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Women as Victims of Power in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*

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Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* is a critique of patriarchal values and institutions. This play questions the power structure that always attributes negative traits to women and thereby confines them to subservient positions. It presents women as victims of power and focuses on patriarchal order in social set-up. Tendulkar here presents how women are still considered the weaker sex and dominated by the so called powerful males. The relationships between men and women are basically political as these are based on the ideas of power.

Since man-woman relationship informs the basic structure of a society, empathy, love, understanding and reciprocity are expected from both sides. However, this mutual relationship degenerates into power as one, i.e, man tries to dominate the other, i.e, a woman. Consequently such a society, based exclusively on power-system, always relegates women to subservient roles. Male patriarchal society, influenced by socially invested power in itself, never conforms to the positive traits that a woman is associated with. It denies them any status of human beings. A woman is meted out ill-treatment not only in her household but also in larger public sphere. As Marilyn French notes, "The personal is the political...the value structure of a culture is identical in both public and private areas, that what happens in bedroom, and vice-versa, and that mythology notwithstanding, at present the same sex is in control of both places."(442). Earlier, women thought that their oppression in the home was the result of their fate but later on a consciousness dawned on them that the gender-specific discrimination was a part of the larger power system which operates from everywhere to subdue women. The subordination and devaluation of women, based on exaggerated biological gender difference, resulted in the binaries of male superiority and female inferiority, created by patriarchal power system.

In fact, patriarchy is an arbitrary system which by exaggerating biological differences between men and women allots a privileged position to men and a subordinate position to women. There is no dearth of sayings and statements in philosophy and religion that help to perpetuate male dominance. The revered poet, Tulsidas, in one of his couplets said that a drum, an illiterate, a low-caste, an animal and a woman, all can be set right and made to work only by beating. Koran Sharif, the holy text of Islam, also privileges man by giving him a special status over woman. It also states that woman is like a piece of land and man has the right to use and abuse her as per his wishes and commands. Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal book, *The Second Sex*, explains the ideology of patriarchy, which reduces woman to a mere sexual being and that makes it easier to subjugate her. Woman is given a secondary status as compared to man. "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other". (Parshley 16).

Tendulkar states that although patriarchy has no serious logic or rationality to support itself, yet surprisingly patriarchal values are so pervasive that they are accepted blindly by all human beings as universal truths. The patriarchal attitudes and beliefs are embedded in the psyche of people and are cherished, preserved and passed on by each generation as natural law. Hence, patriarchal system propagates the dominance of man. Vijay Tendulkar's play

Kamala essentially incorporate this most obsessive universal issue of subjugation of women in Indian society.

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*, a play in two acts, was first produced in 1981. It highlights the exploitation and oppression suffered by women under privileged sections of society. *Kamala* is an overt critique of power system which treats woman mere as a slave or a thing of convenience but never as a human being. It is a 'gynocentric' play like *Silence!* the Court is in Session. (Dharan 29). The play questions the socially entrenched beliefs, which endow men with power and supremacy and make women prisoners of those beliefs. The question of gender is contextualised here in the unscrupulous world of sensational journalism, which is, in fact, a product of capitalism. And the play is a strong indictment of oppression of woman in the personal space of marriage, of wife by husband and equally in the social space, of a tribal woman by an ambitious journalist. In general sense, the play presents man's dominance over woman in different conditions.

The playwright was inspired to write this play by a real life incident. Tendulkar himself closely associated with the world of journalism explains his motive clearly:

...when investigative journalism has a heroic halo around it, my creative writing takes me to the exploitative and male ego part of it and I compulsively depict that rather ugly side of the hero instead of projecting him simply as a heroic figure. (59).

The play presents the imbalance of power in human relationships. Since gender relations are characterized by power and work most clearly but usually unchallenged in marriage, in the play marriage is one of the focal points. The household of Jaisingh Jadav, a journalist in Delhi forms the locale. Jaisingh is married to an educated woman from an aristocratic family, Sarita. In material terms, their house does not lack luxuries and modern amenities and so their married life ought to be happy. But in reality, theirs is a barren marriage due to selfish motives and ruthlessness of the ambitious husband. Hollowness pervades their married life because Jaisingh has an absolute control over his wife Sarita. He is a true product of the patriarchal society. He takes for granted all the services rendered by Sarita as his natural right. He possesses all socially approved masculine qualities like ambition, anger, boldness, insensitivity, individualism, and above all, power, with which he serves his selfish designs. He acts as a master of the house who has the prerogative to rule over others. He is absolutely indifferent and insensitive towards his wife. He talks authoritatively and rudely to her and when she refuses his sexual demands, he calls her a "bitch". Jaisingh expects his wife to be servile to him. He is an absolute tyrant in the house. In his house all decisions are taken by him and anything to be implemented has to be approved by him first. He expects his word to be taken as law in the house and tells Sarita authoritatively, "it's I who takes decisions in the house and no one else. Do you understand?"(42). All he does in the house is to abuse, swear and shout at others in an inebriated condition. He is basically good only for his profession where he pursues his ambitions ruthlessly and unscrupulously. Through Jaisingh's character, the playwright depicts the fact that Indian men have been conditioned in such a way that they have internalized the need for power particularly dealing with women. Hence, the play clearly emphasizes marriage as not something based on love but rather on the interplay of power.

Marriage for Sarita is more of bondage because her individuality has been completely erased by the dominance of her husband. She has unconsciously learned to subdue her desires and she works for Jaisingh at his command as per his wishes. In her husband's absence, she attends to his phone calls and notes down each call and the messages to be shown later to him. As she tells her uncle, Kakasaheb, "That's the way you see it. My husband sees it differently. If I say they didn't tell me their names he gets angry with me for not asking." (Tendulkar 3). Sarita is intimidated and scared of her husband. When she comes to know that he is coming back to Delhi, she panics and tells her maid Kamalabai:

Sahib is just coming. Make a curry from that cauliflower in the fridge. See if those mangoes in the basket Kakasaheb brought are ripe. If they are, put out six or seven. See if there's any beer. If there isn't, send Ramdev to get some. Is last night's briyani still good.... Did Ramdev get the clothes from the dhobi? (4).

She is nervous before his arrival and even after he is inside the house, she is fearful of him and totally servile towards him. Here we find that Sarita lives in her own home as a maid. Sarita's fear in her mind of her husband presents indirect dominance of her husband on her. Even in her husband's absence Sarita does not feel herself free from her husband's dominance. Sarita's position is not very different from other Indian women, as spelt out by Kamla Das:

You called me wife.
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and to offer
at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering beneath your
monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost
my will and reason, to all your questions I mumbled incoherent
replies." (118).

The play is a comment on the sad state of affairs in the country where, even after so many years of independence, women are deprived of their basic rights. "Unavoidably conscious of women's marginalization in a society where males formulate the rules of living, one cannot deny or ignore the forces working towards women's subjugation." (Roy 22). Even after freedom people are enslaved in some way or the other. They do not enjoy the basic right to lead a free life. Though centuries have elapsed but the lot of women remains the same. They are not only treated as inferior beings but are also deprived of their dignity as human beings.

A woman's personality, quality and way of life which she had in her parental home are erased after marriage. Certain duties concerning her husband's family are imposed on her. And, she is supposed to perform her duties efficiently and in a submissive manner. After marriage she is not supposed to protest against her husband similarly in this play Sarita does not question or complain against her husband's lack of participation in the management of household. Her situation is almost equivalent to that of a puppet who is easily manipulated and controlled by the master. It seems particularly apt in the case of Sarita what John Stuart Mill says comparing a woman's state in marriage to that of a slave, "a personal body servant of a despot" since her husband may "claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations." (40). In the play too, Jaisingh demands sex as a marital right which Sarita can't withhold from him. He is utterly indifferent to the needs, desires and wishes of his wife. He

being powerful by virtue of being her husband, orders her all the time and considers it natural that all her orders will be carried out. Even things like checking if enough water is ready for bath, which Jaisingh could have easily managed himself are imposed as duties on Sarita.

For ten years of her married life, Sarita is a perfect embodiment of the concept of 'Pativrata Aryastree' upheld by the Indian society. She performs the duties of an efficient housekeeper and a good wife religiously and devotedly. She is, truly, as her husband's friend Jain puts it rather teasingly, a "lovely bonded labourer" in a prison like house who provides her husband with domestic comfort, sexual enjoyment and social companionship. She is an object in Jaisingh's life, which has high utility but is treated as a non-entity. After all she provides all the energy and support for her husband to be a successful professional. Sarita remains confined to the very closed and personal area of home. She is so docile, self-effacing and adjusting that submission always reflects in her behaviour. She cannot exercise her choice in the house and has to seek approval of her husband always. She bears patiently when Jaisingh scolds, snubs and degrades her. Such physical manipulation presents power here. Sarita tells her uncle an incident when fed up with the prevailing circumstances, she told her husband that she has decided to go back to her parental home, instead of persuading her to change her decision, he booked her ticket. This particular incident reveals the lack of solicitude for Sarita on Jaisingh's part. However, Jaisingh is attached to Sarita for his sexual satisfaction and for the fulfillment of his domestic needs. Sarita is nothing more to him than a maid.

The irony lies in the fact that Sarita not only remains absolutely unaware of her persistent oppression by her husband but also acquiescent to it in ten years of marriage. Here, she resembles Nora in Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House* (1879) who too does not realize her doll-like existence in marriage for about eight years.

The turning point in her life comes with the arrival of Kamala, a poor illiterate, tribal woman, whom her husband Jaisingh has brought to prove the truth of a sensational new item. Jaisingh has actually bought Kamala from a flesh market in Bihar where women are publicly auctioned after being tested by men. Jaisingh proudly tells his wife of the fact:

They sell human beings at this bazaar at Luhardaga beyond Ranchi. Human beings. They have an open auction for women of all sorts of ages. People come from long distances to make their bids.... 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.....(14).

Sarita is shocked on hearing this and in fact disapproves of the fact. Sarita does not feel threatened by Kamala's arrival in the house. She could have been jealous of the presence of another woman in the house who is under the impression that both of them have the same status in the house and are owned by Jaisingh as their master. Keeping more than one woman as wife here highlights the status of a woman as a commodity which can be bought, sold, used and thrown by the powerful patriarchy. Kamala, as she is inexperienced in the ways of living tactfully, tries to make a deal with Sarita and tells her:

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, 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 merry with the master. Go out with him on holidays and on feast days..... Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed? (35).

Sarita could have instigated Jaisingh to get rid of Kamala on hearing this or could have been angered or agitated, but this does not happen. Rather, she is compassionate and caring towards Kamala and insists on her staying with them. Sarita's noble nature is revealed when she shows her concern about the ragged appearance of Kamala when the latter is being taken to the press conference:

JAISINGH: She will come to the press conference in the same clothes now.

SARITA : She's a woman, after all. And her sari is torn. (21).

At this time Sarita pleads with her husband to allow Kamala to cover herself properly, but her efforts prove futile as Jaisingh does not allow Kamala to change her ragged clothes. He suggests that she should look natural so that the press conference would get its hype. Jaisingh's remarks present his inhuman treatment towards Kamala.

Sarita's compassion for Kamala brings its reward. It is only after talking to Kamala that she suddenly realizes the truth of her servile position in marriage. Kamala herself on the margins of margin becomes instrumental in the awakening of Sarita's 'self and individuality'. She becomes aware of her real condition only when during her conversation with Kamala she asks her what price Jaisingh has paid for her:

KAMALA : Can I ask you something? You won't be angry?

SARITA : No, go on.

KAMALA : How much did he buy you for? (34).

Sarita realizes that she is only being used by her husband. In the marriage market she is a mere commodity. This realization is full of pain for her, she tells her uncle :

I was asleep. I was unconscious even when I was awake. Kamala woke me up with a shock. Kamala shocked 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. Slave 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 [she is twisted in pain.] (46).

Sarita's growth as stems from this awareness. She firmly decides to restore her own dignity and self-respect in her life by exposing the power inherent in her relationship with Jadav. She realizes that her situation in Jaisingh's household is not very different from Kamala's. Jaisingh had bought Kamala after a paltry sum, but with this "slave" Sarita, he even got money as dowry from her father. Both the women are part of transactions by men in the game

of power politics. Kamala's arrival in Jaisingh's household thus proves to be a boon for Sarita. She can now see the vicious politics of power operative at all levels in various forms, even though she had experienced it only in the closed space of home. She is bestowed with courage and determination to live life with dignity and her own free will and makes a decision not to submit to her present subjugation any more.

The very act of buying Kamala is interrogated by the playwright. The brutal and exploitative forces of the social system are ruthlessly exposed through this incident. Jaisingh takes pride in buying her for a trivial amount of two hundred and fifty rupees. "Even a bullock costs more than that," he says "I bought her dirt cheap." (14). Kamala belongs to the oppressed powerless group in society to whom the world is hostile at all levels. She is a victim of greed, lust and ambition of men at large; men who can buy her in the market for personal use or equally to gain professional mileage. Jaisingh proclaims that he has a humanitarian purpose behind buying her but in reality, she is a tool, which will help him ensure better prospects in his career, by producing evidence of a heinous practice, which no one else in his profession could produce. He is vain about the inhuman act and tells his wife, "Do you know, I turned the world upside down to find this bazaar. I was the first journalist to reach it." (15).

Jaisingh has no sympathy or concern for Kamala. She is also just a device in self-promotion, to ensure a step higher in his career. The manner in which he prepares and coaxes Kamala for the press conference reveals his selfishness. When Kamala hesitates, "his expression and tone of voice" hardens and he commands her like a master. For him, kamala's torn clothes are more important than her honour and dignity. Therefore, he ensures that she accompanies him in such a state. He does not let Kamala have a bath after the long journey from Bihar because it would spoil her image as an exploited poor adivasi woman though Jaisingh himself is feeling dirty and greasy. According to him, she is a tribal woman and has "natural endurance". Jaisingh has already planned to get rid of Kamala as soon as she serves his purpose of being presented as an evidence in the press conference. Although Sarita is unwilling to send Kamala to 'Nari-Niketan' yet Jaisingh is very adamant to carry out his plans and says, "Look here don't be sentimental about it. Look at it from her point of view. She won't feel a thing about it. She must go there tomorrow. Once today's press conference is over, she has no business here. It's all been arranged." (26).

This ghastly act overtly points a situation in which a male exercises his power over a woman only to satisfy his ego. Jaisingh does not consider Kamala as a human being who can experience hurt, dejection, loneliness and isolation. He does not even think of the repercussions of his act on Kamala's life. He merely wishes to use her as a trump card in the contest for power.

The playwright makes a scathing attack on the exploitative world of power, here revealed in the valueless world of sensational journalism. At the press conference, Kamala does not get any sympathy or understanding from journalists. Instead she further becomes a subject of male's sexual gaze. The participants of the press conference symbolize all male spectators who take a voyeuristic delight in woman even when she is inhumanly treated. For them, Kamala's life is a "tamasha". The questions asked from her are unpleasant, awkward, degrading and embarrassing but the men are least bothered about her plight. Finally, after the press conference, prevailing over Sarita, Jaisingh succeeds in taking Kamala to Nari-Niketan. This reveals the duplicity, shamelessness and vulgarity of the patriarchal system which rests with males who render women powerless. In the patriarchal social set-up, commodification of women is carried out in such impersonal places as flesh markets where they are traded for

very low prices. A woman is seen as a negotiable commodity, which can be bartered for man's selfish interests. Hence, Kamala in a way becomes symbolic of all those powerless women who are exploited and victimized in a power system. No doubt, "Kamala is an indictment of the success-oriented male-dominated society where women are often victims or stepping stones in men's achievements." (Bannerjee 15).

In the play, gender oppression is highlighted through the valueless world of sensational and investigative journalism which embodies in itself the power to make things more sensational than they actually are. As a journalist, Jaisingh lacks any human feeling or concern. For him the "art lies in presenting the case—not in the case itself." (15) In this respect, he is a complete foil to Kakasaheb who practiced journalism with values and a social purpose. And the irony is that he talks of morals and of upholding morality. When Kakasaheb asks him the reasons for taking "desperate risks" in his professional life, he talks pompously as a socially committed journalist:

There's a commitment behind it, there's a social purpose so what if you don't recognize it? What I'm doing—what we are doing—there's a great need today for somebody to do just that. In the moral rot that's set in—in this country, someone's got to uphold moral principles, moral norms, moral values.... The weak and backward sections of society are under attack. We need someone to make a noise against it.... We need a force that will raise his consciousness, prepare him to struggle for social and political changes. (23-24).

The loud talk is a mere hypocritical façade, which he employs in order to be successful in his ambitious ventures. He is highly self-centred and career oriented. He dares to take risks for his "blood-thirsty professional plot", as Kakasaheb puts it, so that he can survive in the competitive world. What Jaisingh does not realize is that he himself is a pawn of the capitalist powers till he is sacked by the proprietor of the paper. As his friend Jain puts it, "A big paper doesn't recognize respect and all that, Kakasaheb—it only knows about circulation and advertisements. And profit and loss." (48). He even states, "we are hunters by habit", thereby echoing Tennyson, "Man is the hunter; woman is his game." (Millet 79). Truly, Jaisingh is a hunter who is blinded by ambition and obsessed with success and uses woman whether Sarita or Kamala as a device to attain his goals. His thirst for power corrodes him completely making him insensitive even towards those who are close to him. Consequently, he not only loses his job but also ruins his married life.

The two minor characters, Kakasaheb and Jain who apparently look different are also more of mouthpieces of patriarchal structure. So ingrained is the patriarchal ideology amongst men that even the Gandhian Kakasaheb, Sarita's uncle, who believes firmly in values, endorses Jaisingh's treatment of Sarita as the regular practice in marriage with nothing unusual about it. He tells her, "It may be unpleasant, but it's true. If the world is to go on, marriage must go on. And it will go on like this." (47). Kakasaheb seems to corroborate what St. Paul had said plainly, "wives submit to your husbands." (Wollstonecraft 109). The old man who argues against exploitative journalism does not argue equally vehemently against exploitative husbands. Kakasaheb seems to sympathise with Sarita but he is not prepared to bring her to the centre space supposedly reserved for the man. Simone de Beauvoir's statement about male chauvinism is applicable to Kakasaheb's double standards:

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. (11).

He also confesses to his niece how he too had ill-treated his wife in his youth. He tries his best to persuade Sarita to make a compromise and adjust to the ways of the male-dominated world. Kakasaheb resembles Nath Devalikar in Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* who claims to be Gandhian idealist but is in fact a powerful hypocrite. Although Jain is sympathetic towards Sarita, yet his concern for her remains only that of an outsider's. Jain like Jaisingh, follows his footsteps as a patriarchal agent and enjoys himself at the cost of Kamala in the press conference. He is also a hollow and hypocrite person like Jaisingh, caring the least for his wife.

However, towards the end of the play, Sarita undergoes a sea-change and questions the prevalent patriarchal ideology which discriminates against women, "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? Does he have one extra sense? A woman can do everything a man can. (47).

Thus, the epiphanic moment makes her bolder, stronger and endows her with a potential to confront the patriarchal attitudes and values with courage. She is determined to be a different person in future, as she tells Kakasaheb, "But 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. (52).

Sarita embarks on a journey of self-discovery and redefinition of her identity. And yet she is not ruthless. On seeing her husband beset by a crisis as he is dismissed from his job, she at least provides humanitarian support and postpones her own decision to assert herself right away. At this moment, the positive human and life giving values take over the oppressive and restrictive values. On the contrary, by playing the role of a master, Jaisingh loses, "the delights of equality, namely those of esteem, of friendship, of intellectual and sympathetic intercourse for the vulgar pleasures of command." (Thompson 30). Ultimately, Sarita is not only able to see her own predicament properly, but also starts questioning the whole basis and practice of patriarchy.

The play depicts that though wife is a companion to her husband yet she does not enjoy equal status. Man is invariably superior and the wife his subordinate. Women across cultures are denied dignity. They are forced to take secondary position in relation to men. Woman is not supposed to have an independent mind. She is forever ruled and controlled by man. The subordination of woman has been there since ancient times. They were always to be protected by fathers, husbands or sons because they were not considered fit for independence. Mary Wollstonecraft says, "Man, from the remotest antiquity found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion." (109). Tendulkar's women, however do try to rebel even if rebellion spells pain. Their efforts to make themselves heard evoke admiration in this power dominating society.

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