

Social Concern In The Select Plays Of Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract :- *Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (7th January 1928 – 19th May 2008) was a leading Indian playwright, movie and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist and social commentator primarily in Marathi. His plays have been translated and performed in many Indian languages. By providing insight into major social events and political upheavals during his life, he has become one of the strongest radical political voices in Indian literature in recent times. His early struggle for survival and living for some time in chawls in Mumbai provided him first-hand experience about the life of urban lower middle-class. Many of his plays derived inspiration from real life incidents or social upheavals, which provides clear light on harsh realities of the Indian society.*

Key words : *Concern, Middle-class, Radical, Realities, Social, Upheavals*

Tendulkar is internationally known as a path-breaking theatre writer. He was the playwright of *Rangayan*, a theatre group which gave experimental Marathi theatre a completely new direction. He was among the handful of playwrights along with Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, Badal Sircar etc. who provided a new content and form to Indian theatre, writing about contemporary issues and themes in a novel way. In an interview with Sumit Saxena Tendulkar himself has said,

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

Vijay Tendulkar has brought a sea change in the field of post-independence drama by projecting the stark realities of life, relationship and existence. Tendulkar had tried to present the modern society with its real worth, predicament, challenges, difficulties and complexities in true colours. His characters are drawn on the canvas of originality without any attempt to moralize them. His plays are written in naturalistic manner and reject the idealistic portrayal of life in presenting the life realistically. Tendulkar has discussed and touched upon every aspect of human life. As Shailja Wadikar states, "He may be seen as a silent 'social activist' who covertly wishes to bring about a change in people's mode of thinking, feeling and behaving" (Shailja Wadikar 2008).

Tendulkar's plays raise questions rather than providing a guideline or message to the solutions of the problems they deal with. Tendulkar in one of his interviews said, "By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take" (Saran and Patil 1993). As Wadikar rightly says, "The playwright seeks to present the modern man with his predicament, his challenges, his difficulties and complexities" (Shailja Wadikar 2008). In his article, Sudhir Sonalkar rightly points out, "In Tendulkar's plays, the ethical question remains both untouched and unanswered" (Sudhir Sonalkar 1993). Tendulkar's plays are like a mirror that reflects the individual's inner and outer world. While dealing with the social realities, he reveals two major tendencies of Indian society: male dominance and feminine frailty.

All Tendulkar's plays project the different aspect of human character and complexities of human relationship. He thoroughly analyses and explains the blood relationships on various levels in his plays like *Kamala*, *Kanyadaan*, *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Gidhade*. The varying relationships in the play *The Vultures*, for example, expose how greed for money makes the family members wild and mad. The play *Kamala* portrays the hollowness of husband and wife relationship and the father in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal* bargains his own daughter's chastity for the fulfillment of his ambition. Tendulkar has tried to bring great variations and innovations not only related to the themes but to the form also.

Silence! The Court is in Session (1967), one of Tendulkar's finest dramatic works, is a play originally written in Marathi and later translated into English by Priya Adarkar. The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* known for its artistic ingenuity and resourcefulness "combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society" (Arundhati Banerjee xviii). The play originated from a real life incident in which Tendulkar happened to overhear a group of amateur players whom he was guiding to their destination, Vile Parle, the Mumbai suburb in which he lived, where the group was going to stage a mock-trial. The play is in the form of 'a play within a play' or 'a play in the form of a rehearsal'. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar has depicted the difficulty of a young woman, who is a victim of the male dominated society. Tendulkar has criticized the follies prevailing in the society. The play carries all the vitalities of contemporary life. It focuses on the human mind and detects the ugliness in it. All the plays of Tendulkar are the result of his surveillance of the life, society and different incidents of his own life. It deals with the problem of unmarried motherhood.

Leela Benare is the female protagonist of the play who stands as a rebel against the established values of the orthodox society. Tendulkar has treated the character of Ms. Benare with great compassion and understanding while

projecting her against the selfish, hypocritical and ambitious male dominated society. By profession, she is a school teacher, sincere and dedicated in her teaching work and an enlightened artist by heart. So, she has joined the amateur theatre group. The other members of the group are Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik, Prof. Damle and Mr. Rawte, who belong to the urban middle-class of Mumbai. Leela Benare is totally different from others in the sense that she has a zeal and zest for life. She wants to share her happiness with others but hardly succeeds because her generous nature is not appreciated by her companions. In the exposure of private life of Benare, their inferiority complex reflects frustration and repressed desires of their life. They cannot understand, appreciate and share the joy of others.

According to Shailja Wadikar, "The character of Leela Benare reminds us of Ibsen's famous character Nora in *Doll's House*, a womanly woman who tries to face the bitter realities of actual world that is full of hardships and challenges" (Shailja Wadikar 2008). Miss Benare is cheated twice in love; first by her maternal uncle and later by Prof. Damle. In the first case, the thing subsides with the passage of time but in the other, she is caught in a trap through a cruel game cunningly played by her companions as her love affair has already been exposed by her pregnancy.

At the very beginning of the mock trial, Benare is accused of the charge of infanticide. The mock trial takes a serious turn when her co-actors arrange it in such a cunning manner so as to discuss and dissect her private life. Being isolated and victimized by society, she offers to marry any of her companions but no one comes forward to accept her proposal. On the contrary, she is denied both, the right of living as she is dismissed from her job and the right that God has given to a woman to become mother as the sentence is passed to destroy the baby in her womb. Prof. Damle, who is equally responsible for the same crime, goes unnoticed and unpunished. Although, Benare's character symbolizes simplicity, innocence and straightforwardness, the character of her fellow companions symbolize meanness and cruelty. Her tragedy reveals the fact that, in the male dominated society, woman's innocence is punished and man's deliberateness and violence goes scot-free.

In the play, Tendulkar throws light on the evil practices inherent in human nature like crookedness, cruelty and violence. Here in the play, the white collar educated and civilized middle-class people become aggressive and violent against their fellow companion who is a female and entertain themselves at the cost of her honour and dignity. Benare suffers for the crime that she has not committed as she says,

These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See
their faces – how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases!
And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires (Vijay Tendulkar 117).

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar directs his criticism against the hypocritical male attitude in Indian society where a woman is quite suppressed and any small attempt by a woman for her freedom is highly deteriorated. Benare's tragedy reveals the fact that women are born to suffer even in the most sophisticated, civilized section of the society.

The play *The Vultures* (1971), originally written in Marathi as *Gidhade*, is intensely gloomy in the portrayal of its characters and action. The play *The Vultures* stands distinct from the other plays of Tendulkar because it ruthlessly dissects the human nature. The play depicts the inborn violence, selfishness, sensuality and wickedness of human being. It is one of the most realistic portrayals of gender and domestic violence that is meted out to woman that is torn apart between her desires and her family. The play was bitterly criticized and its public performances were suspended for the time being. Ramakant, Umakant and Manik are like their father Hari Pitale, always ready to cheat one another and never hesitate to seek each other's lives to extract money. Each one is suspicious of the other and thus lacks the peace of mind.

All the family members, except Rama and Rajaninath, lead a kind of life that is comparable to vultures only. That is why the play has been aptly given the title 'The Vultures' because it shows the vultures in the form of human beings. The children follow the footsteps of their father who cheats his own brother in business and acquires prosperity and affluence. They all belong to a flock of vultures. The atmosphere is completely charged with disbelief and viciousness. Manik's statement gives evidence to it,

Ha! So I should leave it open, should I? So you can come and strangle me, all of
you? It's because I take care that I've survived in this house! Think it's human
beings that live here? (Tendulkar 207).

An element of greed compels Ramakant and Umakant to beat their father when he rejects to give them information about his secret account in bank. When they don't find success to get money from Manik's lover, the Raja of Hondur, they skillfully and violently abort her child by beating her inhumanly. Towards the end of the play, Manik successfully tries to abort the baby in the womb of her brother's wife to take revenge from her brothers. The actions of the family members i.e., a wrong done by Hari Pitale to his own brother, the beating up of father by his own sons, the forced abortions of Manik and Rama, reflect the fundamental hatred that all the family members have for each other.

Shailja Wadikar adds, "In *The Vultures*, the characters are essentially bad without having a single good quality" (Shailja Wadikar 2008). The character of Rama, the wife of Ramakant, is described as a sensitive, submissive, helpless, tender little bird among the vultures, turns towards Rajaninath, his younger brother-in-law and gets pregnant by him in the course of time. Having no alternative, Rama accepts this illicit relationship as her husband grows impotent due to excessive drinking. The play openly exhibits the sexual relationships, the scenes of violence and abusive language that shocks the sensibility of its viewers. The play shows something that is never shown nor depicted before in the Indian Theatre.

The play *Kamala* (1981) is based on a real life incident. The play was inspired by a real life incident – the *Indian Express* expose by Ashwin Sarin, who actually bought a girl from a rural flesh market and presented at a press conference. Taking the base of this real life incident, Tendulkar presents the harsh reality of our society. In the play, Tendulkar attacks on twin issues, firstly the field of journalism and secondly the institution of marriage. Jaisingh Jadhav, a self-seeking journalist buys Kamala, an Adivasi woman, from the rural flesh market of Luhardaga and presents her at the press conference. He does not have any moral motive to reform Kamala's life. He uses her as a tool by which he can get promotion in his job and win reputation in his professional career. His craze for name and fame had made him loveless and mindless fellow.

The play *Kamala* points out an unbearable fact that newspaper, the so called medium of social reform and awareness, has transformed into an object of getting praise and power. Tendulkar has also attacked on the institution of marriage in the play. Sarita, Jaisingh's wife, an embodiment of women, is used either as slave or menial servant or stepping stone of her male counterpart. Kamala's entry in their house reveals to Sarita her husband's egoistic and deceitful nature. Kamala makes Sarita conscious that she too is the slave of her husband. Jaisingh treats both Kamala and Sarita as objects of exhibition and not as human beings. The former brings him name and fame in his professional career while the latter provides him domestic comfort and sexual pleasure in conjugal life.

Thus, the play exposes slavery of women in the male dominated society in India. Kamala makes Sarita conscious about her status in the house. She says that she too is a slave like her. Kamala's view on how both of them have to adjust with Jaisingh is like self-revelation for Sarita. Kamala says,

Memsahib, if you won't misunderstand, I'll tell you. The master bought you; he bought me, too. ... 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. ... Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed? (Vijay Tendulkar 35).

The women characters in the play depict simplicity, innocence, sincerity, generosity and the spirit of devotion to their male companions. The character of Sarita suggests that even a modern woman is not so free as her male counterpart in contemporary society, as she has to follow her husband's whims and also to maintain the household life. Sarita becomes aware of the fact that her dignity or position in the house is not far away from Kamala. Yet, towards the end, when Jaisingh is fired from his job, she provides him emotional support instead of rebelling against him.

Towards the end of the play, Sarita 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 (Tendulkar 52).

In the play *Kamala*, Tendulkar exhibits selfishness and hypocrisy of the modern young generation and brings out the oppressive nature of contemporary society, where the craze for both money and success renders him loveless and mindless.

Tendulkar is a creative writer with a fine sensibility. He exposed alienation of modern individual to contemporary politics. He also exposed men's dominance over women, his portraiture of overt and covert violence in human-beings and above all his deep and abiding consciousness of women's vulnerability in Indian social hierarchy. Tendulkar's central concern is the relationship between individual and society. In play after play, he has made effective presentation of the latent violence and lust in middle class life, the consequent devastation and the essential loneliness of man. All of his plays have direct, one to one relationship with reality with an extraordinary mixture of violence that is so much omnipresent yet invisible in real lives of people. Most of his plays deal with the individual placed against the backdrop of society and explore the tensions between the two. His creativity has a prismatic quality, myriad potential and a multitude of colours.

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