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Domestic Violence and Gender Conflict in Vijay Tendulkar's *The Vultures*: A Study

Victor Mukherjee

M.Phil. Research Scholar.

Department of English.

Rabindra Bharati University,

Kolkata, West Bengal.

Abstract:

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) was one of the most important playwrights in modern Marathi theatre, who made significant contributions to contemporary Indian drama. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the themes of domestic violence and gender inequality in Tendulkar's *The Vultures* (1971). It has been shown that violence in *The Vultures* operates on different planes inside a common domestic space – brother against the brother, the sons against the father, the brothers against the sister, and the husband against the wife. Along with the shameless display of sex, violence and animal passions inside the family, Tendulkar in *The Vultures* explored the emerging impact of capitalist wealth, the lust for materialism and greed which are responsible for the deterioration of human values and the collapse of the edifice of familial relationships in contemporary Indian, urban society.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Gender Inequality, Capitalist Wealth, Materialism.

Violence is an act of aggression, usually in interpersonal interaction or relations. Violence can be viewed as not only physical harm, it may also suggest discrimination, deprivation, denial of access to resources, intimidation, exploitation and other means whereby economic and social inequality is perpetuated. Indian scholars in the field of Women's Studies have defined 'Violence' as the coercive mechanism 'to assert one's will on another, to prove or to feel a sense of power' (Karlekar 241- 242). They have emphasized the dynamics of power and powerlessness involved in a violent act. It may also be aggression of an individual woman against herself, such as suicide, self-mutilation, negligence of ailments, sex determination tests, food denial and so on. Govind Kelkar in *Violence against Women in India: Perspective and Strategies* (1991) situates violence against women 'in the socio-economic and political context of power relations' (Kelkar 1). She feels that the view that violence is 'an act of illegal criminal use of force' (Kelkar 1) is inadequate and should include 'exploitation, discrimination, upholding of unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of terror, threat or reprisal and forms of religio-cultural and political violence' (Kelkar 1).

Vijay Tendulkar's *The Vultures* (1971) explores man's bestiality in its most savage manifestation, for this is a play that shows how a family driven by the lust for money transforms itself into metaphoric 'vultures' that tear each other apart. In *The Vultures*, the family as a domain of comfort and protection is debunked, for the family is presented as a site

of violence. According to Samik Bandyopadhyay, 'The violence in *The Vultures* is played out in a different kind of entrapment, not the chancy, accidental kind that comes with a defective look, but a conventionally/socially determined entrapment, viz. that of the family' (Tendulkar xlvi). In the elaborate stage direction of *The Vultures* in Act One, Scene One, Tendulkar begins by specifying the time of staging the play as 'Time, any time' (201). This indicates that for the playwright 'time' is not an issue, but that themes and characters are. Looking at *The Vultures* from a temporal perspective, the issue of domestic violence or gender conflict is not limited to the frames of time and space; for violence exists as if ubiquitous and never ending.

In the First Act of *The Vultures*, Rajaninath introduces the audience to the nature and personality of Rama as 'a statue of emotions' (201) as a person who could not conceive her own life beyond the directives of her husband. She is a marginalized figure in the Pitale household, and is a woman who has to live under the perpetual domination of her husband and almost every other family member. The plight of Rama reminds one of Kate Millett's observations regarding the importance of the male gaze in the social conditioning of women in *Sexual Politics* (1970):

The continual surveillance in which she is held tends to perpetuate the infantilisation of women...The female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power. She may do this either through appeasement or through the exchange of her sexuality for support and status. As the history of patriarchal culture and the representations of herself within all levels of its cultural media, past and present, have a devastating effect upon her self-image, she is customarily deprived of any but the most trivial sources of dignity or self-respect. (Millett 76)

The character of Rama in *The Vultures* has been projected by Tendulkar as an ideal, traditional Hindu housewife who displays a 'dogged loyalty' (201) towards her husband. Rajaninath calls Ramakant a 'barren beast' (201), 'a leper' (201) and 'a mangy dog' (201) who takes poor Rama 'on the road to hell' (202). Rajaninath predicts that for Rama and Ramakant the 'future/ is lost, unredeemable/ And there remains to them/ Only – death' (202). Later, Rajaninath elaborates that he is disturbed by the tragic plight of Rama because she had to drag on living life with her impotent husband who could not provide her the 'soft fulfillment' (205) of conceiving a child. Being deprived of emotional comfort, psychological strength and sexual satisfaction, the character of Rama in the Pitale household has been reduced to a stature of an unaccommodated other. Rama indeed exemplifies the post-marital suffering of the newly wedded wife. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1972) delineates a similar position of the women when she writes, 'In the solitude of her new home, bound to a man who is more or less a stranger to her, no longer a child but a wife and destined to become a mother in turn, she feels a chill' (Beauvoir 477).

Kumkum Sangari in her book, *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives and Colonial English* (2001) writes about the feminist theorizing of domestic violence. Sangari speaks of women's complicity and active participation in the infliction of abuse on the other female members in the family. In *The Vultures*, Manik's cruel behavior towards Rama reminds one of Sangari's observations on a woman's role within the domestic space in the perpetration of violence. In the Pitale family, all the members survive in their own distinctive spaces with their private cruelties without any bonds of personal relationship. Tendulkar indicates that it is the passion for money that governs their fate. The desperate confession of Papa Pitale indeed anticipates the future course of events in the play: 'If I die, it'll be a release! They're all waiting for it. But I'm your own father, after all if I die, I'll become a ghost. I'll sit on your chest! I won't let you enjoy a rupee of it. I earned it all. Now these wolves, these bullies' (209). Tendulkar not only establishes the theme of hostility between father and son, but also indicates lust for familial and financial authority. There is no real filial closeness existing between Papa and Ramakant, and all their affinities are expressed in terms of materialistic needs. Contempt, greed and vengeance are in fact the most significant attributes of the family members. Like his elder brother, Umakant does not acknowledge the presence of his father. Children instead of being proud of their parents are ashamed of them and have contempt to the extent that they can devour their parent's flesh. Maya Pandit in her essay, "Representation of Family in Modern Marathi Plays: Tendulkar, Dalvi and Elkunchwar" observes:

With *The Vultures*, Tendulkar's vision of family became more violent. Here he went one step ahead to demonstrate the bestiality and monstrosity of people in a family living in a nauseating consumerist world. The family of Ramakant, Umakant, Manik, their father and Uncle and the illegitimate son of their father represent the decomposing state of the family where even the outward façade of decency has evaporated and what remains to be seen is the naked play of desire to possess, own, gain money and destroy another human being. (Pandit 71)

In consonance with the chaotic behavior of Papa, Ramakant and Umakant, Manik too possesses identical vulture-like tendencies and is devoid of all sentiment and good sense. Manik is extremely jealous of Rama and exploits the latter's submissive behavior and treats her as a maidservant. However, she does not get annoyed with Manik for this kind of rude behavior because she suffers from an inferiority complex. Since she is not an extrovert like her sister-in-law, Rama listens to and obeys Manik. Also, her behavior is the result of her orthodox teaching which had taught her not to confront the in-laws, even if they are in the wrong and behave atrociously. However, Manik who is the oppressor of Rama becomes the oppressed in the hands of her brothers. As vultures are always in the quest for flesh and do not hesitate even to attack each other, the Pitales are greedy opportunists, always engaged in a pursuit for money from anyone by any means whatsoever.

The third scene of *The Vultures* provides a critical exposition of the nature of cruelty and violence that was inflicted on Sakharam, the uncle of Ramakant. In this scene, Manik sows the seed of the idea in her brother's brain to extract Sakharam's share of money from Pappa, which their swindler father had managed to appropriate from his younger brother. Ramakant, Umakant and Manik agree to remove their uncle to possess his share of money for themselves. They ruthlessly drag his body on the ground, their action actualizing the image of a 'vulture' which feeds on its prey with cruelty. Tendulkar thus shows in his play that since Ramakant, Umakant and Manik do not have the potential for prosperity in their present state of existence, they can only torture their family members and to take over their inherited wealth. Violence for them becomes a means to suppress their professional and personal failure. Their displaced aggression makes one recall the 'Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis' according to which 'the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration which leads to some form of aggression' (Buss 27). Later, this theory was reworked by Leonard Berkowitz who asserted that 'the motivational energy that powers aggression is provided by an emotional state such as anger or rage which is a primary inborn reaction to frustration' (Abeles, Fischer and Scherer 62). For the Pitale family members in *The Vultures*, frustration and aggression are linked in a cause and effect relationship. The Pitale householders' familial frustration leads to the generation of an emotional state which finds an outlet through the execution of violence.

In the fourth scene of *The Vultures*, the focus shifts to the emotional crisis of Rama and Rajaninath, both of whom are victims of emotional negligence and familial violence in Hari Pitale's family. Their wilful suppression of desires and its cumulative impact transmute into rebellion. However, Rama and Rajaninath register their protest by asserting their individual choices in a private love affair. In their essay, "Performing Woman, Performing Body: Adapting *Nagamandala* for Feminist Theatre", Sharmila Sreekumar and K.C.Bindu observed:

The tangible ways in which patriarchy operates is experienced by women in the immediacy of the controls and regulations on the body. The woman's self, is in a sustained way, defined in terms of their bodies, and further reduced to their sexualized bodies. Caught in the web of social directives, women are forced to tailor themselves into appropriately feminized bodies and see their bodies as their selves. Their subjectivities are regulated since they are constantly required to define themselves only through the 'male other'. (Sreekumar and Bindu 219)

In *The Vultures*, Rama's body is the site where social and sexual transgressions have been performed. Ramakant's frowning indifference and rejection of any sexual relationship makes Rama seek companionship in Rajaninath. In Rajaninath, Rama finds the culmination of her desires and the fulfilment of her femininity. Rajaninath tries to warn her against the social ignominy involved in her actions but she boldly confesses, 'You're right, I shouldn't.

But I can't help myself' (223). Thus Rama's yielding to Rajaninath shows that every woman wants something more in marriage other than mere social security. Her pregnancy, a sign of trespass outside the bounds of marriage, is not only the liberation of her repressed sexual 'libido' but also a positive assertion of her femininity against the passive response of her husband.

Analyzing the theme of violence in Tendulkar's *The Vultures*, M. Sarat Babu in his book, *Vijay Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal: A Reader's Companion* (2003) compares the relation between Hari Pitale, the father and his three sons with Sigmund Freud's theory of the primal father-son conflict. In his *Totem and Taboo* (1918), Freud had suggested that the primitive hordes were governed by a patriarch or a primal father who enjoyed intimate relations with the females in the horde. As his sons grew up, they were jealous of their father, as they wanted to possess what the father possessed. With age, the sons became hostile to their father who in turn, tried to banish them from the horde. M. Sarat Babu identifies this primal father-son conflict in *The Vultures*, in the hostile approach of the three sons – Umakant, Ramakant and Rajaninath towards their father Hari Pitale, who is a prototype of the primal father. Hari Pitale is the patriarch ruling his household while enjoying extra-marital relations with other women. But as he advances in age, his sons grow up and they began to hate him. The hostility of the growing sons against the patriarch is seen in the open revolt of the three sons and their ill-treatment of Hari Pitale.

In the Second Act of *The Vultures*, Tendulkar portrays family as the site of domestic violence through the tragic suffering of Manik who falls prey to the patriarchal subjugation in the Pitale household and experiences a relational shift from a position of ruthless victimizer to a helpless victim. Kumkum Sangari observes, 'Patriarchies are simultaneously located in specific modes of production, in class structures and mobility, in particular forms of class-caste status and inequality, and intersected by specific forms of self-identification with custom, tradition or religion' (Sangari 373). Such a perspective helps the reader to appreciate Tendulkar's portrayal of the family as the site of violence and also to situate its politics within a larger societal frame. Indeed, as Nivedita Menon in *Gender and Politics in India* (1999) points out, 'women's link with caste and community is made through the family' (Menon 11). In the Pitale household in *The Vultures*, the two brothers Ramakant and Umakant execute a violent oppression on Manik. It may be relevant at this point to note what Shulamith Firestone in her book, *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1972) considers as the contradictions of sex for class. She observes, 'Unlike economic class, sex class springs directly from a biological reality, men and women were created different; and not equally privileged... The biological family is an inherently unequal power distribution' (Firestone 3). In keeping with this perception, Tendulkar traces the inequality between a male child and a female within the domain of Pitale household in *The Vultures*.

In the Second Act, Umakant and Ramakant plan to make use of their sister's love affairs with the Raja of Hondur. Tendulkar exhibits thereby the shameless display of lasciviousness prevailing in the society. On the revelation of the secret of Manik's pregnancy, the brothers feel excited because of the possibilities of blackmailing. Ramakant makes a

deadly proposal, 'She is pregnant, if you want her fixed, put down the money. Cash down. Twenty Thousand, what? More if you like. Otherwise, bloody publicity! Uproar in the bloody newspaper! Let's have a go' (236). Luce Irigaray in *This Sex which is not One* (1977) using the Marxist analysis 'of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth' (Irigaray 177) tries to explain the status of woman in patriarchal societies. The similarity Irigaray sees between a commodity in capitalist wealth and woman in patriarchal society is that men want to accumulate both as women and commodities are 'a mirror of value of and for man' (Irigaray 177). Both commodities and women, states Irigaray, 'among themselves are not equal, not alike, nor different. They only become so when they are compared by and for men' (Irigaray 180). According to Irigaray, there is a dichotomy in the meaning of the commodities. One is its natural meaning and the other is the social meaning. The objectified woman's body too bears the same schism. For as Irigaray indicates:

The commodity, like the sign, suffers from metaphysical dichotomies. Its value, its truth, lies in the social element. But this social element is added on to its nature, to its matter, and the social subordinates it as a lesser value, indeed as non-value. Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation that transforms it into a value bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier, a 'likeness' with reference to an authoritative model. A commodity – a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. (Irigaray 179-180)

In *The Vultures*, Manik's body becomes the proposition through which Ramakant and Umakant hope to earn financial gains. Her body is a capitalist commodity through which they nurture the dream: 'But twenty thousand is must. Ten for you. Ten for me. What? Fifty-Fifty?' (237). However, a phone call informs them that the Raja of Hondur has died of a heart attack. As a result of his death, their dream of obtaining money vanishes and the failure in their design makes them wild with anger. In their rage, they hit out at Manik's belly, and they even plan to break her arms and legs of Manik. This can be better understood in terms of Michel Foucault's observation in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that the body is invested by power relations. In *The Vultures*, the family becomes the social institution executing the mechanisms of power and violence, for as Samik Bandyopadhyay rightly observes, 'As the institutions come to embody power, power assumes an institutional body, its practice defined and determined within the parameters of the particular institution' (Tendulkar xlii).

In *The Vultures*, the nature of the physical violence which Ramakant and Umakant execute is almost beyond human imagination. They not only do not hesitate to break one of Manik's legs with heavy blows of the tin-opener and a broken bottle, but they even destroy the foetus growing in Manik's womb. Manik screams 'terrifyingly' (248) as she 'comes half crawling down the stairs...one leg in plaster. Her white saree is soiled with blood' (248). She

desperately tries to save herself from Ramakant and Umakant, who had already killed her unborn baby. The extent of the physical violence inflicted on Manik's body by her family members makes one recall Samik Bandyopadhyay's observation:

The body of the woman and the institutional body of power come into collision in Tendulkar's plays, sparking off and calling forth varying intensities of violence. It is this pattern that offers what Foucault would call 'the point of articulation of the ethical preoccupation and of the political struggle for the respect of rights, of the critical reflection against the abusive techniques of government and of the ethical research which allows individual liberty to be founded.' (Tendulkar xlii-xliii)

The second scene of the Second Act serves as a foil to the cruelty existing between Manik and her brothers. In this scene Rama appears as a passive figure of patience. Tendulkar presents Rama as female whose marriage did not reach consummation. Her innate motherhood is 'full to the brim' (203) and she is 'as loving as the earth' (203) having the potential womb to bear babies, but is unfortunately left untouched by the 'barren beast' (202) Ramakant, her impotent husband and hence she is 'unshed' (203). With his sympathy, Rajaninath tries to stir Rama's consciousness, probes her suppressed femininity and makes her aware of the absurdity in which she has sought the affirmation of life. He tries to awaken her to life by saying: 'Go on live your whole life in fear and trembling. People, like you infuriate me. Who've you got to be afraid of?' (238). Rajaninath in fact helps to break the long silence of Rama, and so while in the earlier scenes of the play, it seemed as if she was passive and indifferent, but at this stage she reconstructs her own ideology and gathers confidence to register her own voice of protest. Now, she not only asserts her own choice but also challenges the manhood of Ramakant who failed to provide her with emotional support and physical satisfaction. Rama's resentment signifies that the natural urges can never be interpreted in the context of social paradigms, for as Judith Bardwick in her book, *Psychology of Women: A Study of Bio-Cultural Conflicts* (1971) observes:

The psychoanalytic idea that women are moved by strong sexual drives in the same way that men are, led to the overestimation of sex as a significant variable in the lives of women. There has been a lack of recognition of the cyclic nature of desire and of the strength of maternity – nurturance as a powerful female need. (Bardwick 59)

Rama's confession after a long silence is a challenge to the whole patriarchal society where a woman is always marginalized as the 'Other'. Rama who had borne the apathy of Ramakant throughout her life emerges at this point almost like a revolution. She defies the snares of moral conventions and makes an open declaration of her sexual needs. She cries out:

But I... in this living death of my wifehood – I commit *sati* every moment! I burn! I am consumed! And do you know something? – I wouldn't lie to you – recently – for the past – several years – I've felt very day like – like getting out of this! Getting free of this once and for all. In anyway whatever. Let the world say what it wants. I don't care. (242)

Defying the barriers of marital harmony and social inhibitions, Rama therefore seeks shelter in the companionship of Rajaninath. He consoles her by saying: 'I know the sorrow of a womb that won't bear – no matter how you're gathered up to make it!' (243). Through Rajaninath, Tendulkar asserts that every individual has a right to redefine one's roles and responsibilities beyond gender stereotypes. The physical need of the body is true to human nature. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir analyzed the ways in which patriarchy alienated women from their capabilities. In accessing the meaning of the 'lived female body' Beauvoir was perhaps the first to question the assumptions that framed human experiences. Beauvoir introduces her perspective in *The Second Sex*:

I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty...how can a human being in woman's situation attain fulfillment? What roads are open to her? Which are blocked? How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? Then from woman's point of view I shall describe the world in which women must live. (Beauvoir xxix)

Tendulkar seems to answer these speculations of Simone de Beauvoir through the news of Rama's pregnancy in the Second Act of *The Vultures* which comes as mockery of the male egoistical sublime and indicates the collapse of the sanctity of personal relationships. Rama's rhetorical confession 'I'm going to become a mother' (249) is a challenge to the patriarchal world of the Pitales and the masculinity of Ramakant. As Rama makes a declaration of her freedom and expresses her desire to leave the house. Tendulkar seems to subvert the dialectics of gender discrimination, through the construction of a libertine self of Rama. Malavika Karlekar has indicated that marriage 'continues to be universally regarded as essential for a girl, in India, irrespective of class, caste, religion and ethnicity, as control of her sexuality and its safe transference into the hands of the husband' (Karlekar 244). Tendulkar critiques this traditional concept of marriage by subverting the power relationship between Rama and Ramakant. Then has Shanta Gokhale in *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present* (2000) observed:

The Vultures is a problematic play...Viewed as a play that operates on a non-realistic, symbolic level, it is not sufficiently distanced from the realistic form to touch other levels of experience and emotion. This is why one questions Lagoo's claim that the embrace between Rajaninath and Rama is a

metaphor for that between all mankind and all womankind through all the ages, the union between *purush* and *prakriti*. If Rajaninath and Rama were more real, their passion would be more real. Their embrace, in being an expression of this real passion would, without anybody making any claims for it, suggest *prakriti* and *purush*. (Gokhale 199)

Tendulkar is often accused of exaggerating the spiritual bankruptcy of a disintegrating socio-cultural milieu and portraying squalor and mental perversion in order to shock his audience. In a conversation with Gowri Ramnarayan published in the journal *Frontline* (1992), Tendulkar stated: 'A historical survey of mankind would make you accept that (victim-victimizer situation) is the natural human condition. There is a constant switching of roles – the victims of one situation become the oppressors in another' (Chakraborty 100). Thus, it is not difficult to understand why Manik in her disoriented state manages to exhibit the worst of her wickedness in the final scenes of *The Vultures*. Manik's idea of getting Rama's child aborted reflects her conscious resentment against the abortion of her own child. In the seventh scene of the Second Act, Ramakant comes to know the real secret of the pregnancy of Rama which exposes him to the worst suffering in his life. It is the loss of authority, arrogance, identity and self respect. He admits, 'I'm a useless fellow brother. Absolutely bloody good – for nothing. Futile. A bloody bitch. Son of a swine! I let my wife...go...go' (263). The tone of violence and chaos become alive once again. In *The Vultures*, Tendulkar explores the issues of man's vulturine instincts, perverted psychology, natural inclination for the macabre, silencing of the feminine voice in the name of social conventions and the fractured notion of morality in familial relationships. The family as a domain of comfort and protection is debunked, for the family itself is represented as the site of violence. Analyzing the themes of cruelty and violence in Tendulkar's plays, C. Coelho has rightly opined:

In his portrayal of human relations and tensions, Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egotistical man and equally self-centered society. His primary concern in plays like *Sakharam Binder*, *The Vultures*, *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Silence! The Court is in Session!* is the failure of human relations due to man's inherent greed and jealousy towards his fellow men. There is nothing superficial or exaggerated in his depiction of the vital and often violent stages of man in our society today. In his plays he reviews the innate violence of the so-called civilized beings in an urban industrial set-up. He attempts to depict the fast changing and frightening aspects of life in modern Maharashtra and India, for that matter. (Coelho 34)

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