

Kamala: A Play of Interrogation and Introspection

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Abstract

Towards the second half of the 20th century, plays in Indian languages marked a definite departure from those of the first half. The socio-cultural roots became very influential in the making of Indian drama. Vijay Tendulkar, a Marathi playwright, came on the dramatic scene during that phase to portray and expose the growing distortion and deterioration of the value system. Tendulkar's play, Kamala depicts the social realities concerning the sale of women in open auctions, the desperate ambition of journalistic profession and the failure of the husband-wife relationship. Tendulkar, like Ibsen, poses questions, but does not answer them.

Key words: flesh-trade, sensational journalism, the man-woman (husband-wife) relationship.

As a forceful and influential playwright, Vijay Tendulkar depicts the Indian urban society including its family-components as a controlling 'machinery' that ultimately tears apart the time-old ideas and ideals which bind human relationships, particularly the man-woman relationship. He unveils the social realities with utmost candour and thorough understanding. He points out some glaring issues with interrogative thrusts, discusses and dramatises them with all their ramifications, but offers no instant solutions. The reflective characteristics of his plays make us think deeply about our immediate milieu, the current moment and the shape of things to come. In all his major plays such as *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *The Vultures*, *Kanyadaan* and *Kamala*, we get the reflection of social realities like women's exploitation and persecution in the male-dominated society, money-power, violence, greed, lust, marginalisation of women and the lack of bonding in family and society.

Kamala is a highly moving play by Tendulkar based on a real incident that was reported by Aswini Sarin in the Indian Express. Sarin bought a girl from a flesh-trade market to bring into focus the cruelty and money-making intention of a section

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of society. This sensational journalistic story of the erosion of human values was turned by Tendulkar into a play centering around the issue of the trafficking of women and a study of the debasement of man-woman relationship. Referring to the purchase of a girl from a flesh market, Arundhati Banerjee, a perceptive critic, rightly remarks, "But using this incident as a launching pad, Tendulkar raises certain cardinal questions regarding the value system of a modern success-oriented generation which is ready to sacrifice human values even in the name of humanity itself".¹

The action of the play opens in 'a small bungalow in the fashionable neighbourhood of Neetibagh' owned by a reputed journalist named Jaysingh Jadav who works in an English language daily. The dramatis personae introduced in the beginning are Jaysingh's wife, Sarita and her uncle, Kakasaheb who is the proprietor of a vernacular district paper and is now on a visit to Delhi to sort out problems relating to the release of 'a quota of paper for his magazine'. The third important character in the scene is a telephone which acts as a vital instrument for exchanging information about Jaysingh who is out of station on a professional assignment. It is the sole duty of Sarita to receive phone calls, to note down the names of callers and to pass on these pieces of information to Jaysingh after he returns. Kakasaheb, at times, deputizes for her when she is engaged elsewhere. Sarita is not posted with the purpose and details of her husband's tour programme. She suddenly hears from his newspaper office that he will return on that day itself. This communication gap between Jaysingh and Sarita reminds us of a similar situation in Mahesh Dattani's play *Bravely Fought the Queen* in which Dolly comes to know from Lalitha, wife of an employee in her husband's office that Jiten (the husband of Dolly) has cancelled the previously scheduled visit of the couple to a friend's house as Dolly is urgently required to help Lalitha to provide inputs for the preparation of the party to be held for the launching of a female under-garment. This reference is relevant to indicate the neglect and ignominy that modern educated homemakers like Sarita and Dolly have to face in a patriarchal set-up. Sarita, however, springs into action on receiving the news of her husband's imminent arrival to ask Kamalabai, the domestic help, to arrange for a sumptuous dinner for her husband. She also enquires whether the Sahib's clothes are in order. Kakasaheb representing the old type of journalism remarks that Jaysingh Jadav, a successful journalist of the day, stands for sensational journalism. This 'high speed' journalism is directed towards the actual event and incident in order to cater to populist sensation-mongering. Kakasaheb points out, "My dear, it's not the facts of an occurrence that are important. But the topic is. Discuss that. Comment on it. Suggest a way to stop it - suggest that" (p. 6). This type of journalism is different from the traditional one based on the discussion of the topic and comments on it. About himself, Kakasaheb remarks, "I'm a back number -

remnant of times past. Now it is the day of your husband's type of journalism" (p. 5). To Sarita's query, he replies that 'commentary' is more important than 'blood-thirsty descriptions'. The danger lurking in 'high speed journalism' becomes immediately evident as Kakasaheb receives a phone call threatening the murder of Jaysingh for reporting an illegal act concerning a Member of Parliament. Kakasaheb suggests that in case of highly investigative stories he should report as a 'special correspondent' and also carry a gun as a means of self-defence. Sarita responds by saying that Jaysingh always insists on reporting under his own name as an indication of his drive and boldness. She also adds that the carrying of a gun by a journalist, according to Jaysingh, is an act of cowardice.

On hearing the daring and desperate attitude of Jaysingh from Sarita, Kakasaheb feels terribly disturbed and remarks: "We didn't give you to him, to take you back as a widow" (p.7). His concern almost amounts to a choric reflection on the element of responsibility inherent in the institution of marriage which involves mutual love, care, concern and happiness. Sarita's suppressed feelings find open expression in her response to Kakasaheb's reaction. She says, "Do you think he's going to change, just because you tell him to? I tried that once — I got so fed up. I said I was going back to Phaltan. What was the result? He started booking my ticket" (p 7). That this male-dominated, gender-discriminating milieu is tormenting her internally becomes clear through this utterance.

The purpose of Jaysingh's trip is unfolded after his arrival along with a 'village woman draped in a dirty white sari, her face hidden behind it'. Jaysingh has bought this woman named Kamala from Luhardanga bazaar in Bihar at a price of Rupees two hundred and fifty with the intention of showcasing her at a press conference to highlight the flourishing trade of women trafficking. Jaysingh's mission to present her in the press conference as a saleable commodity is itself ironic because through this act, he shows himself to be a publicity — hungry journalist endeavouring to make himself more saleable in this media market in Bihar. Sarita is distressed to hear from Jaysingh that women of all ages are sold at an open auction in that Bihar market. Before buying these women, Jaysingh adds that the men who intend to buy them 'handle the women to inspect them' physically. Jaysingh makes it clear that he had gone to the market to get definite evidence 'to prove that such auctions are taking place in the country now' (p.14). He tells Sarita, "See, how we'll blast out this shameful affair. There'll be high drama at today's press conference. It'll create an uproar" (p. 15).

Jaisingh gives specific instructions to Sarita that a special watch must be kept on Kamala so that her presence in their home remains a closely guarded secret before her appearance at the press conference. Jain, a colleague of Jaysingh, visits his home,

tries to elicit information about the purpose of Jaisingh's trip but Jaisingh avoids giving a straight answer. Jain, a long-time visitor of the house and a close observer, makes a choric comment, addressing his "Bhabiji (Sarita)... This warrior against exploitation, in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. Hai, hai! [Theatrically to Jaisingh] Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife! ... Bye (To Sarita) Bye, lovely bonded labourer..." (p.17). This labelling of Sarita as a 'lovely bonded labourer' may well be regarded as an unambiguous expression of the inner voice of Sarita who finds herself enslaved at the hands of her male-chauvinist husband.

Jaisingh makes Kamala come before him and he tries to persuade her to accompany him to a feast where important people will assemble. Jaisingh talks about a feast instead of the Press-conference since he wants to rid her of any hesitation and fear. However, since Kamala shows herself to be reluctant, the master in Jaisingh bursts out, "I order you to come there with me. Today" (p. 20). Then he prepares her how to answer questions to be put to her by the assembled people there.

Kakasaheb confronts Jaisingh on the issue of his 'blood-thirsty professional plot'. He denounces this type of journalism which is only interested in scandals and other sensational events. He condemns sensationalist journalists like Jaisingh for ignoring the fundamental problems that the people living in suburban areas face daily. The urban media, Kakasaheb observes, are quite indifferent to such issues as 'plenty of greed', 'gambling, illicit liquor making, red-light houses, bribery, corruption,' 'rapes and murders', 'injustices and atrocities against' 'Harijans', etc, that plague the districts and villages. Jaisingh defends himself by saying that he is not for 'mercenary journalism'. On the contrary, he says that he has a definite social purpose to serve. As a journalist, he always stands up for the, 'weak and backward section of society' and endeavours 'to raise the consciousness' of the common people 'to struggle for social and political change' (p. 24). Kakasaheb retorts by saying that his avowed exercise will turn out to be futile as he is engaged in journalism in English - the language which is not understood by the common people.

Tendulkar has very dexterously blended the two issues, the devalued status of women both in family and society and the profit-oriented role of a section of media persons. Soon, the moment comes when Sarita's self-realization acquires a new and shocking dimension. Kamalabai, the maid, tells Sarita that Kamala has asked her whether Sarita has been 'bought' or 'hired' by Jaisingh. Further, she has enquired about the price paid for hiring Sarita. This audacious enquiry has provoked Kamalabai so much that she tells Sarita about her firm resolve to leave this house if Kamala is

permitted to stay there. Sarita realizes that Kamala is equating her position with her own. She, however, keeps her cool. In her enquiry to Jaisingh about the future of Kamala she comes to know that Jaisingh's intention is to send her to a shelter for homeless women and to discard her after the press-conference is over. Thus, it is clear that he who is out to expose women's exploitation in the feudalist-capitalist set-up is himself an unalloyed exploiter. We get enough evidence of Jaisingh's attitude to his wife Sarita. He looks upon Sarita as a kind of commodity just as he takes note of Kamala with the same vision. In other words, Jaisingh for all his purported concern for the exploitation of women is himself a chauvinist in his own personal life.

The narration of the proceedings at the press-conference by Jain and Jaisingh at the latter's home unfolds how a village woman-victim was treated at the conference with levity and high-flown irrelevant questions punctuated by sex-related enquiries. The harassment of an ignorant woman-victim shocks Sarita and elicits ironic comments from Kakasaheb, who espouses the cause of serious journalism. The other side of Jaisingh's aggressive journalism is authoritarian propensity to possess the lady, whom he has married. Sarita, in her 'heart-felt aversion' to Jaisingh does not allow him to embrace her and she pushes him away. Vaunting as her husband she asks Sarita, "Don't I have the right to have my wife when I feel like it" (p. 32). This episode shows the cracks between the husband-wife relationship and it is the consequence of Sarita's clear understanding of her position through the lens of Kamala's perception. First, Kamala laments that this big house is bereft of children. Then she feels sorry about Sarita's barrenness and asks a straight question, "How much did he buy you for? (p. 34)". When she hears from Sarita that her price was Rupees seven hundred, Kamala regrets that so much of his master's investment on Sarita has been wasted. She puts her claim in such a way, "Memsahib if you won't misunderstand, I will tell you. The master bought me, too... So, Memsahib both of us must stay here together like sisters. We will keep the master happy" (p. 35). She, in fact, audaciously proposes to live in the house as a mistress of the Sahib, Jaisingh. She proposes that she will bring forth children for him and bring them up and Sarita will be vested with the task of keeping the family accounts and giving company to the Sahib in various public forums. The last layer of Sarita's illusion is torn off as she begins to understand that even an illiterate village woman like Kamala knows that all women including legally married wives are slaves to men. In an open display of his gender superiority, Jaisingh does not allow the determined Sarita to keep Kamala in the house on the plea of an imminent police case against him because of his buying of Kamala. Jaisingh is overhasty in taking Kamala to the woman's home. But Sarita firmly says that Kamala will continue to stay in their house. The male chauvinist in

Jaisingh again rears up and makes it clear to Sarita, "It's I who takes decisions in this house, and no one else" (p. 42), He orders Kamala, ' *Chalo* '.

After the departure of Jaisingh with Kamala, Kakasaheb once again makes a choric comment, "Kamala is just a pawn in his game of chess" (p. 43). Endorsing his remarks, Sarita tells him "Not just Kamala. Kakasaheb. me too ..." (p. 43). It is now crystal clear that by showing Kamala as a saleable commodity Jaisingh has attempted to project himself as a brilliant professional in the area of investigative news-stories. Kamala is, therefore, no more than a pawn in the chessboard of his ambitions. Sarita too likens herself to Kamala as she has been made a permanent pawn in the chessboard of Jaisingh's whims, frivolities and possessiveness.

The husband-wife relationship between Jaisingh and Sarita faces a terrible showdown when in the evening Jaisingh proposes to Sarita to join him in a big party wearing the saree that he brought from Trivandrum. In reply, Sarita enquires about the whereabouts of Kamala and sharply negatives Jaisingh's command to accompany him in the party. Jaisingh asks her, "You don't want to come? Why?" Sarita answers, "That's my will" (p. 44). This firm assertion of her own will terribly surprises Jaisingh and provokes him to sarcastically comment, "Never noticed any signs of it before" (p. 45). This is a remarkable episode where Sarita comes out of her marginalised self to assume the role of a self-possessed assertive woman. She demonstrates that she 'can speak', and can protest, and rebel. She tells Kakasaheb that she is going to hold a press conference to unmask Jaisingh Jadav. She declares, 'I'm going to say this man's a great advocate of freedom. And he brings home a slave and exploits her. He doesn't consider a slave a human being — just a useful object" (p. 46). The coming of Kamala had made her aware of her true position in Jaisingh's family. She remarks, "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" (p. 46). This climactic point of the play leads to the falling action when Jain comes to Jaisingh's house to convey the sad news that Jaisingh has been dismissed by the proprietor of his newspaper on the ground of his over-adventurism in exposing the facts of the flesh trade. This proprietor has been forced to take this decision as Jaisingh's exposure story has affected the powerful people with whom the owner of the press has been closely associated. Sarita calls up Jaisingh asking him to return home immediately. On his return, he hears the news of his dismissal. Saddened and shocked Jaisingh talks about the debased morals and values of the press baron. It is important to note at this juncture that the basic womanhood in Sarita raises its head to stand by Jaisingh in his hour of supreme plight. But the rebel in her does not die down. Sarita's injured feeling remains within herself and she is prompted to declare, "But at present I'm going to lock all that up in a corner of

my mind and forget about it. 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" (P 52). Sarita suffers a long-time predicament at the hands of her husband while Jaisingh who epitomises male-ego ultimately falls in grave peril.

In the male-dominated gender discriminating society, Sarita holds a 'Second Sex' (Simon-de-Beauvoir's phrase) position which is no better than that of Kamala. Kamala is the object of humiliation, exploitation and torture, and this woman in bondage helps unbind the tenuous relationship of the husband and wife and that of the press baron, the employer and his money-hungry employee, the journalist Jaisingh. Through Kamala's analysis, Sarita has been made to understand the essence of buyer-seller relationship which is replicated in the husband-wife relationship. Jaisingh loses his job in his mindless haste to highlight the cause of Kamala for promoting his own professional career. The role of Kamala has a devastating impact on Jaisingh's professional life, while Sarita, finding Kamala as a genuine cause for social rehabilitation is favoured with the latter's clear-eyed assessment of a woman's identity in society which is yet to empower her.

Sarita pledges herself to take her rightful position in the family and society, although as a humanitarian, she shows her readiness to limit her rebellion to non-conformism in the current helpless situation of Jaisingh. Kamala is a silent sufferer and is also capable of seeing things clearly. Sarita is a forward-looking woman who refuses to remain a permanent victim of psychological turmoil and works out the strategy for her future, blotting out all traces of ignominy and injustice.

Tendulkar, as a creative writer, may not be a proclaimed feminist and holds no special brief for any particular section of society but he shows in an unobtrusive way that a marginalised woman 'can also speak'. Sudhir Sonalkar comments, "In Tendulkar's plays ... the ethical question remains both untouched and unanswered".² Tendulkar definitely writes for 'life's sake' (Bernard Shaw's phrase) but didacticism is not his forte. He starts his play *Kamala* with an interrogative note on vital issues and gives us a vast space for introspection at the end.

References :

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