

# THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN THE SELECTED PLAYS OF VIJAY TENDULKAR

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**Abstract:** Vijay Tendulkar, one of the vanguards of Indian Drama is the most influential and controversial playwright in Indian literary scenario. For the past four decades he has been the most acclaimed theatre personality in Marathi. Writing contemporaneously with Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Mahesh Dattani, Tendulkar is one of the brightest stars who occupy an exclusive position in the field of dramas with his concern for common man and his society. To his contemporaries he was the articulator of most urgent question of his generation. To his immediate successors he was a rock like reference point by which they assess of their own work. For the future generation he will be like a place of pilgrimage. He is the precursor of Indian theatre who has refurbished it with dynamism and vitality to awaken the dormant conscience of society through the medium of drama. He has changed the form and pattern of Indian drama by demolishing the three-act play by bringing new models.

Vijay Tendulkar's plays cross the limits of Marathi theatre and are completely responsible for placing Indian drama in the international maps. His plays deal with themes of public importance and they bear ample evidence to this fact that he has a message to deliver, a vision to fulfill. In the beginning, he appeared as a controversial playwright but his works portrayed him as an honest artist. He is a rebellious and courageous personality who is well known as a dramatist, screen and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist and social commentator. He was actively associated with the civil liberties movements in Maharashtra. All this reveals his concern for his country and society. He is a realist and refuses to be fooled by romantic concepts of reforms and movements. He exposes the flaws and failures of unrealistic reforms and movements in his plays. The controversy that rose after performing many of his plays is the clear proof of the unconventional attitude towards solving the human problems.

**Key words:** controversial, successors, articulator, flaws, exclusive, conscience etc.,

## INTRODUCTION :

The position of women in society has long been a burning problem in India. But during the period of Vijay Tendulkar this problem became more prominent. Women are subjected to problems right from birth to her grave. As a girl child, she is treated as an unwanted creature in the family. Female babies are looked upon as a burden on their families as their parents have to save a huge amount of money for their marriage. She is looked upon as a curse that has fallen upon them.

All the women characters in the plays of Tendulkar stand out for their spirit of resilience and capacity to learn from their experiences and thus to grow as strong, self-confident individuals capable of taking on life in the patriarchal world with its humiliating and crippling prejudices against them. A pattern of development from a state of innocence and simplicity of perception and response to that of awareness and knowledge of the intricacies of their world is distinctly perceptible in their depiction. What makes them memorable characters is the subtle interplay of a wide range of human instincts, feelings, emotions and thoughts crystallizing into positive and holistic attitudes towards the odds of life.

The close analysis of these women, on the contrary, suggests that they do display notable courage to assert themselves against tyranny but do so in a humane and affirmative manner. Moreover, it is noticeable that some of his women no longer remain confined to the domestic space. Sarita, who is only a housewife, is strongly conscious of the degradation and exploitation of women in general at the hands of men. She is, in fact, acutely sensitive about all the oppressed and tyrannized people of the world including men. Her concerns and the spirit of revolt thus, transcend the barrier of traditional feminine space. Benare, too, steps out of this limiting domain and becomes economically self-reliant by working in a school. Her determination to protect the fruit of her unwed motherhood further indicates the emergence of new woman who tries to define her self-existence at her own terms.

Aggression, authority and determination to overpower are the inborn traits of men and being passive, serviceable and inferior are the stereotyped characters of women. Though the problem can be considered universal they are common in lower middle class society in India where women become scapegoats in the so called civilized society.

Tendulkar's plays portray a variety of women who possess contradictory traits and suffer in the patriarchal society. They elude any attempt at generalization. Some of his plays deal with the problem of subjugation of woman, their marital relationship, their loss of identity, subjection to domestic violence, problem of premarital pregnancy, sex outside marriage and so on. Tendulkar has portrayed all sorts of woman including educated traditional woman, old world woman, materialistic woman and educated modern woman.

Almost all the plays of Tendulkar taken for analysis discuss the position, the rank and struggle of woman. The problems for the woman protagonist in all these plays stem from the social structure and the conservative attitude of the patriarchal society towards woman. Though the problem can be considered as universal, they are common along the lower middle class society in India where women become mere scapegoats to the patriarchal setup. They remain as mere catalyst for males to attain their goals.

The abuse is generally considered to be a part and parcel of marital life. An ideal woman is expected to submit herself to her father, brothers and husband without any grumblings. So often she is treated as her spouse's property; husbands assume that this subordinate role gives them the right to abuse their wives in order to keep them in their place. They are believed to have no rights to determine them because women are considered as puerile beings according to the dominant social and cultural norms. Thus, social prejudices reinforce domestic violence against women. Physical as well as mental torture usually occur on a regular basis causing suffering and inflicting deep

scars on the psyche of the victims and their families. 'Home' is the domain of a woman. But there has never been a guarantee that she lives out her life safe and unmolested.

Tendulkar's plays in general stir up the gender victimization and their exploitation embedded within the social landscape of Indian society. His dramas unveil the male chauvinists who display aggressive or conservative masculinities. He focuses the marital issues, the problem of domestic violence, ethical and moralistic issues, issues of power, political issues where in gender victimization is more explicit. His plays unfold a wide range of women – crooked as well as ideal, traditional as well as assertive. His dramas demonstrate the tragic condition of women in the feudal backwardness of the society, revealing the cruel exploitation, injustice and absurdity.

Unequal gender relation and injustices perpetrated on women are the foremost concern of Vijay Tendulkar. As a feminist, he unveils a vast plethora of details concerning afflictions inflicted on women in this society. Women are considered to be subsidiary to men in all cultural domains such as familial, social, political, moral, religious, economic and legal. Indian patriarchal set up firmly asserts men's superiority over women and is based not on mutuality but on oppression. Tendulkar has taken care to look into the problem of women and need for the process of liberation and how a woman has to undo so many things, unlock her clutches and deconstruct the myths and come out of the intricate web successfully woven around her by the society. Tendulkar voices for the women to become aware of their potentiality, which often remains unrealized even by them as well as by the callous society. It is through his plays he makes his reader/audience hear the feeble voices and view the passive steps taken by his female protagonist who themselves along with males are responsible for dragging havoc into their lives.

Tendulkar's female protagonist, Laxmi in the play *Sakharam Binder* suffers similar plight of Rama in her marital life. Like Rama, she is portrayed as an ideal Indian woman who suffers due to her childless state. Her husband throws her off to streets as she fails to conceive a baby. The playwright focuses on the typical patriarchal attitude which always holds a woman responsible for the childless state and men are never blamed.

The play *Sakharam Binder*, explores the complexity of the frustrated and directionless young generation in the post-independent India. The protagonist of this play, Sakharam is a foul-mouthed womanizer. Due to the bitter experiences of life, he does not believe in the institution of marriage. So, he remains a bachelor. He establishes a rapport with a woman who is deserted by her husband and likes to live with her without getting into wedlock. "We're not saints. We're men. I tell you, worship and prayer can't satisfy the itch. If you want a thing... you've got to have it" (SB 127), frankly states Sakharam Binder. Sakharam is the master of his house and the woman has to obey his words like a slave. She has to satisfy his excessive physical lust and provide him with domestic comforts ungrudgingly.

The lives of two women characters in this play clearly reveal their existential attitude towards life. They are victims of frustration and loneliness. Laxmi is married but she is childless. This leaves a great void in her life. After being deserted by her husband, she walks into the life of Sakharam choosing to be his slave. She endures all the mystical tortures and psychological tortures. Before she decides to leave Sakharam, Laxmi questions the meaning of her existence, "Am I a slut? A bitch? A niggling bit of a cast-off woman? Then beat me... beat the life out of men. Burn me alive. There's no body I can call my own. So my life is worth nothing..." (SB 150).

The same fate befalls Champa too. Once they are out of their families their sense of loneliness increases physically and emotionally. It is with the view of escaping from the devouring vacuum that Laxmi talks to ants and crows and also feeds them as if they were her children. Similarly, Champa tries to ward off her extreme feelings in excessive drinking and use of tobacco; least realizing that there is no permanent remedies to her gnawing loneliness. Champa allows Laxmi to share her roof considering her companionship. Being childless destitutes both of them find consolation in their respective deprivations. In spite of the re-direction and sublimation of their emotions, the feeling of emptiness grips them all more.

The plays which revealed the plight of women offered the moral brigade of the conservative section of audience and raised controversy as it dealt with peddled sex and violence. Comfortable convictions in morality received a beating up in these plays which exposed the middle class hypocrisy in a clinical and naturalistic manner. Tendulkar draws the attention of the audience to the endless decay and violence in the social mores inexorably impinging upon the man-woman relationship, sex and ethics seem to have created a sense of fatefulness out of which there is no escape, especially for woman. They are trapped in their own helpless condition, left to the battering of cruel and irrational forces beyond their control.

Tendulkar's play *Kamala* is based on a real life incident. In 1982, a journalist named Ashwin Sarin purchased a woman from a rural flesh market in Dolpur in Rajasthan and produced her as evidence at press conference. Representing this real incident, as Shailaja Wadikar states, "Tendulkar throws light on the ghastly flesh trade, the position of women in society, the cut-throat competition that goes on in success oriented contemporary generation and the egoistic hypocrisy of the young journalists" (24). Sarita and Kamala represent the scapegoats of the treacherous ways of so-called cultured, civilized and progressive people of modern generation.

The character Kamala in this play is an illiterate village woman brought from a rural flesh market by Jaisingh. His attitude towards the slave reflects the attitude of modern young generation in the success-oriented, civilized contemporary society where they are ready to sacrifice human values to pursue their material goals. The following conversation between Sarita and Jaisingh brings to focus the state of helpless, cast off women in society:

JAISINGH. I bought her—in the Luhardaga bazaar in Bihar. SARITA. ...Bought her?  
 JAISINGH. For two hundred and fifty rupees. Even a bullock costs more than that.  
 [Sarita is stunned]

They sell human beings at this bazaar... They have an open auction for women of all sorts of ages. People come from long distances to make their bids.

SARITA. They auction -women?

JASINGH. ...The men who want to bid-handle the woman to inspect them. Whether they are firm and flabby, young or old. Healthy or diseased. How they feel in the breast in their waist, in their thighs. (K. 14)

Her firm determination to revolt, it is clear, is not of a negative and disruptive nature. It has been prompted and motivated by the positive impulse to oppose tyranny and injustice. There is nothing in her words and actions to suggest the desire to hurt or humiliate her partner as an act of revenge. In fact, what makes her resolution more impressive is the fact that she is determined to fight not only for her own sake but for the sake of women's cause against their oppressions and degradations. That is the reason she decides to stay back and nurse Jaisingh back to health when he feels utterly broken and shattered because of his dismissal from job by his master. In fact, her sympathies are with all the Kamala's of the world, whether male or female. Sarita emerges as a woman with remarkable depth and maturity. She displays a great capacity to grow and learn from her experiences in order to encounter tyrannies against herself in particular and women in general. She shows both emotional sensitivity as well as intellectual capacity necessary to comprehend and confront the realities of oppressive and exploitative male world. What makes her a memorable figure on stage is the impressive equipoise she exhibits in deciding to stay back with Jaisingh, firmly determined, at the same time, not to slave for him any longer.

Jain understands Sarita's hardships and casually remarks, "This warrior against exploitation is exploiting you... Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife!" (K. 17). This anticipates Sarita's future realization of her position in the family.

The challenges put forth by Sarita towards the end of the play remains as mere queries in the minds of millions of Indian women, "Why aren't women ever the masters? Why can't a woman at least ask to live her life in the same way as man? Why must only a man have the rights to be a man? Does he have one extra sense? ..." (K. 47). Sarita locks these interrogations in the corners of her mind temporarily, to give emotional support to her husband who is sacked away from his job, "How innocent even the masters look when they're asleep, don't they? Let me stay here. I'll stay here with him" (K. 52). There arises an oscillation within Sarita between her feminine sensibility and her zest for identity.

In the character of Rama in the play *The Vultures*, Tendulkar is able to create an impressive, naturally sympathetic individual caught among the family of vultures. Like Sarita in *Kamala*, she is also a docile house wife devoid of all marital pleasures, especially motherhood and is subjected to physical and psychological violence under a drunkard husband. She has been painted in the pastel shade of innocence, purity, goodness and willing subservience.

Tendulkar exposes man's bestiality in its most savage shape in his play *The Vultures*. Through this play Tendulkar makes an unique mixture of feudal violence, impotence and rage acquired on critical force on celluloid. Does the thirst of capitalistic values lead to cultural and moral degradation? Are the weaklings especially women are ruthlessly crushed by the strong and mighty in the society? The selfish, sensual and barbaric tendency of the members of a family allows him to explore these questions.

Tendulkar's significant play *Silence! The Court is in Session* exposes the issue of victimized women where the central character miss Leela Benare has become a victim in the hands of men who are selfish and brutally ambitious in a mock law court performed by 'The Sonar Moti Tenement progressive Association (Bombay). Other members are the Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik, Professor Damle and Rawte. Samant, a villager is shocked to know that the school management, where Benare works as a teacher, holds an enquiry against her just because of one bit of Slander'. He takes pity on her when she bursts out placing her hand on her swelling stomach. All decide to frame Benare as 'the accused' in the 'mock-trial'. She is made stand in the dock. She is shocked when accused of the crime of infanticide and realizes that she is baited by the male aggressors. In the beginning, Benare brims with mirth and merry, but she feels engulfed and lost towards the close. Bitter are the lessons of life that had to offer her. Benare after her betrayal in love tries to face the life with fortitude. All her pleas for marriage were discarded; she was publicly mortified. Thus her life turns to a mere existence. Benare herself proves to be the victim of her own destiny.

Tendulkar scrutinizes the evil and wicked tendencies inherent in man through the tragedy of Leela Benare. Though Benare proves to be a successful teacher, the school's authorities decide to throw her out of her job because of her defame. Thus freedom to lead an economically independent life is snatched off from her. Similarly when the judge of mock trail passes the verdict of aborting the foetus in her womb, she is denied of the rights of becoming a mother. Though Benare tries to rise up from her distress, she proves to be a weak, fragile woman towards the end of the play.

### **CONCLUSION :**

The women are victims of patriarchal structures of power which seek to keep women subjugated and enslaved. The various forms of sexist practices in patriarchal setup of society have been one of degrading and crippling forces which women have been confronting since the day of dawn. Most of his women find themselves helpless in the face of sexist oppression and are unable to cope with it in any way other than accepting its pains and sufferings. The inability to resist such oppressive conditions might be attributed to their being living at a low level of awareness and poor material conditions. These individuals usually do not possess the ability to think rationally which is due to their lack of learning that gives them no choice, other than to resign. Since they neither think nor act to bring a change in their lot, there is seen no significant growth in such characters. The absence of hope and faith in themselves makes them silent sufferers and they resign to the cruelties done to them. They appear to possess low sensitivity and have a limited perspective.

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