
Kamala by Vijay Tendulkar: A Subtle Call for Feminism

¹Dr. Rani Tiwari

¹Associate Professor, Department of English, S.S.V. College Hapur, Uttar Pradesh- India

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Abstract

Feminism believes in gender equality. It voices for same opportunities and rights for women as men enjoy. Women are generally confined to domestic life and men have unlimited scope. Many writers have voiced for feminism. Among modern dramatists of Indian writing in English, it is worth noting that Vijay Tendulkar has voiced for women rights. His is a subtle call for feminism. In his play *Kamala*, the issue of women slavery is taken up. It is ironically treated. The playwright has tried to depict that although slavery is illegal, yet it is unfortunate that it has been legalised in marital knot. In patriarchal society like that of India, women are still in an oppressive state. A parallelism is drawn between Kamala, the slave and Sarita, the suppressed wife of the journalist Jaisingh. Sarita has the realisation that she is in a state no better than that of a slave. She feels that practically she is insignificant. The self discovery leads her towards search for identity. Ultimately Sarita gains her strength, asserts her presence and turns out to be a new woman. This paper is a study of the subtle feminist approach of the playwright Vijay Tendulkar who voices for women rights.

Key words: Equality, Feminism, Oppression, Self discovery, Slavery.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, many women's organisations arose in India. There was an imprint of the reform movements of nineteenth century. As the national movement intensified, the ideas of democracy, socialism and internationalism came up. With this women too gained greater width. Women participants of national movement and organisations like All India Women's Conference (AIWC) encouraged women to have their participation in all the sectors. Thus women not only arose academically but also proved themselves in political and economic scenario. "A key idea was a belief that advancement of a society hinges on the progress of women."¹ Western countries were affecting India. But the Indian women were rooted to their culture. Although modern women showed a new strength, yet they were stuck with Indian tradition. Right to Equality is put in the Indian Constitution in Article 15. Indian women have been having their participation in mass movements. But yet, there is a great need to encourage them to have a strong presence in structured decision making. Women need to hold high positions in institutions. Only then we can say that India is a new developed nation. The great writers have ever raised the issue of women empowerment. One of the great dramatists of Indian writing in English is Vijay Tendulkar. He has ever given his revolutionary voice to the issue of women through his dramas. He has strongly opposed many social vices. At times he faced opposition for his revolutionary words, but his spirit remained undaunted.

Vijay Tendulkar was a versatile writer. "His work was voluminous."² His each play deals with revolutionary issue. The multifaceted problem of Indian society is realistically portrayed by him. Although it is true that no claim was proclaimed to be a feminist writer but it is clearly evident that there

is a subtle approach of feminism in his writings. His female characters get his subtle support throughout his works. He deals with them with compassion. In his play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Miss Leela Benare is badly humiliated by her male counterparts of drama troupe. She is being declared as immoral lady and a threat to society for her position of unmarried motherhood by the male chauvinists. Mock trial is actually a pretext to ill treat her. We clearly note the gender bias in this drama. Professor Damle who impregnates her is not questioned at all for his deeds. Henceforth Leela finds herself in the midst of misery and puts forth: "Life must be hanged. Life is not worthy of life."³ Tendulkar's another play *A Friend's Story* has dealt with the theme of homosexuality in heterosexual world. Sumitra suffers due to her otherness and being far from traditions in the matter of her sexuality. Nothing matters except being human. It is about three college friends. We find obsession, betrayal and character's search for redemption. Mitra feels helpless to change her destiny. She seriously expresses about her futile existence: "Who makes us the way we are and sends us here? Why are we what we are? Why do we become our own slaves? We have to search for our own answers. No one can help."⁴ *Kanyadaan* is another play of Tendulkar. This play shows that how a young girl becomes the prey of her own father's notions. Her original home and identity is disapproved by her. She says, "I am not Jyoti Yadunath Devlalikar, now, I am Jyoti Arun Athavale, a scavenger."⁵ It is against law to enslave others and this deed is also prohibited in every nation of the world. There is unfortunate subtle existence of it due to its legalization in nuptial tie. In pretext of tradition and custom the practice of dowry prevails still in society. It seems to be sale and purchase of humans.

Vijay Tendulkar's many plays have been translated into English and other Indian languages. In 1981, his play *Kamala* was published. It was originally written in Marathi. It was Priya Adarkar who translated it later. This play is an exposition of how women are treated by society which has double standard. It deals with many issues and one of them is the flesh market. It also shows suppressed condition of women in male dominated Indian society. It also shows the lack of harmony in the marital lives of Indian couples. To fulfil his purpose the writer created characters like Kamala and Sarita. Through the use of lucid imagery the playwright presents the sufferings of virtuous female characters who undergo oppression in the hands of men. It presents a plot which deals with a husband who wants to control his wife and wishes her to act as per the strings controlled by him irrespective of her education or wisdom.

The play *Kamala* has been written with an approach of naturalism and realism. The base of the story of the present play is an original incident. Jaisingh Jadav represents a dedicated masculine fanatic society. He is a renowned journalist. Kamala is a woman who is being brought by him from the rural flesh market and presented by him in pathetic state at a Press Conference. He does so because he wants to get promotion and wishes to gain high reputation in his profession with this sensational news. He has no concern for the future of Kamala. No attention is paid to the result of this exposure of Kamala in her life. He provides fake prediction of his guilt on this disgraceful custom and says, "They sell human beings in Bihar at Luhardaga bazaar beyond Ranchi. They have an open auction for women of all sorts of ages."⁶ He further says that a lot of people arrive there from far away for making their offers. The persons who want to bid, hold the women for observation. They are curious to know if they are hard or soft and if they are in youth or old age. Other than this they are also interested in getting information about the touch of their breasts, their waist and thighs. Jaisingh Jadav purchases Kamala in this auction just to create sensational news and to achieve publicity and favourable outcome in his career instead of extending help. Kamala is used as a means to achieve fame. He accompanies Kamala in the press conference where she faces humiliation. She is unable to answer any question. Her womanhood and chastity is directly hit. The entry of Kamala in the household reveals the hypocritical life of Jaisingh's wife Sarita. Her existence has no meaning. The playwright has very well revealed the falsity of marriage. Sarita lives in an illusionary world in her marital life. The revelation of reality is brought forth by Kamala. She opens up her spirit. Sarita helplessly tries her futile exploration for the significance of

marriage. She examines her own position, her rights, her wishes and importance of her existence in the house. It is to her shock to discover that there is similarity in her state and that of Kamala. Kamala accepts her life of enslavement. She knows that Jaisingh will be her master as he bought her and she is supposed to submit before him completely, in every respect. She is always deceived by Jaisingh. He hardly bothers for her feelings and emotions and uses her as a tool to fulfil his selfish motive. She is unaware and submits to his will. She lives as if a puppet. But Sarita too does the same. Sarita realises that it was post marriage registered enslavement. She acted as per her husband's wishes. She starts feeling that she has not remained to be capable of creating a self identity. She meditates on the significance of her presence in the life of her husband. Although she is literate and holds a high sophisticated stature, yet she is a prey to masculine oppression. Socially she leads a luxurious life but internally she has no happiness. Jaisingh exploits both women. "Like Kamala, Sarita is also an object in Jadav's life, an object that provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort."⁷ This play presents Kamala as a literal slave and Sarita is a subtle slave in the covering of sophistication. Thus Kamala makes the vision of Sarita clear. Virginia Woolf's observation here is quite apt for Indian scenario. She has rightly observed that women imagine of having a high place of importance. But in reality women have no significance. She says of women, "She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates lives of kings and conquerors in fiction...."⁸ She puts forth that in reality women become a slave to the life partner with whom her parents forcibly tie the nuptial knot. It is further said that in the life of reality women is hardly given any freedom. She is considered to be a personal property of her spouse.

Sarita represents the well educated Indian females who are victims of the chain of marital life and oppressed in every possible way in this so called sacred institution. To some extent Sarita too is accountable for her own pitiable situation because she was always anxious in fulfilling the marital accountability given to her. "How much did he buy you for?"⁽³⁴⁾ This innocent question of Kamala caused Sarita to contemplate about her own state. She says, "I was asleep, I was unconscious even when I was awake. Kamala woke me up.... Kamala showed me everything."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Sarita gets the realisation of her suppressed state. She feels that her husband is not her life partner. She perceives the utilitarian attitude of Jaisingh. She feels pathetic that she is enslaved by him. She explores that she has not been given any rights. She feels herself to be a slave. She has the realisation of acting in her life as per the command of her husband. "Laugh, when he says laugh. Cry, when he says, cry...."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Sarita feels about herself that she is a bondswoman who was used like a tool for her husband's household, physical and community based solace. In the words of Simone De Beauvoir, a bourgeois women, out of her marriage, gains "a gilded mediocrity lacking ambition and passion, aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips-away gently towards death without questioning its purpose."⁹ Women get happiness by giving up their liberty. This great feminist writer has stressed that women go for a very high sacrifice. No one else can do so. The soul of women has the capacity of achieving great height. But she looks for a peculiar self-contentment, serenity and security from marriage. This exhausts her soul of its ability for greatness. She closes the gates of her new residence. During her girlhood, the complete area of her village was like home for her. The jungle of that countryside belonged to her. But at the present time she is limited to a narrow area. In a patriarchal society, a woman is generally identified by society according to her relationship with the men in her life. Her own identity is never considered. She is always identified in relation to her male family member, be it her father, brother, husband or son. She is supposed to act as per their wishes. There are a set of life pattern formed for woman. But such a behaviour pattern is never formed for men. The society puts women in chains by putting various restrictions on them. For example, Jaisingh never cared for the significance and presence of his wife. Jain says to Sarita: "Hi, Bhabhiji, I mean, an English 'he' to him, and a Marathi 'hai' to you. This warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you."⁽¹⁷⁾ He further says that this warrior has converted a self determined horse riding Belle into a slave. He calls 'Hai', 'Hai' theatrically to Jaisingh. He says that Jaisingh should feel shame on himself because he is the hero or leader of the movement against ill treatment and he has made his wife a bondswoman. Jaisingh is a person without heart who never had any concern for the feelings of

women. It is very much evident from his behaviour towards Sarita. He uses Kamala for his vested interest. He has no sensitivity for Kamala when she was prosecuted in the press conference. He has no reaction even when she was made a laughing stock. Kamala was just a stepping stone for him. But Sarita attitude towards Kamala is totally different. She has deep concern for her. She is highly sensitive towards her. Kamala's words reverberate in her mind. Kamala had said to her, "Memsahab. If you won't misunderstand, I'll tell you. The master bought you: he bought me, too...so, memsahab; both of us must stay here like sisters." (35) Kamala further says that she and her memsahab Sarita will keep their master jolly. The master will get babies. She says that she will take care of them. Sarita will hold the accounts and look after the home. She also gives a proposal that half of the month Sarita will sleep with the master and the other half, she will sleep with him. Sarita's consent for Kamala's stay in her house is a bit surprising. But to analyse the psychological state of Sarita we conclude that because of the inhuman treatment met in the hands of her husband, Sarita had a parallelism in her mind. She had started equating herself with Kamala who was a slave. On her opposition of Jaisingh regarding sending Kamala away, he panics, "It is I who take decisions in this house and no one else. Do you understand?" (42). After having a deep contemplation on her life it is for the first time that Sarita desires to assert her own will. She denies to accompany Jaisingh to a party. She shares her desire of holding a press conference to her uncle. Her purpose of the press conference is to reveal the true nature of Jaisingh who is regarded as a great journalist: "I am 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." (46) He also says that he should know about the story of buying of Kamala by Jaisingh. He got other slave almost free and her father got a big quantity of money. Kakasaheb, the uncle of Sarita, tries to soothe her by putting forth that Jaisingh is akin to all men. His behaviour is universal. Even he himself gave his wife the same treatment. "A man is always too proud of his achievements." (46) Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1950s that, "Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism."¹⁰ Sarita too questions manhood. She feels that it is holding power and just ruling over women. She says: "Why? Why can't men limp behind? Why aren't women ever the masters? Why can't women 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" (47). Sarita is guided by her uncle to submit before her husband if she wishes to continue her marital life. Many feminists have opined that marriage for men is like holding an imperial power. It is universally noted that men want to rule over women. Traditional Indian marriages give opportunity for this. A wife is ever expected to be totally submissive. If it is not so, she faces domestic violence. Sarah Grimke aptly feels that man has established his dominion over women to fulfil his wishes. He has ever used women to fulfil his selfish interests. He has used women to meet out his sensual desires. Women has been used by him to provide comfort. But it is pathetic to note that her status has never been raised by him. He has ever been active to degrade her. He has ever tried to "enslave her mind."¹¹ Vijay Tendulkar felt that transformation is essential. It is through Sarita that he speaks when Sarita says of women that if they work equal to men they should be treated equally. Mira Kumary analyzed in her study that the source of inconsistency laid not with the women individually but with society itself. A reconstruction of society will be the best solution. "The fault is with the actively cruel social environment, not with her."¹²

The new expedition taken up by Sarita is what Elaine Showalter calls the "Female phase."¹³ It is an adventure towards self realisation. It is an inward journey towards search for identity. It is evident in her strong assertion that "a day will come, when I will stop being a slave. I'll no longer be an object to be used and thrown away. I will do what I wish, and no one will rule over me...." (52) With an approach of strength, she is ready to assert her presence to the world. Full of optimism and strength, she comes out as a strong new woman. In *Kamala* the author takes up the issue of slavery and a search for identity. Throughout the play we can notice the subtle feminist approach of the playwright. According to Linda Hutcheon:

While feminism and post modernism have both worked to help us

understand the dominant modes of representation at work in our society, feminists have focused on the specifically female subject of representations and have begun to suggest ways of challenging and changing those dominants in both mass culture and high art.¹⁴

In the present scenario too, Indian women are facing many issues like domestic violence, divorce, sexual harassment at work place, rape, dowry etc. One of the great achievements is the reform in the field of law which has given greater protection to women's rights. Women have been given support and protection through the right to property, domestic violence Act 2005, reservation for women in different sectors etc. Indian women have established themselves globally by gaining high position in all the fields, especially in the field of academics. They have also voiced with their various movements. We can very well see how Indian women are trying to revive themselves. Women, who were earlier marginalized, are breaking the narrow boundaries. Women have been gaining freedom by linking themselves to all sections of people in society. Today working women represent nation. Thus the vision of many Indian Nationalists and that of the writers like Vijay Tendulkar is getting fulfilled. With the new phase of Indian history in which India has moved to global economy, we need the state to act strictly against any kind of crime against women so that women can have a total equality at every level.

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