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Kamala as not a name or Entity but Numerous Presences: Vijay Tendulkar's Celebration of Womanhood amidst Patriarchy in *Kamala*

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Abstract: Vijay Tendulkar's plays show a keen awareness of society and a penetrating insight into human psyche. The play grows around a real life story of Jaisingh, a journalist who literally buys a woman from the sex trade for his publicity, and higher prospects in his career. The uneducated woman Kamala is brought to his household where the same is put in the custody of his wife and her maid. As the three women meet they interact with each other from their respective position and try to plumb the depths of each other's understanding.

Keywords: marginalized, patriarchy, sex trade, sisterhood, womanhood

Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar's plays mostly deal with burning issues relating to women in the best of attire to express disgust over society's bias towards the marginalized and the downtrodden, whether of sex or caste. The marginalized find their centred platform in the hands of Tendulkar. Tendulkar provides a space for one and all, making them look perfect and real even in their new-found state. However much the society might castigate and disrupt these characters, Tendulkar pinpoints the plight of his characters and highlights them with a special glance.

Tendulkar's *Kamala* is based on a true story of a journalist who purchased a woman from the rural sex trade industry and brought her to urban limelight with the sole aim of gaining in prominence for himself. Kamala the uneducated girl from the village, who had been bought from the market by Jaisingh Jadhav, the journalist is unconcerned of the politics and money-making growing around her. Instead she is groomed into satiating the sexual appetite of the patriarchal society. Kamala has no notion of identity or self dignity and is eager to serve the purpose of his male bidder. As she enters into Jaisingh's house she is quite inquisitive and prompt in finding out of what help she could be to her master. She meets two other women in the household— Sarita, the good wife going by the patriarchal code and following every code of conduct and the maid Kamalabai. The three women though poles apart in their social standing stand on the same platform as each is a menial servant catering to the needs of family and society.

The women judge their roles and try to find out the purpose of their existence. Though these understanding may vary from one to the other as per their awareness and education, initially the women very sympathetically deal with the other considering the other a close confederate. However the characters change themselves and reinvent them in the vision of an empathizer. Tendulkar's vision penetrates deep into the interstices of the societal disturbances and the cryptic feeling of a marginalized. Tendulkar's play *Gidhade* (Vultures), *Silence*, *Sakharam Binder*, all question the basic ethos of human culture and society. The paper delves into the interstices of human relationships as the three women form a sisterhood in their search for identity.

Discussion

In Tendulkar's eponymous play *Kamala*, the protagonist's understanding of home and husband is taken over by the wife as she realizes that she too holds the same status as Kamala. In a conversation between Kamala and Sarita, Kamala asks Sarita how much her husband might have paid for her and when the latter answers it was seven hundred, she realizes that it was a bad bargain to have paid seven hundred apart from the clothes and food that her man must be providing for her and to have no children even after that. Hence Kamala's assurance:

He spent a lot of money on the two of us. ...It isn't easy to earn money. A man has to labour like an ox to do it. So, memsahib, both of us must stay here together like sisters. We'll keep the master happy. We'll make him prosperous. The master will have children. I'll do the hard work, and I'll bring forth the children, I'll bring them up. You are an educated woman. You keep the accounts and run the house. Put on lovely clothes and make merry with the master. Go out with him on holidays and feast-days...Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed? (Tendulkar 35)

In Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* and *Sakharam Binder* the women form a sisterhood. In *Silence* while Mrs Kashikar shoves Benare into the fire, here in *Kamala* and *Sakharam Binder* the women come to each other's aid, understanding each other's perspective. As N.S. Dharan writes in his *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*, "Both Leela Benare and Sarita are educated and efficient and refuse to be cowed down by men" (Dharan 28).

Jaisingh's role is prominently done as an aspiring journalist riding up the ladder and working out a path to reach the upper stratum of society and life. The characters in *Kamala*, very few in number make a vibrant presence in their difference of age and diversity of opinions. The characters feel a pull for two basic impulses— to rise high and make his way into the depths of life. The very choice of name *Kamala* refers to Goddess visibly meaning Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. The Goddess worshipped and revered in Hindu households for her beauty, glory and brilliant dazzle of wealth is here an Adivasi girl bought from the flesh market by Jaisingh. While *Kamala* is prepared for physical exploitation, she doesn't face physical extortion in the hands of Jaisingh. Instead she herself is eager to serve her master who had bought her. In this regard it can be said that the notion of a woman of the house being regarded as the goddess of wealth acts as a leit motif in his other play, *Sakharam Binder*, well. *Sakharam*, who had never been subjugated by any woman, and had merely used them for his sexual satisfaction, ultimately surrenders before Laxmi, under difficult situation. Laxmi, who returns after having quitted, stands as the emblem of the homemaker, though not a wife.

Kamala is taken as a topic of discussion and her plight is not even recognised by herself. She does not even understand the dishonour she faces in the hands of Jaisingh and the like who use her for the sole purpose of rising up the social ladder instead of addressing the problem of the society or the concern of the woman. As has been mentioned by Arundhati Banerjee, the veteran critic, that Tendulkar, a "journalist by profession" and one who had "penned daily columns in newspapers" (Banerjee xix), directly questions the ethics of journalism as the story is based on a real-life incident. Made into a film in 1985, starring Deepti Naval, Shabana Azmi and Marc Zuber, the incident had remained a site of heated debate ever since.

Tendulkar very appropriately uses the names *Kamala*, *Kamlabai* to make them resemblances of the Goddess Lakshmi, who is also known as *Kamala*, to ironically bring to the fore the Indian male consciousness which worships a woman as a Goddess and does not deter from indulging in the body of a woman as flesh to satisfy his senses. The three women characters in the play belong to different socio-cultural backgrounds and belong to different class or communities. While *Kamala* had been brought up in a rural setting, *Sarita* had belonged to an urban household. On the contrary *Kamlabai* had lived in an urban setting though belonging to the working class.

However the two of the three women in *Kamala* have the same name. They are merely resemblances of the same character or have similar existences in spite of being poles apart.

When Kamala eagerly waits for the satisfaction of her master, she waits in anticipation as to why she had not been exploited though she had been earned with hard earned money. The age-old family structure where women had been considered to be the soul-meet of the husband has been flaunted and she is brought down to the status of a usable commodity, a bare necessity for the survival of man. Just like any other thing needed in the house, the woman is seen as an object that can be bought and unpacked, used and purpose meted. This implication becomes even more acerbic as Jaisingh holds on to his wife steeped in desire as she is about to serve food and claims, he is hungry for her.

Vijay Tendulkar creates a collage of the human society and a picture of the home and hearth in an Indian setting through the projection of the women characters who are diverse in their experiences, aspirations, love, desire, understanding, their social standing and position and their journey on their path of life. The characters both men and women derive their succour from life, and each character has a separate journey. However amidst these host of characters who are real and befitting the contemporary society, the characters are steeped in myth, and the age-old tradition of social existence and womanhood.

Jaisingh's wife Sarita realizes in the course of time that there is hardly any difference between Kamala, the woman who had been bought as a toy to project the rampant sex-trade going on in the outskirts of the big cities and herself. Sarita finds Kamala's saree is torn and though Jaisingh wants to project the woman before the press, just as she is, Sarita never forgets to mention that she is a woman. The good wife tries to assert her self and powers in the house and tries to execute them. She hands over her sari to Kamala to make the latter drape in her sari and asks Kamalabai, the maid to carry the saris to Kamala. This symbolic gesture of Sarita offering Kamala to put on her saris and Kamalabai carrying them makes the women resemble each other and one is the mirror image of the other. In the society and by the societal practices Sarita realizes that she is none other than another slave of the household. She too bears the same status as the other inmates of the house who are the actual slaves and people who have been bought.

Sarita, through the incident of Jaisingh's buying Kamala for rising up the social ladder, comes to a realization of her self. She comes to believe that she too is a slave as she too had been brought to Jaisingh's house in exchange of a huge dowry provided by her father. She insists on keeping back Kamala as a person of the house. In a trice Sarita had developed a sisterhood with Kamala and Kamalabai, the maid and had felt a serious alienation from her status as the wife and hence the possessor of the household. She wants to provide Kamala whom she has almost started considering the projection of her real self, with the comfort of the home and hearth which Sarita believes Kamala has the right to possess being bought by Jaisingh. However Jaisingh very practically analyses that keeping back Kamala in his house could only prove to the world that he had bought a woman for satisfying his purpose, and hence engaged in sex-trade for himself. In spite of Sarita's urges and Kamala's unwillingness Jaisingh almost drags Kamala to the orphanage, a Women's Home.

Sarita was nothing but a “bonded labourer” (Tendulkar 17). Though in fake sarcasm, yet quite truly Jain, Jaisingh’s colleague in the play claims, “Hero of anti-exploitation campaign makes slave of wife!” (Tendulkar 17). Sarita feels the truth of it beneath her skin and gives up her pride of being the woman of the house, the Lakshmi, according to traditional notion in Hindu religious belief. She refuses to satisfy Jaisingh’s hunger (32) and instead imagines herself on the same platform as the other women Kamala and Kamalabai. The two Kamala s bearing the name of the Goddess of wealth Lakshmi are ruined by the societal processes and dismal functioning of society. As Sarita bypasses Jaisingh and does not provide her husband whom she believes is her master too, Jaisingh names her “[t]he bitch” (32), as she leaves, revealing his true self behind his apparent sophistication and good nature.

Sarita realizes that she too is in a hierarchy with the man of the house and far from benevolence it is a game of power which she must fight and win. Though never pronounced clearly Sarita is happy to see Jaisingh in a tight situation as his boss decides to sack him from job from his more than dare act of buying a woman, certainly an offence against the values of the paper. The man reigns supreme in the household which Sarita hates. As clearly mentioned in the stage direction, she “is in the grip of heartfelt aversion” (32). She confesses to her uncle:

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 a 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 only 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 (Tendulkar 46)

However her uncle makes it clear to her that Jaisingh was not a “bad man” (Tendulkar 46) and exactly conformed to the tenets of the society. According to Kakasaheb he was nothing “unusual” (46), merely proud of himself, his material gains and a simple “go-getter” (Tendulkar 47). However Sarita is uncompromising and she asserts her desire to reach out to her piece of sky:

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 (Tendulkar 47).

Sarita fights for her status in the household and believes she can and should acquire the same status as the man of the house— having the authority to take decisions and make commands. She stands on the same platform as Jaisingh and waits for the apt occasion.

As Sarita vies for her status in the house which belongs to her yet does not, the two women, the maid Kamalabai and the adivasi girl Kamala fight for their assured space in the house. While Kamala considers herself as the mistress of Jaisingh bought for the same purpose, and hence of a higher status than the servant of the house; Kamalabai considers herself a member of the house for a longer time and one who has strong connections with the same. Each jostles for her space and the frustrated Kamalabai tells Sarita that she would be leaving in case the other woman continued to exert her control over her—

Kamalabai: She asks me, were you bought or were you hired? And that wasn't all. She asks me, how much did they hire you for? What work do you have to do? Me, she's asking me. I said, what's it got to do with you? Do you know what she said? Servants shouldn't raise their head and answer back. They should be grateful for their daily bread. She said that to me (Tendulkar 25).

Conclusion

The two women contest their space and try to attest their position in the household. Kamalabai who had gained the position in the house through hard labour and considered Sarita as her master is quite shocked to find Kamala behaving as both the servant, conquering her space and trying to enter into Sarita's domain as the woman of the house. Kamalabai is shocked and frustrated at Kamala's attitude. She instead questions Kamala's too bold questioning of her (Kamalabai's) identity. In the duel that wages to find out who holds on to the house and why, leaves Sarita unperturbed. Sarita is confirmed in the thought that each one of the three is nothing other than slave, as she had clearly mentioned.

Sarita instead plans a dramatic Press Conference at Press Club in Delhi in the same strain as that had been organized by Jaisingh. She confesses her heartfelt realization of her existence and her husband's role in her life:

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 great advocate of freedom. And he brings home a slave and exploits her...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 (Tendulkar 46).

Sarita's heart-rending lament can be felt as sound of her sobs gets reverberated through numerous middle-class households if not all. Tendulkar's comment on his play seems justified as he says in an interview:

I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle class family and have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My work has come from within me, as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live. If they want to entertain and make merry, fine go ahead, but I can't do it, I have to speak the truth (qtd Saxena).

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