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Gender Discrimination, Sexism and Violence: A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's Selected Plays

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Abstract

'Indian Women'—at one point of time, during the Vedic ages, were treated at par with men and were given all the rights that men enjoyed in those days; then and now- virtually no difference between men and women but in real life, the pathetic condition of majority of women in our country is not hidden from any one. Exploitation, harassment, physical and mental torture are a daily thing in the life of most of the women in India. Though one section boasts about advancement and improved life style of Indian women, there is the other section that is even denied fundamental rights and is leading a dilapidated life. Discrimination against women can be seen from the womb as the female foetus are aborted, education has been denied for them and forced to act as slaves in their own houses as well as in the houses of their in-laws. Women have to suffer for dowry, which may lead to suicide or murder. Women have been treated as an object of luxury and lust. In our patriarchal society, male domination has reduced them to nonentity and have been bartered, sold and used as stepping stones for the so-called success that male race enjoys. Such a degraded world of male domination is portrayed by Tendulkar where discrimination, sex and violence against women are in full swing and this paper tends to show us how women have been subjugated in all aspects of their lives with the help of selected plays of Tendulkar- "Kamala", "Ghashiram Kotwal", "Kanyadaan", "Sakharam Binder", and "Silence! The court is in session".

Key Words: Discrimination, Violence, Sexism, Indian women.

Introduction

Despite the high status of women during the Vedic period, gender bias was entrenched deeply in the cultural heritage of not only India but in other societies also. In many countries, discrimination against girls actually starts in the womb. Female foetuses are aborted because society places a high emphasis on giving birth to male children. Another important reason for the discrimination against the female foetus is the fear of heavy dowry that parents are expected to pay when their female children are married. Girls are also discriminated against in terms of their health and education. The infant mortality rate of girls is higher than that of boys in most countries. Girls are made to do more work than boys and parents prefer educating their sons rather than their daughters in the hope that the son will earn and support the family in the future but they overlook the old saying that "Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman, and you educate a whole nation".

Women have been treated inferior in the male dominated society. They have been subjected to several restrictions and were vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Violence against women exists everywhere. It varies from time to time and place to place, in type, frequency, intensity and control.

Even today there are many cases of violence and many ways in which women are need to suffer. During her youth, she has the fear of being raped and does not have any safety if she goes out alone. After marriage she is harassed and beaten for dowry, which may lead to suicide or murder. According to Doctor Pushpa Sinha (Role of media and violence against women), Dalgado, in analyzing violence have suggested that, "Violence as an exercise of force in an attempt to inflict injury or damage, we might add however, that it may also taken the term of threat to use violence unless one's aims are satisfied". Suma Chitnis gives another interesting corollary to the concept of violence which is defined as violation, transgression or socially unacceptable infliction of pain. Behaviour viewed as violence in one society may not be so viewed in another. What is unacceptable in one society may be acceptable in another society.

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the outstanding Indian Playwrights. He has mastered different genres of literature like Essays, Short Stories, Criticism, Screenplay Writing and Drama. He is known for his plays, *Shantata! Court Chaule Ahe (1967)*, *Ghashiram Kotwal (1972)*, *Sakharam Binder (1972)*, *Kamala (1981)*, *Kanyadaan (1983)*. He has received awards including the Padma Bhushan, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Filmfare Award, Saraswati Samman, Kalidas Samman and Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar. He is ranked with great playwrights like Badal Sarcar, Girish Karnad and Mohan Rakesh. In the preface to his collection of 'Six One Act Plays Raatra (night)', he has mentioned: Recently, my name has been repeatedly counted amongst the followers of the new drama sect. I have felt no great urge thus, far to determine which sect I belong to, nor do I expect to feel the need to do so in the future. I have written on any theme that has occupied my mind over time, stubbornly insisting that I write on in which ever form I thought best...It is wrong to support that everything different from the establishment is bad, childish and irrelevant. It is equally wrong to think that only which is different is good, true or valuable. Personally, despite being counted amongst the new dramatist, I love to lose myself in the best of Deval, Gadkari, Khadikar and Warekar... (Tendulkar 197)

Vijay Tendulkar has powerfully articulated the socio-political situations in his plays. He has expressed it 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 others are) and in my way brood over it. Once in a way I even do something to relieve myself of the tension and anxiety and agitation produced by this brooding. I participated in a protest meeting or dharma or a fast or morcha or a satyagrah I align myself with some civil liberty organization...

As a writer, I find myself persistently inquisitive, non conformist, ruthless, cold and brutal as compared to the other committed and human

As a social being, I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end...

As a writer, I feel fascinated by the violent exploiter and exploited relationship and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that the relationship is external fact of life however cruel, will never end. Not that, I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off. (Tendulkar 92)

Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal (1972)* set in Poona of the Peshwas revolves around Ghashiram Kotwal, the eponymous hero who came to Poona to make his future but was accused of thievery and put into jail. His reputation being sullied by the Brahmins of Poona, decided to take revenge on the

people of Poona in general and the Brahmin community in particular. Tendulkar shows us how to gain power and position, a father has morally degraded and baited his only daughter Gauri to allure Nana Phadnavis, the representative of Peshwas of Poona. The play shows us how Gauri had been systematically exploited once by her own father, who had sent her knowingly in the mouth of a scavenger/ a womanizer on the other hand how Nana had used her to gratify his carnal desire, for whom women are born to satisfy the physical needs of men. Nana's description of Gauri in their first encounter reveals Nana's evil intention and attitude towards women, which is prejudiced with violence and sexuality. He says:

Oh, can we? Can we find her? How beautifully formed! What a lovely figure! Did you see? Erect! Young! Tender! Ah! Ho ho! We've seen so many handled so many, but none like that one. None her equal. We wonder who she is (Tendulkar, 379).

Nana views sex as a part of power. He associates it with his majesty and greatness. He makes it a prestige point to have the girl otherwise his majesty and respect would be gone. Drink and sex comes as a relief for him. He threatens that nobody will keep his head if he does not get what he wants. Gauri is forced to be the mistress of that man who is already married many times. She accepts what her father decides for her. At last, Gauri is exchanged for the Kotwali. She compromises with her honour. She is sacrificed at the altar of personal desire, ambition and revenge. Innocent, young and nubile as she is described initially, she possessed all that is required to be exploited.

Once exchanged for the Kotwali, she remains hot favourite of Nana only for some time. She seems to enjoy power outwardly. But once Nana's fancy for her is over, she is discarded. She loses her charm, honour and respect. At last, she loses her life at the critical moment when her father was looking for a groom for her. At every juncture, Nana unfeelingly orders for the corpse to be thrown in river not for any holy reason or for cremation purpose but for the body not to be found. She dies a shameful death. Thus, she meets a terrible and pathetic end.

Throughout the play, Gauri is voiceless, disempowered and victimized. She silently bears the dictatorship of her father. Like most women of India, she is not involved even in the serious matter like marriage which belongs to her personal life only. She is thrashed in hell for the selfish purpose. In fact, Gauri is a representative of all those unlucky women who endure all these hardships in their life. She is the symbol of exploitation of female sexuality to represent the loss and destruction in their struggle for power.

In *Kanyadaan (1983)*, Tendulkar shows us discrimination and violence against women in the hands of Arun Athavali, a dalit whose ancestors had been suffered in the hands of upper class society. Jyoti, the daughter of Nath Devalikar, an MLA who insists on democracy at home has promised to marry Arun, going against the will of her mother Seva and brother Jayaprakash. Arun proves to be a violent husband who treats his wife as an object of revenge against all the persons of higher caste and class. Though Arun loves Jyoti very much but the dalit part of his mind lives in his tormented past and unleashes torment on his high caste wife. His past returns to haunt him every night and he turn into unpredictable savage beast, which has strange malice and a sadistic desire to punish his wife. He has crude satisfaction that he has "caught a Brahmin dame" (p 18). Not only the daughter is punished but Arun derives sadistic pleasure in abusing her parents too. Seva who is the leader of Sevalal is accused by Arun as a procuress who supplies girls from the sevalal to the socialist leaders. Arun even accuses that Jyoti's real father is not Mr. Nath but 'Guruji', the guide and philosopher of Seva.

When Seva asks Arun the reason of the quarrel, he shocks them saying that he has beaten Jyoti for which he does not feel shy but defence himself saying that abuse and beating are knitted in the webs of their lives. It is part and parcel of their lives.

Arun's brutality has been exposed in his non hypocritical behaviour, when he defends himself by saying:

"What am I but the son of scavengers. We don't know the non-violent ways of Brahmins like you. We drink and beat our wives..... we make love to them..... but the Beating is what gets publicized" (p 540).

For him beating of the wife does not mean that he hates her. He loves her too, but according to him it is never appreciated but they are evaluated by their negative sides only. So he says:

"I am a barbarian, a barbarian by birth when have I claimed any white collar culture" (p 539).

Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder (1972)* explores the world of domestic violence and victimization of women by men. In *Sakharam Binder* Champa and Laxmi are not individuals but the representative of entire women community who exploited under the utopian opium of family and marriage. Tendulkar agitated and revolted against the patriarchal conventions and customs to raise the question of women's sexual exploitation.

Sakharam is the oppressive head of his family in a lower middle class locality. For him the man-woman relationship is something absolutely commercial. He doesn't believe in the institution of marriage. He says:

"It's good thing I'm not a husband. Things are fine the way they are. You get everything you want and yet you're not tied down. If you've had enough, if she's had enough; you can always part. The game is over. Nothing to bother you after that" (p 129).

But he has insatiable appetite for female sex and for it he gives shelter to helpless women on his own terms. He keeps one woman at a time. First he brings Laxmi and then Champa but he makes it clear that he is a habitual womanizer and, drunkard; and before them he has cohabited with many women on contract. For him it is a master-slave relationship. So, the woman will not have any say in cohabitation. He is a successful polygamist outside the institution of marriage. The women have to live within the limits of Sakharam. The physical relationship without any ties and commitment is the life philosophy of Sakharam. He does not consider such relation a sin because he does not feel ashamed of it. He wants his woman to serve day and night for him and respect him, and satisfy him. He does not care a fig for her and throws her out when nothing womanly left about her. Sakharam did not listen to the plea of Laxmi and throws her out of the house and justified his decision of sending her out in the following words..... "And you know what I am like. Everything said and done, there's the body, the home of all our appetites. Try keeping them down-you can't. Impossible, so I decided, once and for all. No point in troubling her any further. She'll stay with her nephew for the rest of her life and worship those gods of her." (p 153)

Sakharam is dry honest and straight forward. He laughs at the double standard and hypocrisy of the middle class society. He himself thinks that he has helped the helpless women thrown out by their husbands by providing them with food, clothes and a shelter. In return, he expects them to slave for him and satisfy his animal instincts. Thus his behaviour towards his women seems to bring out his brutality. It makes him out to be a downright beast. The humanness in him seems to have

been subjected to such a cynicism under the weight of the hypocritical social mores so much so that it manifests itself in a perverted form. In consequences, all that is best in him seems warped and devilish.

The play *Kamala (1981)* is based on a real life incident of Ashwin Sarin, the then correspondent of the Indian Express, who bought a girl from rural flesh market and presented her at a press conference. In the play, Jaisingh Jadhav is the journalist who brings Kamala from a rural flesh market and presents her at the press conference. He does not have any motive to reform Kamala's life but only a means by which he can get promotion in his job and win reputation in his professional career. His craze for name and fame has transformed him loveless and mindless fellow. This play points out an unbearable fact that newspaper, the so called means of social reform, is transformed into an object of getting pelf and power. Simultaneously, here Vijay Tendulkar has attacked on the marriage institution. Sarita, Jaisingh's wife is an embodiment of the women is used either as slaves, menial servants, or stepping stones of their male counter parts. Kamala's entry in her house reveals to Sarita her husband, Jaisingh's egoistic, deceitful nature. Kamala makes Sarita conscious that she is the slave of her husband. Jaisingh treats both Kamala and Sarita not as human beings, but as objects of exhibition. The former brings him promotion in his job and reputation in his professional career and the latter provides him with domestic comfort and sexual pleasure in conjugal life. The play thus, exposes slavery of women in the male dominated society in India. Kamala makes Sarita conscious that she is the slave of her husband Jaisingh. Kamala's views on the subject how both of them have to adjust with Jaisingh are like a revelation for Sarita. She says, 'Memsahib, if you don't misunderstand, I'll tell you, the master bought you, he bought me too... So, Memsahib, both of us must stay here together like sisters. We will keep the master happy... Fifteen days of the month, you will sleep with the master; the other fifteen I'll sleep with him' (p 35).

The women characters in the play depict simplicity, innocence, sincerity, generosity and the spirit of devotion to their male companions. The character of Sarita suggests that even a modern woman is not as free as her male-counterpart in contemporary society, as she has to follow her husband's whims and caprices in and outside the household life. Sarita becomes aware of the fact that her dignity or position in the house is not far away from Kamala's. Instead of rebelling against her husband, she provides him an emotional support, when he is fired.

Towards the end of the play *Kamala*, she tells Kakasaheb '... a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave' (p 52). Vijay Tendulkar exhibits selfishness and hypocrisy of the modern young generation, and brings out the oppressive nature of contemporary society. Jaisingh Jadhav is the representative of the modern hypocritical society, where the craze for both money and success renders him loveless and mindless.

In the play, '**Silence! The court is in session**' (1967) Tendulkar shows us how Ms Benare, one of the members of the Amateur Theatre Group namely: 'The Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association', has been trapped by her co-actors in the 'Mock-Trial of Lydon B. Johnson' at the suburban village. Ms. Benare, a teacher by profession was a self dependent, carefree modern woman and a parody of her counter sex, in the middle class milieu of Maharashtra. Inferiority complex, insecurity, mundane existence and lack of confidence provoked her male counterparts of the theatrical group plan to expose and humiliate Benare, going out of human morality and compassion. In the 'Mock-Law-Court' all the members of the troupe played different roles—Mr Kashikar, the mock judge, Mr Sukhatme, the lawyer of defence and lawyer of prosecution whereas Rokde, Karnik, Ponkshe, Samant, Rawte assumed the role of witnesses.

In the name of game Benare has been tortured, humiliated, exposed and victimized by labelling charges upon charges on her. Mr Kashikar, the judge accused her of infanticide to sully her character. He says:

‘Prisoner Miss Benare, under section no. 302 of Indian penal code, you have been accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the aforementioned crime?’ (Silence p 25)

Not only that, Mr Kashikar quoted a Sanskrit proverb: ‘Janani janmabhumiścha svargadapi gariyasi’ means mother and motherland both are even higher than heaven. (Silence 30)

But it is ironical and hypocritical on the part of male dominated society in general and Mr Kashikar in particular, because, on the one hand he advocates supreme position of women as mothers but on the other hand he drags a mother into the witness box and punishes her with his most heinous judgement. He says: ‘Neither you nor anyone else should ever do anything like this again. No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore the court hereby sentences that you shall leave. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed’ (silence 119).

Violence and domination was its peak when Ms Benare was handicapped inside a room bolt from outside and thus denying escape to the plea of tormented Benare. She even had been assaulted by her own gender, when she has been dragged to the witness box by Mrs. Kashikar by pulling her hair. She has been silenced and denied verbal right to say her say. Whenever Benare speaks, the judge orders her to keep ‘silence’ by banging the gravel. The banging of the gravel is symbolic of the Indian society, which practices partial treatment and justice on women. Benare was not only victimized and compelled to digest discrimination in the mock-law-court’, in her real life also her chastity had been violated once by her own maternal uncle in juvenile stage and once in her matured stage by Prof. Damle. Benare narrates the incidence of her blemished chastity respectively which is an eye-opener on the violence and domination of male centric society. She says:

‘Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn’t even know what sin was. I swear by my mother, I didn’t! I insisted on marriage. So, I could live my beautiful lovely dreams openly. Like anyone else! But all of them - my mother too were against it, and my brave man turned tail and ran’ (silence 74).

Again Prof. Damle who gratified his carnal desire and impregnated Benare in extra marital affair denies responsibility and dejected her as if women are mere commodities ‘use and throw’ Benare narrates: ‘I offered my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering and went his way. He didn’t care about them. He was not a god. He was a man. For him everything was the body! That is all!’ (P 73-74)

The women characters in Tendulkar’s dramas suffer a lot as the victims of the hegemonic power structure. The female body as an object of male sexual fantasy and desire is theatrically presented by Tendulkar. All women characters in his plays are marginalized objects in interlocking system of sexual politics and power politics. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak’s study of the unhappy lot of the subaltern people in ‘Can subaltern speak?’ has great similarity with Vijay Tendulkar’s female characters. Michel Foucault views that women in our society fall into an extremely complex system of relations and this system is based on ‘Highly intricate mosaic’ (power/knowledge) of man-woman relationship. It is not only with the case of Laxmi, Champa, Kamala, Sarita, Jyoti, Gauri and Benare but of the whole female race from the time immemorial, women are treated as beasts and slaves. To conclude and picturized the position of women in the society, a quotation from Virginia Wollf is worth mentioning where she delineates the same picture of women in society: ‘Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from

cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger... (and) in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband'

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