to threaten the visibility of the man of the house—

CHAMPA. Sakharam Binder? Who's he? (P-157)

Interestingly, now Champa is 'watching' him and thus subverting or reversing the gaze and through this subversion Champa draws attention and claims visibility.

The role of language in this discussion is always important. Abusive language or language of attack is always 'masculine' whereas language of submissiveness always 'feminine'. But Champa breaks this 'rule' and shocks us to turn our attention to her.

CHAMPA. Scared? Who, me? And scared of whom? My husband? [spits]What can he do to me?...You think he'd have the guts to do it, that ninny?... (P-157).

Regarding the division of labour (one for male and another for female), Champa breaks the myth. She is not used to do the typical 'woman's job' like making a cup of tea. At the very first introduction she manages to command Sakharam, 'Now make me a nice cup of tea, will you?'(P-158).She also subverts the idea of man's making a woman 'pet' (something like what Jaising made out of Sarita).Calling Dawood she says— 'Be a pet and go get me a nice 'pan' with tobacco, if you don't mind' and Dawood runs around like a 'nitwit' (p-159).Infact, through the striking contrast between Laxmi and Champa, visibility of Champa becomes more visible. If we remember the scene where Laxmi wanted sleep badly and Sakharam denied it forcefully, we see Champa refusing to conform to the 'rule' which denies an individual's basic need and says straightway— 'sleep is not his father's property' (P-161).

Theatrically enough, Champa is seen to assault her husband(the designated oppressor if compared with Sakharam in case of Laxmi or Jaising in *Kamala*).Tendulkar here is showing the visible presence of Champa through her subversive action and language .During the sexual union, male is

supposed to be 'active' and female 'passive'. The language of Champa offers an interesting study in this respect—

CHAMPA. You'll have your fun...Wait. I'll give it to you. (P-171)

The active voice is significant. She is giving it and more significantly boldly asserts it.

Women are often used as a procreative device in phallogocentric society. So an impotent wife is discarded. Along this line we can find an explanation of driving out of Laxmi by her husband. But when Champa is asked about the reason of separation with her husband, she contemptuously states the reason—

CHAMPA. Impotent husband!...I walked out on him. Who wants a husband just for the sake of his name! (P-180)

Here is a tendency to claim individual visible presence breaking the shackles of identity formation depended on other. This is further made clear in the following conversation—

LAXMI (sighing). Not mine. He's yours now.

CHAMPA. Look here. I'm on my own... (P-181)

Ironically it is Laxmi, another female, who becomes instrumental in bringing the death of Champa. Like Mrs. Kashikar, Laxmi has internalized the patriarchal value system and cannot cope with the situation which threatens the 'natural' establishment. Sakharam is a man of several women, so also Champa, a woman if not of several, clearly of three men her husband, Sakharam and Dawood. But the value standard is different in case of Champa and so not to be tolerated.

The endings of all the three plays are significant. Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* is metaphorically silenced. No definite visible sign of hope can be traced. In *Kamala*, Sarita, though now has no illusion about her position, yet no clear indication by playwright is given about how she will manage to establish her own individuality in that very societal system. In *Sakharam Binder*, Champa is murdered. So in the case of his women characters; Tendulkar seems to capitulate before the Establishment and its reactionary value system. One wonders if it is because the dramatist himself turns his back on the vital relationship between the value system and the social structure which strategically inhibits and

restricts the full development of a woman's personality. This is a somewhat frightening thought in as much as it forecloses the very possibility of amelioration. "Tendulkar has of course put before the world the frightening truth about life but what disturbs me is the signal that his plays send out: they seem to say that there is no escape from this frightening reality"⁸. However, one possibility is that this capitulation and negation is the inevitable consequence of the middle class social context within which Tendulkar as a dramatist and his dramas are essentially rooted. Thus, the suggestion is there but not the fulfillment. Claiming visibility is obviously there but they are not sanctioned, often denied and largely ignored.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

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 7. *Vijay Tendulkar*, KATHA, 2001, P-94
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- [All page references indicated in parentheses directly after the quotations are from *Vijay Tendulkar: Five Plays*, Oxford University Press, 2009]