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Convergence of social domains in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala*: Performing the home and the society, the private and the public

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to read Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* as a play that critiques a degenerative social condition perceived through the experiences of a careerist, upper-middle class individual and, collaterally, his family. The play exposes the consumerist society through the individual's encounter with it and carries out the exposure on the domestic stage of home, eventually exposing the 'home' as well. The paper tries to examine the way the two worlds have been unveiled and also the way they overlap each other to expose a shared space of degeneration. The study seeks to grasp the play's social critique by studying Tendulkar's well-coordinated dramaturgy made of bold thematic and performative statements.

Keywords:

Home, society, media, gender, family, marriage, stage, Indian theatre.

Introduction

Post-Independence Indian theatre runs strikingly parallel to the contemporary socio-historical condition of the country as the two are unprecedentedly embedded into each other. In the newly arrived post-Independence postcoloniality, drama aspires to be 'Indian' under the nationalist narrative of nation-building, while it also desires to be self-conscious and critical of its context. The desire for indigeneness coexists with the urge to critique the very process of constructing the indigeneness. As a result, a strong tradition of theatre evolves either to reinscribe the dominant mood of nationalist consolidation or to question whatever given by it, eventually resulting in an 'Indian' tradition of theatre that mediates the situation at hand and is also mediated by it.

The major tradition of theatre is the one that selectively appropriates Sanskrit classical drama and folk conventions to the modern stage and enacts the received or imagined history with a view to formulating a mythological or retrospective narrative to critique the present. But there is also the strong presence of a different style of theatre that directly looks at the immediate social reality mostly in urban or semiurban setting and formulates a "tradition of urban, realist, predominantly domestic drama" (Dharwadker 269). They probe the contemporary society through the crucible of the private space of home and personal relations and give birth to a theatre of social critique that engages with macro issues of the time while remaining subtly personal. The present paper seeks to read Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* (1981), which belongs to this tradition of social-domestic play. The play critiques the contemporary society by engaging with some of its discursive institutions and products such as the capitalist-consumerist media and sex as saleable commodity. The intricacies of personal or conjugal relations in an upper-middle class urban home serves as the stage of this social critique and exposes a condition which looks liberally progressive but is highly consumerist and gendered both within and outside home. The present study aims to examine this condition to see

how the two worlds – the home and the society – expose each other and bring forth an exploitative and suppressive order that lies underneath the cover of modernity and sophistication. Conjunctively, the study is also to look at Tendulkar's realistic, naturalistic representation on the stage to assess the theatrical finesse vis-à-vis the issues addressed.

The play

Kamala presents a maverick journalist of an English-language daily, Jaisingh Jadhav, who goes to Lohardaga, a remote village in Bihar (now in Jharkhand) and buys a tribal woman, named Kamala, from auction to prove that auction of women still goes on in India. He brings the woman in his bungalow in New Delhi much to the wonder of his wife Sarita and her uncle Kakasaheb, an old school journalist in a Marathi newspaper, and presents her at the New Delhi Press Club to create sensation in media and at the highest level of power. But Jaisingh has to lose his job when his own employer refuses to back him under political pressure. A defeated man returns to his home, where he still rules, to find his wife still caring though undergone considerable changes.

The play unfolds the socio-personal drama through two distinct lines of societal situations. One is the internal world of home and family; the other is the outside world of society. The capitalist-consumerist media, sex trade, and rural, tribal disadvantages represent the outside world, while the internal domestic world is represented by a patriarchal family and home where conjugal relationship betrays a sexually suppressive, master-slave equation. The play creates different locations that materially-visually look different but ideologically become akin to each other. The New Delhi Press Club and the site of auction of the outside world contrast with the domestic world of the family. But Tendulkar ultimately blur the line of differences between all locations of the two worlds to expose a situation that degenerates all across. The two domains converge to expose the society at large, though they remain distinct in their contextual characteristics even when they overlap each other. This is also true when different locations are shown even within the outside world of society where they ideologically meet each other while staying fully distinct in their socio-economic specificities. The New Delhi Press Club and the site of auction materially stand in stark contrast to each other but ultimately converge to uphold an image of exploitation which is equally pervasive and context-specific.

The outside world: the auction and “multiple patriarchies”

The site of auction at Lohardaga bazaar can be considered a case of how sexual exploitation works at a societal level marked by multiple backwardness. The tribal society is on a peripheral remoteness, lacking in minimum facilities of the mainstream society due to administrative indifference. The abominable living standard under utmost poverty and illiteracy develops a socio-cultural pattern where it becomes common for men to drink and sell their women. For women such as Kamala, their position reveals multiple exploitations. Their always-already sexual denomination is further heightened by their economic and cultural constraints. Men do not hesitate to auction women off to get rid of poverty. They become the normal scapegoats in the economic enterprise which is evidently gendered and male-decided. Kamala cannot raise her voice against the auction because her sex makes her already unequal in her society; the socio-economic backwardness of her community renders her doubly oppressed. She has to live under the regulation of patriarchy which is extended to other types of hierarchies such as caste, ethnicity, and economic condition. It has become

“multiple patriarchies” (Chitnis qtd. in Chaudhuri and Rajan xxiii) where economic and cultural patterns are strongly gendered, let alone the sexual pattern.

The material and ideological condition of the auction explicitly exerts male authority and a disregard for the feminine ‘Other’. Its bias against women holds no bar and explicitly treats them as a commercial commodity whose saleability lies on their sexual vulnerability. The site of the auction draws a sizeable male crowd which lusts over the titillating spectacle of women being treated like cattle and their bodies subjected to physical verification by the male buyers. The total humiliation of the fantasised female body satisfies the masculine audience. Mired in poverty and illiteracy, the crowd celebrate the women as sex-objects and crudely display a situation where trade and titillation are equally settled. Sex and business converge to create a pattern of exploitation which is explicitly multidimensional.

A different yet similar domain in the outside world: media

Media and specifically the New Delhi Press Club episode further expose the degenerative outside world of the society. This is a domain altogether different from the Luhardaga auction. No one can match the shining, posh New Delhi media with the dusty, odorous auction site. In every social index, one is the sign of progress and modernity, while the other defines backwardness. But in spite of their material difference, the two domains stand together in their respective patterns of exploitation. Both represent social degeneration at large. While the Luhardaga auction functions with its crude, rustic explicitness, the New Delhi media works implicitly under the garb of urban modernity.

Media: what it promises to be

Jaisingh Jadhav plays a maverick journalist who risks his life supposedly for the sake of moral journalism. He claims to be a moral-activist who stays away from politics and resorts to alternative modes of protest to change the society. Media is that socio-cultural apparatus of protest which seems to suit Jaisingh's anti-politics and anti-corruption mission. It is theoretically an apolitical instrument of shaping and mobilising people's orientation and beliefs. People, according to N. Couldry, believe in the authority of the media discourse because they believe that most others also believe the same (qtd. in Sinha 2803), and on this basis, media can re/shape the public sphere. Jaisingh wants to exploit this authority of the media over people in order to form strong public opinion against corruption. For this reason he goes to Luhardaga, a remote village in Bihar, to eye-witness the auction of women and purchases one as an evidence to be shown at a press conference in New Delhi.

Media: how it turns out

The play *Kamala* exposes the self-styled prober and the professional class he belongs to, hitherto hidden under the perceived image of progress and modernity. The maverick journalist stands utterly corrupt and exploitative to push his career-graph up. And media fails miserably to perform its supposed role of a watchdog and plays in the hand of power. In the play, Tendulkar tries to create the dialectic of two different schools of journalism in order to critique one against the other. One is the old-styled, vernacular, traditional, and ethical journalism represented by Kakasaheb, uncle of Jaisingh's wife Sarita; the other is the new-age, fast and smart, chic-English style, practised by Jaisingh. The new style wants to redefine journalism altogether by changing its areas of emphasis and technique of handling news-items. Adventurism and risk become the catch-words to make the journalist look like a rebellious explorer, hounding down issues and

adopting, sometimes, inconceivable ways to bring them in print. Going to a remote flesh-trade centre, purchasing a woman there, and keeping her in one's own house are such tasks daring enough to make the reporter larger than the report itself. During the process, he becomes a self-obsessed star reporter, whose name shines above the reports he makes. The style of presentation also takes a new turn. The old method of calm restraint while reporting sensational incidents gives way to a style that sensationalises even the non-sensational. What matters is what sells.

The dark underbelly of media is further exposed at the press conference arranged by Jaisingh. The high-end show is planned to uncover the plight of women and poor people in India, but it ironically reveals the contemporary plight of media and corrupt journalism. Kamala, the tribal woman, has been reduced to an object of 'tamasha' in front of the elite, educated, and urbane audience. To media, Kamala's miserable life does not hold so much importance as much the way she is presented in the press conference. First, she invites media curiosity as a woman purchased in an auction – an item sensational enough to fire the male, urban imagination. They have heard or read stories of human auction, but this tribal woman gives them the scope to experience their fantasised notion and enjoy the thrill of it. Secondly, Kamala's sexuality is vital here as she has been presented as sexually vulnerable and alluring to the predominantly male audience. The over-enthusiasm of the photographers and the sex-starved audience over her half-covered body, deliberately kept so by Jaisingh, shows her as a well-thought out pawn in the hand of a very calculative journalist, who simply rides on her for his career-gain, and the consumerist media which profits from the highly saleable news item called 'Kamala'. 'Sex sells' is the mantra of this new-age media, which never hesitates to cash in on it even at the expense of a poor woman. For circulation, advertisement, and profit, this mercenary media can become shamelessly masculine and project woman in a derogatory manner, but all under the pretext of social activism.

Jaisingh's pathetic end exposes the way media works within its discursive configuration. It sustains its functional apparatuses, such as Jaisingh himself, which it is also sustained by, but does not hesitate to do away with them when such apparatuses pose threat to its sustenance. The star journalist is finally fired by his own newspaper as his press conference rouses brows of all the big-shots involved in the flesh-racket and endangers the commercial arrangement between media and power. The media-house, which once found business in his heroics and stood behind him, readily clears its hand off when pressures start mounting from above. Jaisingh cannot claim a moral stand against the decision because he is a willing player in the 'game'. The only thing that goes wrong with him is that he has crossed the given limit and come in the way of the big and mighty. In this world of commercial journalism, he wanted to become bigger than the institution itself, which he is a part of, and as a result he is cut to size. The rise and fall of this man clearly shows how media operates in a consumerist society and the standard pattern of journalism. For its commercial growth and sustenance, media claims to play the role of a social watchdog, but for the same purpose it can also sacrifice its presumed role and work as a compliant force with the establishment, a seasoned player in the political game of power, changing its guard according to the need of time. It harbours mercenary journalism so long it is profitable but disapproves it when it becomes a threat.

The inside world: the 'happy home'

The drama of exposing the outside world unfolds through the individual's, and consequently his family's, encounter with that outside world and largely on the stage

of Jaisingh Jadhav's home. The method of engaging the media in the crucible of home unsettles media's perceived image, but the exposure does not spare the stage of home either. The relationships between its members have been scrutinised. The image of 'happy home' becomes suspect as it reveals a highly exploitative order that runs underneath. The home here is a site of gender discrimination. It bears the presence of its owner, who reigns over it as its husband-cum-master. The wife is fated to play an auxiliary role, as though a passive telephone call receiver attending the incoming calls and keeping records for her husband. Besides, she has also to meet the physical needs of her husband as and when required. Thankfully, this master-slave relationship is covered by the sanctified norms of marriage. In this gendered space, the husband can rightfully go to the extent of bringing another woman (Kamala) from a rural flesh-market on the ground of professional reasons. His manhood permits him to exercise this right and expect his wife to be a loyal and muted spectator of this exploitation. Tendulkar uses the tribal woman, Kamala, as an intervening force from the outside world to question, or help others to question, the institution of marriage, home, and the patriarchal attitude to woman. The always-already made Jadhav-home has been unmade, at least ideologically, by the presence of Kamala which brings in a relative perspective to show that the 'happy home' has a dark underbelly.

The outside and the inside: the rot all across with varying patterns

The coexistence of the two women is the most crucial moment in the play because it is where the outdoor and the indoor, the society and the home converge to show degeneration across social domains. Kamala is brought into the Jadhav-home with her Luhardaga past and as a media-product. Her entry into the house marks the moment of convergence of different social domains in terms of suppressive and exploitative order. Kamala and Sarita together prove that exploitation is not limited to the domains of class/caste/economic/cultural backwardness. The Luhardaga auction bazaar of women, which becomes one with the posh New Delhi Press Club, can penetrate even an urbane, affluent, and educated home, landing the purchased woman and the married wife on an equal ideological footing. Kamala, in her rustic ignorance, draws a simplistic line of analogy between her and Sarita memsahib and concludes, "Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed?" (35). The analogy revokes Sarita's gender amnesia and opens her eyes to the crude realities of marriage. Undoubtedly, her better social status in terms of her access to modernity makes it possible for her to grasp the implication and see through the fact. Kamala unknowingly facilitates this awareness, while she herself remains unaware because of her multiple backwardness in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity. The patterns of exploitation vary across different social contexts due to contextual specificities. The crudity of Luhardaga cannot be found in a New Delhi upper-middle class drawing room. Exploitation here occurs under the garb of culture and modernity where the master-slave relationship is sanctified by marriage and made acceptable by urban sophistication. Sarita cannot burst out against all suppression under the dual pressure. She cannot dismiss the marital obligation; nor can she reject her urban modernity to stand naked in public like Kamala. She is also doomed like Kamala but in a different way. The two women thus exist in a space where boundaries of societal condition seem to blur; different domains with their varied specificities contribute to expose each other; the society looks rotten somewhere crudely and some other places under the patches of urbanity.

The home onstage

In his social problem plays, Tendulkar's method is to use the domestic world of 'home' as a space to examine the social realities outside. He "translate[s] social and political conflicts into personal dilemmas and resituate[s] them within the domestic sphere" (Dharwadker 277). Home becomes the crucible where the society is examined on the testing ground of personal relationships. Its members' private life is deeply enmeshed into the crises of gender, marriage, family, caste, and class. Their interaction with the social crises unsettles many perceived realities of the outside world while also unveiling the home itself. For this purpose, Tendulkar has always created onstage a realistic home whose "material-visual 'look'" (Dharwadker 277) displays signs of social politics. Its inhabitants build up a performative narrative that often naturalistically relates to the predominant discourses of social relations. Jaisingh Jadhav's small yet well-furnished, affluent bungalow in a fashionable neighbourhood in New Delhi sets the stature of the man who works as an associate editor in an English-language daily. The counter-presence of an old school journalist of a vernacular daily offers an alternative that helps to assess Jaisingh's journalism in perspective. Jaisingh's loud and coarse 'Punjabi' manners build his position of authority in the house. It dismisses the allegedly amateurish, non-commercial, feminised journalism of Kakasaheb by the power of its masculine and commercial professionalism. Jaisingh's masculinity also undermines the identity of his wife. Sarita's passive and mechanical ways indicate the asymmetrical relationship with her husband. She has been reduced to a telephone call receiver who tirelessly receives calls for her husband and takes down notes. The ringing telephone and Sarita's ritual of attending it constantly suggest her limited agency within the home. The telephone is also a visual channel that connects the two worlds of indoor and outdoor. The outside world enters the home symbolically through it, resulting in an exposure of the outside and the internal home as well.

In contrast to Sarita, Kamala is always veiled, hesitant, and scared. This visual difference underscores the social gap between the two women, who otherwise stand together in terms of gender subjugation. She becomes confidently expressive only on the night when she unknowingly makes Sarita awake to reality. The coexistence of the two women is made naturalistically suggestive on the stage. They stand apart in their different body languages. Kamala sits near Sarita's feet even when they discover their ideological affinity in their respective ways. Before she is shifted to orphanage, she wears the sari Sarita gives her but in her own way. Their affinity indicates the presence of an exploitative pattern at all levels of the society. But their unmistakable difference stresses the distinctive specificities of each of these levels or domains.

Tendulkar's stage setting is effectively tuned to the play's thematic fabric. The upper-middle class drawing room is prepared as a space that can unfold the drama of the outside world through the complications of marriage, family, and home. The setting successfully brings the rustic Luhardaga bazaar to the sophisticated drawing room in New Delhi; or the noisy Press Club to the apparently placid drawing room. The mechanical Sarita, helpless Kakasaheb in front of the authoritative Jaisingh, alongside the pawned Kamala, the telephone, English dailies, and drinks, create a space that is domestic and also goes beyond it. The use of light, particularly at the end, is also notable. When Jaisingh comes back home fired from his job and lost, Sarita puts her acquired consciousness on hold and compromises to save her home. The play ends with a nearly dark stage where Sarita turns off all the lights leaving only one. Tendulkar seems desperate to offer a positive ending amid despair and suggest a better prospect through the gained consciousness of the individuals.

Conclusion

Kamala is noted in the tradition of urban realist drama for its remarkable exposure of the society both at macro and micro levels. The macro level of the society shows commercialisation of media and sexuality in an androcentric system. But this macro analysis has been carried out at the micro level of home and family. The intricacies of personal relations at the private, domestic sphere have been put in the perspectives of gender, class, and consumerism, producing a critique of the macro society and the micro home. Tendulkar takes off the garb of urban modernity and unmasks the social rot in his characteristic style of hard-hitting plain-speak and ruthless jibe. He does not attempt at any technical experiment, which he hardly does in his urban realist plays, but hits the society where it hurts most in an intimate yet distanced, personal yet impersonal, micro yet macro way. The present study has sought to assess the social critique through a critical analysis of the play-text and its performative aspects. However, scope for further analysis of the play still stands open. The study can be taken forward by a reading of the performance history of the play and how that history can possibly contribute to explore new aspects of its social critique.



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BIO-NOTE

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