

## TREATMENT OF WOMEN AS SLAVES IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S 'KAMALA'

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### ABSTRACT

*Kamala is a naturalistic play which is inspired by a real-life incident. Ashwin Sarin, a correspondent of The Indian Express actually buys a girl from a rural flesh market of village Shivpuri in M.P. for Rs. 2,300/- and presents her at a press conference. He then wrote series of articles in May, 1981 in the Indian Express. Vijay Tendulkar(1928-2008), the doyen of Marathi literature and a master drama-writer uses the play to dwell on the characteristic sufferings of the Indian middle class woman made to suffer by selfish, malicious and hypocritical male chauvinists. He presents his ideas about womanhood and proposes a feministic ideology which pits women in direct encounter with chauvinistic male oppressors. The playwright has intentionally given the women characters – Sarita and Kamala - a greater variety and depth . Kamala's bold conversation with Sarita and then Sarita's confident and assertive utterances towards the end of the play show that both have emerged as strong women, which Tendulkar wanted every Indian woman to be.*

**Keywords:** Flesh market, Kamla, patriarchy, Press conference, Sarita.

### INTRODUCTION

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) is undeniably a great Indian playwright who is known for his multifaceted creative genius. As a versatile and prolific Marathi writer he has authored twenty-eight full length dramas, twenty-four one-act plays, and eleven plays for children. Besides being an acclaimed dramatist he is well-known for his literary essays, political journalism, screen and television writings, translated works and social commentaries. He has also written novels and several short stories. Despite his interest and involvement in different social, political and literary activities his genius finds full expression only in dramas. For his vast dramatic output and *avant-garde* theatrical activities in Marathi, he has been honoured with several prestigious awards including the Maharashtra State Government Award, the Sangeet Natak Akademy Award, Padma Bhushan Award and the Katha Chudamani Award. His writing

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career has spanned more than fifty years and several of his plays have, in fact, become true classics in Marathi and they have been translated into English and other Indian languages.

In the history of contemporary theatre, Tendulkar has a place which is unique. As a playwright, he is different from other playwrights because of his experimentation with the subject matter. Vijay Tendulkar's innovative dramatic techniques and experimental methods in the presentation of varied themes have provided to the highly orthodox Marathi theatre a new authenticity and power. Though his treatment of socially controversial themes and unconventional approach to human problems in his plays has made him a controversial writer, he has been acclaimed as a writer of realistic dramas, for he electrifies the conservative audiences with brutal themes and forthright dialogues. As a sensitive writer, he minutely observes the moral degeneration that has cropped up in the political and cultural life of the contemporary society, and presents it in his plays with thorough detachment and clinical objectivity.

As a writer, he focuses on the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and explores it deeply. He comes to the conclusion that this relationship is a cruel fact of life and is eternal and will never come to an end, particularly in the case of women whose position in the contemporary society is very dismal. And so, like most of the contemporary writers, he trains his critical gaze on the miserable plight of women who are the victim of the institutional body of powers in the contemporary society. In his view, woman has become a commodity of male gaze and is a victim who is subjected to violence both physically or emotionally. The women characters in Tendulkar's dramas suffer a lot as the victims of the hegemonic power structure. The female body is the object of male sexual fantasy and desire. All women characters in his plays are the marginalized objects in interlocking system of sexual politics and power politics

Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kamala* is a naturalistic play which is inspired by a real-life incident – *The Indian Express* expose by Ashwin Sarin, who actually buys a girl from a rural flesh market and presents at a press conference. (Banerjee, Arundhati, p. xvi). Sarin while investigating into the flesh trade that flourished in Madhya Pradesh, purchased a woman by name Kamla from village Shivpuri in M.P. for Rs. 2,300/-. He then wrote series of articles which were published by in the *Indian Express* on 27th, 29th and 30th April, 1981 and 2nd May 1981. The article published in the issue of 27th April, 1981 had the heading '*Buying girls from circuit house*'. The woman Kamla was brought to New Delhi. This article opened with following words:

“Yesterday, I bought a short-statured skinny woman belonging to a village near Shivapuri in Madhya Pradesh for Rs. 2,300/-. Even I find it hard to believe that I have returned to the Capital this morning buying this middle aged woman for half the price one pays for a buffalo in Punjab.”

The story caused a national furore. Vijay Tendulkar described the plight of Kamla through this play. In this play, Vijay Tendulkar deals with the general plight of women who are oppressed and exploited everywhere in society. They are treated as slaves in male dominated society. Tribal women are bought and sold in the flesh market as slaves to be exploited sexually. Tendulkar uses the play to dwell on the characteristic sufferings of the Indian middle class woman made to suffer by selfish, malicious and hypocritical male chauvinists. He expresses his concern on

the exploitation of women as well as women's victimization by male-dominated society.

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* delineates women as objects of commodity which can be purchased, bartered and sold. Jaisingh Jadhav, a young journalist working as an associate editor in English language daily, goes to Ludhardaga beyond Ranchi and buys a woman named Kamala for Rs 250 at a flesh market where women of all kinds are auctioned openly. He brings her to Delhi and keeps her in his house to present her at a press conference in the evening in order to expose the inhuman trade which is rampant even in the remote villages of India. However, Kamala does not know that Jadhav is going to present her at the 'Press Conference'; she is in the impression that Jadhav has bought her to keep her in his house as his mistress. Jadhav keeps it secret even from his best friend Jain who just visits him in the forenoon. Individualism and competition of his profession demands it. Jain who knows the hardships of Sarita, Jaisingh's wife, mocks the idea of purchasing a woman as it enslaves a woman. He remarks: "Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife" (*Collected Plays*, p. 17) and calls Sarita "lovely bonded labourer" while saying 'Bye' (*Collected Plays*, p.17). This is a hint at Sarita's position in the family. Sarita is indeed a 'lovely bonded labourer', taking note of all phone calls, attending to all Jadhav's physical needs and running about in the house carrying out all his presumptuous instructions. Sarita is stunned at the news that Jadhav has bought Kamala and reacts in the following manner:

JAISINGH... They sell human beings... They have an open auction for women of all sorts of ages. People come from long distances to make their bids.

SARITA. They auction – women?

JAISINGH. Yes, women. Can't believe it, can you? The men who want to bid - handle the women to inspect them. Whether they are firm or flabby. Young or old. Healthy or diseased. How they feel in the breast, in their waist, in their thighs and...

SARITA. Enough.

(*Collected Plays*, p. 14)

Sarita becomes furious and asks Jadhav to stop. Jadhav warns her not to tell anyone that he is going to exhibit Kamala at the 'Press Conference':

What's so unusual about the Luhardaga flesh market? Women are sold in many places like that, all over the country... See how we'll blast out this shameful affair. There'll be high drama at today's press conference. It'll create uproar!

(*Collected Plays*, p. 15).

When Sarita asks him whether she should ask Kamala to bathe and put on a fresh sari, Jadhav stops her:

No...she can have bath tonight or tomorrow morning...she'll feel dirtier after her bath. Please don't do anything concerning her without asking me first. For God's sake!...Just let this evening's Press Conference get over. It's very important.

(*Collected Plays*, p. 18)

When the time of the press conference comes close, Jadhav talks to Kamala politely so that she may agree to go to the conference:

JAISINGH. How do you like it here, Kamala?

KAMALA. Very much, Sahib.

JAISINGH. Kamala, this evening we're going out together.

KAMALA. Oh! I'll see Bombay! They say it's a very big city.

JAISINGH. There's going to be a big feast where we are going.

KAMALA. Why, is there a Krishna temple there?

*(Collected Plays, p. 19)*

This shows that Kamala is an ignorant and illiterate girl who does not know that she is in Delhi, not in Bombay. She tells Jadhav that she cannot go with him in her rags. Jadhav, hardening his voice tells her: "You will *have* to come, Kamala." (*Collected Plays*, p. 20) Finally Kamala agrees to go with him to the press conference in her rags.

Kakasaheb, Sarita's uncle who runs a paper, expresses his apprehension of Jadhav's predicament, and so warns him of the possible future danger: "You may be caught in a terrible jam some time." (*Collected Plays*, p. 10) Kakasaheb tries to convince him that it is dangerous for him:

...the situation's different now. And your attacks are on different people everyday... Aren't you going to look at where all this is leading? What's going to be the outcome of it all? And on top of that – you're not prepared to take care to protect yourself.

*(Collected Plays, p. 11)*

However, Jadhav is not convinced as he is under the illusion that he is fighting through press against exploitation and oppression. He also hopes that his employer is there to protect him:

They can still prosecute me? Let them proceed. That'll make a nice front- page item... We'll make them dance like monkeys this time! Oh no, not just me, it was the whole team. All of us. All because of your support. Thank you... Yes, he can sack me. I am not worried. Why should I worry, when you are with me, Jaspalsaab?

*(Collected Plays, p. 9)*

When Sarita also expresses her apprehension of his going to jail, he says:

I don't mind. My editor is going to fight this case right up to the Supreme Court. That'll give a lot of publicity to this problem. And I probably won't be sentenced – because we've safeguarded ourselves legally. We gave a lot of thought to the plan.

*(Collected Plays, p. 26)*

Anyhow Jadhav meticulously executes his plan and succeeds wonderfully at the press conference in exposing the inhuman trade by presenting Kamala as a proof. During the press conference, Kamala gets embarrassed at certain unpleasant questions. But Jadhav lacks the faculties of intuition and nurturing in this context and does not take notice of Kamala's

embarrassment. He and Jain are over -excited on their success and get drunk. Kakasaheb watches them in silent amusement. However, very soon, he gets so displeased at the happenings in the conference that he exclaims: “this is your Press Conference!” (*Collected Plays*, p. 29). Sarita and Kakasaheb feel very sorry for Kamala. Sarita even refuses to sleep with Jadhav that night because she is too much disturbed. When she talks to Kamala, she is herself taken aback at Kamala’s questions:

KAMALA. How much did he buy you for?

[*Sarita is confused at first.*]

SARITA. What?

KAMALA. I said, how much did he buy you for?

SARITA. [*Recovering*]. Me? Look here, Kamala. [*Changes her mind, and sits down beside her.*] For seven hundred.

KAMALA. My god! Seven hundred?

SARITA. Why? Was it too little?

KAMALA. [*Pauses*]. It was an expensive bargain, memsahib. If you pay seven hundred, and there are no children...

(*Collected Plays*, p. 34)

Kamala’s questions open Sarita’s eyes suddenly and, for the first time, she finds no difference between herself and Kamala whom her husband has brought to get success in his journalism. Only women understand the problems of women, a fact that emerges from the frank and unreserved conversation between Sarita and Kamala. Kamala, though naïve, ignorant and illiterate, sympathizes with Sarita over her barrenness.

This unexpected revelation enlightens Sarita on her position in the house. Though Jadhav had been given a handsome dowry in marrying her, her position remains in the family like that of a slave:

Memsahib, if you won’t misunderstand, I’ll tell you. The master bought you; he bought me, too... So, memsahib, both of us must stay here like sister. We’ll keep the master happy... The master will have children. I’ll do the hard work, and I’ll bring forth the children. I’ll bring them up. You keep the accounts and run the house... Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master, the other fifteen, I’ll sleep with him. Agreed?

(*Collected Plays*, p. 35)

And so when Kamala proposes to do all the housework while Sarita will look after accounts and such other sophisticated things, Kamala also goes on to add that each of them will share their master’s bed half a month each.

The brief conversation between Kamala and Sarita develops a better understanding between them and makes Sarita aware of her position in the family. She now realizes that her husband does not have much difference between her and Kamala. That Jadhav uses her as a mere object to satisfy his own carnal desire, and as an object to parade his own status in the capacity of his wife at parties. When Jadhav returns from the ‘Nari Niketan’, he asks Sarita to accompany him to a party. At this she refuses to do so:

JAISINGH. [*Growling*]. It's seven. Go, get dressed, quickly.  
[*Sarita doesn't get up*]... Don't you want to come to the party?  
SARITA. No.  
JAISINGH. You don't want to come? Why?  
SARITA. That's my will.  
JAISINGH. [*Rather surprised*]. Your will?  
SARITA. Aren't I allowed to have a will of my own?

(*Collected Plays*, pp. 44-45)

Sarita arranges a press conference to tell everyone about the predicament of women in the contemporary Indian society. She confesses Kamala's help to comprehend the master-slave relationship:

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 free – not just free – the slave's father shelled out the money – a big sum. Ask him what he did with it. [*An uncontrollable sob bursts from her. She controls it.*] Sorry.

(*Collected Plays*, p. 46)

A determination to live on her own comes to her and any argument put forward by Kakasaheb fails to repress her fury against male domination. When he asks her why she suddenly began to think like this in a different way, Sarita responds:

Why did I, you ask? I was asleep. I was unconscious even when I was awake. Kamala woke me up. With a shock. Kamala showed me everything. Because of her, I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I'm a slave. Slaves don't have rights, do they, Kakasaheb? They must slave away. Dance to their master's whim. Laugh, when he says, laugh. Cry, when he says, cry. When he says pick up the phone, they must pick it up. When he says, come to a party, they must go. When he says, lie on the bed – they [*She is twisted in pain.*]

(*Collected Plays*, p. 46)

When Kakasaheb tries to pacify Sarita by saying that the world goes on in this way through marriage, Sarita screams at him in impatience:

Why? Why can't men limp behind? Why aren't women ever the masters? Why can't a woman at least ask to live her life the same way as a man? Why must only a man have the right to be a man? Does he have one extra sense? A woman can do everything a man can... What a man does is manhood. Even if he washes people's dishes that are manhood... This must be changed. Those who do manly things should be equal to men. Those who don't, are women.

(*Collected Plays*, p. 47)

This shows how women's desires are repressed under the onslaught of reactionary ideas of the fundamentally orthodox society. It also displays how women are disreputated to do certain things. She cannot talk freely, walk freely and live freely. If she does this, something unfortunate occurs and this misfortune inevitably falls upon her head. This must change. Sarita has now come to know the reality of marriage and husband-wife relationship:

I'll go on feeling it... a day will come, Kakasaheb, 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.

(*Collected Plays*, 52).

Thus, Sarita emerges as a woman who fights against her exploitation though the right of equality is denied to her.

In the play *Kamala* we find Jadhav is indifferent to humanness and is incapable of humanity itself. The husband-wife relationship between Jaising and Sarita is typical of the sort existing in the cities like Mumbai, where husbands, having been in employment do not have enough time for their wives and kids and therefore they have to content themselves by being mere social beings. Kamala is treated as an object and she has to serve her role as the male-dominated society wants. Through Kamala and Sarita, Tendulkar expresses the male-chauvinistic spirit where male believes in liberty of themselves and at the same time they try to suppress the voice of women in the society either by force or trickery. Tendulkar suggests that exploitation of women in male-dominated Indian society is a perpetual process in the past and coming future. Kakasaheb also is a part of that patriarchal society as he forces his wife to follow him silently without any grudge.

Thus it can be safely concluded that the principal action of the play *Kamala* revolves around women. Sarita and Kamala stand for the consciousness in the play beyond any doubt. Hence, the play can be rightly called women-centric. Through the delineation of women characters, Tendulkar projects a point of view that peculiarly feminine-tending to be even feministic – as the entire denouement in the play bears it out. In this women-centered play, Vijay Tendulkar presents his full and free expression of his feministic ideology which pits women in direct encounter with chauvinistic male oppressors. The playwright has intentionally given the women characters – Sarita and Kamala - a greater variety and depth – and thus a definite edge, over – to their male counterpart. Kamala's bold conversation with Sarita and then Sarita's confident and assertive utterances towards the end of the play show that both have emerged as strong women.

## REFERENCE

1. Tendulkar, Vijay (2007). *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.