

REPRESENTATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CRUELTY IN TENDULKAR' *S THE VULTURES*

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From the earliest Greek tragedians to the contemporary playwrights of cruelty and violence, from Sophocles to Seneca and Jean Genet to Peter Weisse or our very known Vijay Tendulkar, spectated of the most abominable forms of hatred ,cruelty and violence that have held both author and audience in thrall. "Violence is not a passing phrase in human nature but almost a permanent function of all human beings"¹ on the other hand cruelty is a means not an end. The use of cruelty in theatre was a means of affecting a sort of therapy for the soul. Cruelty is the motive behind every human gesture –the spring that unlock human action.

Tendulkar has portrayed the theme of violence and cruelty most realistically in most of his plays. *The Vultures* (originally called *Gidhade*) along with, *Silence! the Court is in Session*, *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal*, is one of the most realistic portrayals of gender and domestic violence that is mated out to a woman that is torn apart between her desire and her family. The play is set in a morally collapsed family structure and explores the theme of violence and cruelty disintegrated in an urban family as one defenceless women and her equally defenceless illegitimate brother-in-law struggling against a pack of middle class vultures in their unending quest for power and property. "Tendulkar is the first writer to make the urban white collared middle class take a note with quite a bit of shock of the reality as it exited, in its bare-to-the bone form"². Family is a group where one forgets all one's pain and problems and seeks love and support. If there is no love relationship, it becomes a group of devils or vultures. And they trapped in unnecessarily game of violence and cruelty. So *The Vultures* is, indeed, the most violent of Tendulkar's plays. It is replete with violent imagery, consisting blood, erring and mad raving. "The vultures expose the violence, avarice and sexual disintegration of the middle class and evoked strong reactions, not only among more conventional theatre goers, but from the censure board."³ *The Vultures'* shows people caught in hypocrisy and acute social and mental isolation. The play depicts family collapsing under the functional and moral values and explores the theme of violence in the various forms: domestic, sexual, communal, and political. Vultures thus proved to be a catalyst in the formation of Tendulkar's characteristic style as a dramatist. "Tendulkar presents a too terrifying, repulsive, almost barbaric representation of life"⁴

On the whole, the play is, no doubt, naturalistic in its portrayal of domestic violence caused by greed. It is built on contrasting situations. On the one hand, there is a gruesome portrayal of man's greed and on the other hand, there is a portrayal of tender love. When the agents of these opposite qualities meet, a conflict of great dramatic significance results. Tendulkar, in this play, displays a rare genius of mixing the absurd as evident in the cruel and curious relationship obtaining among Hari Patile(Pappa), his

two sons Ramakant and Umakant and his daughter Manik; and the tender but possessive relationship between Rama, Ramakant's wife, and Rajninath, Pappa's illegitimate son. All of the members of the family are vultures, unlike Rama and Rajninath, who possesses human virtues in the family. Rama and Rajninath, the one, wedding into the family and the other the illegitimate son of the family, are biologically outsiders and yet linked to the family by family ties, making a bonding in a commonality of humiliation.

Rajninath, the illegitimate son of Hari Patile, has also performed the role of chorus who watches the violent disintegration of the family and bears witness of it. Rajninath, "sitting writing" and "speaking in poetry" like a chorus in scene I and IV in act I, and VIII in act II, provides the information of the past and present of the family. He, turning to the realities of the family, makes us aware of the extremes of violence and cruelty in the very barbaric and savage form. The action begins with a scene in which Ramakant and Rama with their belongings are getting ready to leave home which Ramakant had exploited and Rama had been trapped in. As they leave the audience hears a "shrill screaming of vultures" and the story of five vultures is recalled in flashback. We look the past events through the eyes of Rajninath, who, in the opening scene, sings a rather long song from which we understand that twenty two years have passed during which time the incidents narrated in the play took place. He notices Ramakant and Rama leaving the house locking it. This sight kindles his memory and begins to write a song. He remembers the day Ramakant married Rama who was "like a doe, an innocent doe untouched" and "as loving as the earth." (V 203) Rama was brought to the house of Pitles which is,

"Not a home, but a hole in a tree
Where vultures lived
In the shape of men" (204)

Ramakant, being an addict to liquor, failed in his duty as a husband to make a mother to his wife. Ramakant tells us that Rama thus spends twenty two years "living importance" (202). She only knew one longing "the need to well with fruit". which is "each womb bearing women's right by birth" (205). She had to full fill her only desire through her brother-in-law, Rajninath. She expresses her pain and agony and tries to alley her pain, embracing her into his arms and made her soil pregnant. But Manik, her sister-in-law, aborts her and therefore Rama once again becomes "empty of pain and empty of desire."

The house of vultures disintegrates. Ramakant becomes a pauper. Both Ramakant and Rama, therefore, have to leave it. Rajninath is sad to see Rama following her husband as is evident in the opening lines of the song he sings: "So Rama went away.

A statue of emotions, chilled to stone.
Alive, she followed after
That living death, her master,
With the dogged loyalty
Of a barren beast." (201)

Rama stands in sharp contrast to the other members of Pappa Pitale's house. When the gardener is driven out for asking for his wages she tells Manik that they had not paid him

for the last two months. But Manik, like other vultures does not care the family of the gardener but she has been “dying for that latest necklace at Harivallab’s....”.(207)

All the Pitals drink, and liquor flows like a river in the house. It is liquor that makes them violent and ruthless towards one another. When Pappa says it has been his stupidity to produce bastards like them, Ramakant retorts: “Pappa, papp: as the seed, so the tree:

Did we ever ask to be produced?” (201)

On another occasion, she tells his brother Umakant that a mangy dog would have made a better father. And, all this in the presence of their own father! However, the old man, hardened by his own past crimes, remains nonchalant. The situation becomes worse of the sudden appearance of Sakharam, Papa’s brother, who claims his share of the forgotten bank account which only Pappa knew about. Ramakant, Umakant and Manik have heard Sakharam demanding money from Pappa. This rouse their suspicion that their father still has some money stacked away somewhere. So, after driving away Sakharam, Ramakant, Umakant and Manik made their Pappa drink to extract the truth about the money. It is a scene of unbelievable violence – violence that children are capable of inflicting on their father. The son pretends to fight each other with the father getting trapped between them. Pappa gets injured. In order to escape from ruthless assault, he admits to them that he has deposited some money in the Punjab Bank. He says pathetically:

“There are no more you devils: there` isn` t:
That`s all there is, really. Please don` t
Kill me: I am your father, you pimps:
Your father: (230)

However, his refusal to part with the money enrages his children who try to kill him. Therefore, Pappa runs away and to quote Rajninath.

“The oldest vulture,
That stubborn ghost
With death in his desire,
Hiding his ugly mew,
Trailing a wing,
Departed from of the hollow of the tree
Where he lived” (232)

While this is happening, his daughter-in-law Rama is helplessly watching from the shadow. Rama, a thunder stuck what these children are doing to their father.

In the second part the sister Manik is destroyed. Manik`s name literally means a “jewel” but this “jewel” has lost its luster. Manik is a perfect portrait of modern India women; spring pseudo- western ways. The pills, the curlers, the cigarettes and the drinking are all evidence of this. She is like an animal. She is one of the vultures. The fact that both Ramakant and Umakant want to get rid of their sister becomes clear in scene I of act II. At a game of cards, Umakant is about to choke Manik to death. Watching this Ramakant goads on Umakant, revealing the inherent violence in him, saying:

Don` t bloody let her go, Umya: Drag the bloody money out: Look
how she`s wriggling: Squash her bloody neck: Twist it: (235)

Ramakant and Umakant talk to their sister about her affair with the Rajah of Hondur, they use obscene language, which is suggestive of their incestuous nature. Discussing Manik's love affair with Raja of Hondur, Umakant tells Ramakant that he might marry her "if her belly swells out" (236). It happens, they can blackmail the "Hondur Fellow." In this regard Ramakant says:

".....let her make love: Romance: Picnics: I tell you in any case, sooner or later, this Raja's going to give her the slip....." (236)

when she becomes pregnant, together Ramakant and Umakant hatch a plot to break Manik's leg in order to prevent her from meeting her love further. They ruthlessly execute this plan. However, a phone call informs them that the Raja of Hondur has died for heart attack. As a result, their prospect of blackmailing Manik's love vanish. In a rage, they break Manik's room open and Ramakant kicks Manik's belly to unborn child out of her in one of the goriest, most heinous scene ever conceived on the Marathi stage, albeit as an offstage event. All we hear of it, is Manik's scream. And then Tendulkar makes us aware of the cult of cruelty and violence, presenting Manik, who comes hobbling down to the steps, one leg in plaster, her sari covered in the blood of the unborn, barely able to hold herself together. She runs out of the house and down the passage at the back, fearing for her own life.

Set against these scene of violence are those involving Rama and Rajninath who lives in the garage, as an outcast. Rajninath helplessly watching the ordeals that Rama undergoes in the house of vultures. He pours out his feelings in his songs. It is through these songs that the reader comes to know of the past happening in the house. Though Rama is forbidden to feed Rajninath, she does it secretly. Rajninath, however, protests to be fed thus. He tells her:

".....go on, live your whole life in fear and trembling. People, like you infuriate me: who've you got to be afraid of? Those cowards?" (238)

Nevertheless, he accepts whatever she brings him, for, as he says, "...if you (Rama) took mud in your hand, it'd turn to sweetness." (239)

As is usual with Tendulkar the woman, here Rama, is given an opportunity to express her agony and frustration, in scene II of act II. One, here, reminds of the long speech made by Leela Benare in the last act of *Silence! the Court is in Session*. To quote a few of her utterance with regard of her survival in the house of vultures.

"..... Every day, a new death. Every minute a thousand million deaths. A pain like a million needles stuck in your heart" (240).

Referring to her barrenness, she says:

"it is not the fault of doctors, of learned men, of saints and sages; it's not even my fault; the womb is healthy and sound, I swear it.

I was born to become a mother. This soil's rich, it's hungry. But the seed won't take root. If the seed soaked in poison, if it's weak, feeble, lifeless, devoid of virtue – why blame the soil....."(241).

She is disgusted with her husband's drunken love- making and she declares to Rajninath her intention of immolating herself. Rajninath sensitive to Rama's yearning to become a mother, hold her in an embrace. She pretends to protest. Needless to say the

seeds, Rama become pregnant. Ramakant takes care for her, thinking that the seed that grows in her womb is his. His belief is so firm, that when Umakant informs of the real source of Rama's pregnancy, he assaults him. He shuts the door on Umakant. He drinks more and more. In the mean time, Hari Patale, the pappa, and Manik have been hanging around the house, thirsty of revenge. Pappa persuades Rajninath to join hands with him to take revenge upon his legitimate sons. Rajninath drives him out. He collides with Umakant who has been eavesdropping. So he runs away. Manik comes to the garage triumphantly announcing that she has succeeded in aborting Rama. Rajninath is shocked. Ramakant, in utter despair, caused by drunkenness and insolvency raves that he will abort Rama, for child is not his. There is no evidence in the play to show that Ramakant causes with Rajninath's songs which begins in the form of prayer to God to show the Pitaless the right path. But, he also knows that all is in vain, for:

“There is no escape for them.
 NoThere is none.
 For there is no escape
 For them...
 Or for anyone...” (265)

The vultures is, indeed, the most violent of Tendulkar's plays. It reminds one of the Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi". It is replete with violent imagery, consisting of blood, eeriness and mad raving. Both Hari Patil's and Manik thirst for revenge. Both succeed in their mission. While Pappa succeeds in driving Ramakant to the street, Manik succeeds in causing Rama's abortion. On the whole, the play is, no doubt, naturalistic in its portrayal of domestic violence. As Samik Bandyopadhyay observes violence in the play saying:

“The violence in The Vultures is played out in “different kind of entrapment, not the chancy accidental kind that comes with the defective lock, but a conventionally/ socially determined entrapment, viz. that of the family. Blood and common shared history give it collective a stronger and more ruthless power than that exercised by the amateur theatre group of Silence!”⁵

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