

Politics of Gender and Power in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* and Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire*

- Santosh Kumar Sonker

Abstract: As we know, “gender”, the most debatable term in the literary academia, signifies socially defined roles assigned to women. Previously the gender discourse was limited to the exploitation of women in the patriarchal society which exploits power politics to subjugate women but contemporary studies made in this realm has extended discussion to the pitiable plight of trans-gender as well. Eunuchs like other marginalized sections such as dalits and tribals residing on the periphery of the society are badly treated at the hands of privileged people. The gender study of the present age has also brought into dialogue the exploitation of men at the hands of women; this aspect of the gender study has given a new direction to the literary academia. Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani have shed light on the problem of gender relations in India and have argued that the socially defined roles are followed more strictly in the upper strata of the society. Taking into account the middle-class social milieu, Tendulkar in *Kamala* and Dattani in *Seven Steps around the Fire* have presented that sense of marginality is more severe for middle class women than other deprived sections of society like eunuchs and tribal women who are free to act on their own at least in their domain.

Keywords: gender, hegemony, tribal, media, police administration

Critics' claims about the meager achievement of Indian English Drama fail to vindicate its authenticity when the plays by the playwrights such as Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani are considered. Drama in the hands of the last two has become a medium of social awakening instead of being mere instrument of entertainment. While Vijay Tendulkar deals with the multifarious aspect of violence, Mahesh Dattani has trained his critical gaze at revealing the hidden realities which are denied though they are very much present in the society. However, the issue of gender discrimination in face of power politics works as a bridge between them and both of them meet at the point of voicing the voiceless with their differences. The present paper aims at the study of gender relations, the violence it perpetuates and the complexity it creates in the family. Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* discusses the issue of violence and media and brings to light the incorporation and perpetuation of violence through media. Dealing with the marketing of tribal women, the play questions the role of contemporary media to stop malpractices of society. But the playwright very adroitly depicts the subjugation of a woman in the family of a journalist and her resistance against it. Maya Pandit argues: “*Kamala* dealt with the problem of the

negligible value of woman as a commodity in the modern world... It also showed how even the state machinery is involved in the heinous crime of trafficking in women. And even Press, the fourth estate, colludes with the State as an ideological apparatus of power to maintain status quo of unequal relation in society” (69). Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* dealing with the plight of eunuchs in India society throws light on the corruption in the administration; in the mean while it discusses the subjugated self of a woman in the house of a Deputy Commissioner of Police and Superintendent of Police. Thus, both plays depict the subordination of women in the family and their revolt against it and also elaborate the voicelessness of the marginalized living on the fringes of the society. It also highlights the silence of the socially backwards which gives impetus to the awareness of women for her discrimination.

The duo plays depict the plight of socially neglected sections such as eunuchs and tribals, however, the underling motif is to examine the dynamics of human relationship in the upper middle-class society. Tendulkar's *Kamala* deals with the family of Jaising, a Journalist living in the core of Delhi and Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire* depicts the family of Suresh, Superintendent of Police; both the male protagonists bear such a social responsibility as to stop evil practices and to create equal social spaces for every individual but they, on the contrary, contribute to and carry on the malpractices for selfish motives. Licensed defenders of humanity crush it not only in the social arena but also in the family. Central female characters in both plays do not have meager social status as in the first, Sarita, Jaising's wife, is a daughter of a Proprietor-cum-Journalist; and in the second, Uma, Suresh's wife is a daughter of the Vice-Chancellor, Bangalore University. Sarita is a well educated and Uma is also perusing her research on the marginalized sections of the society. Both of the plays depict two different sections, tribals and eunuchs, that are sidelined from the main stream of the society but are sexually enjoyed and exploited by the rich. Tendulkar's *Kamala* unveils the sexual abuse of the tribal women like Kamala who is purchased by Jaising in the market of Luhardaga where women are auctioned and sold like commodity. “The men who want to bid—handle the women to inspect them. Whether they are firm or flabby. Young or old. Healthy or diseased. How they feel in the breast, in their waist, in their things and...” (*Collected Plays in Translation* 14). This pitiable and inhuman fate of the tribal women results from the discriminatory policy of the society which has given the economic control in the hands of the privileged depriving the others of the mandatory needs of life. Similarly eunuchs are also treated as thing. Uma considers Anarkali, as her name suggests, a female and uses “she” to address; Mumswamy, “it” for the purpose and Suresh, “they”. It suggests that eunuchs have no identity in Indian society; they are treated as non-living creatures. In this respect Venkat Ramani has appropriately observed: “Consider how Anarkali is variously addressed: the constable calls her it; Uma “she” and Suresh “they”. The human and non-human co-exist. The transformation of 'it' into “she” and then to “they” is a psychic transformation into 'feminine', a symbol of sacrifice

and devotion and then to 'selflessness'" (270-71). Jaisingh's assumption, "These downtrodden people [like Kamala] are happy at the slightest excuse. Toil and labour take getting used to. Luxury doesn't" seems true but its ironical connotation implies their traditionally defined image (*C P T* 13). To pacify hunger they have to work hard from dawn to night but often, even their heart-breaking labour does not yield sufficient food for their survival forcing females of the house into the market of flesh and blood. He treats Kamala as the commodity of sexual pleasure having no civilization and prestige. His presumption becomes clear when he remarks: "... people of her kind don't have a bath for days on end. ... And you will be surprised—she'll feel dirtier after her bath" (*C P T* 18). It is his preconceived and biased notion because at his beguiling to accompany him to the place where very important people meet her, she shyly remarks: "... me in this mess. Look at my clothes I won't go there ... Don't embarrass me" (*C P T* 20). It clearly refutes what Jaisingh says about Kamala. But she loses her confidence with his assertion of power as master. She agrees to go with him and to respond to every conference but is hesitant of her clothes: "... I will go with you. But these clothes are so bad. So torn and dirty" (*C P T* 21).

Likewise Suresh mocks at Anarkali at her idea of "sisterhood" saying that "What is that you said? Sister? They are all just castrated generated men. They fought like dogs" (*Collected Plays* II 238). But his idea concerning lack of human relations in hijras proves baseless when Anarkali, overwhelmed by Uma's humane attitude, wishes, "If you were a hijra, I would have made you my sister" (*CPII* 242). Uma's response "of course" does not create any effect because in meanwhile sense of her class starts hovering into her mind and stands against their inter-personal relationship, "Where are you, and where am I? (*CPII* 242). But the sense of human relationship gets closer with the exchange of ideas: "Anarkali I would love to be your sister, if you love to be mine" (*CP II* 242). Thus, Anarkali who has bitter experiences of human relationship finds difficulty in believing Uma and argues that "Oh! You are only being kind. Don't hurt my heart" (*CP II* 242). "The address 'sister' gives an additional force to the need of human touch and interpersonal relationship even at the face of social oddities" (Agrawal 38). The intensity and warmth of human relationship in the eunuchs is clearly noticeable in the speech of Champa who tells Uma: "You don't know how much we all love her (Kamala). You will not understand her. I loved her more than you can love your daughter. You don't know" (*CP II* 262). The market of women portrayed in *Kamala* is not under the carpet as the whole administration is fully aware of it. Jaisingh explains: "The police, as usual, washed their hands of it. The Home Minister put up his hands over his ears. They made the false charge that news- papermen tell lies" (*C P T* 15). Jaisingh, who beats the hollow drum of media as an instrument to reveal corruption, also is a part of power-politics; it is the game of power only for which he takes risk of revealing the sale of women. What and how does Kamala feel and what would be the effects of the Press Conference on her psyche are not matter of his concern; he is

conscious of his appreciation as the first journalist to reveal the matter. Suresh's struggle for highlighting the market of blood and flesh results in his dismissal from his post for the simple reason that it unveiled the real face of the powerful people who enjoy purchased females within the four walls of the lavished bungalows and pretend to be the most pious in the public. Corruption in administration starts leaking out as soon as Uma sets out investigation into Kamala's murder. Irritated at the bail of Anakali, Suresh reveals the reason behind her imprisonment in the murder case of Kamala: "... we only arrested her because there was no one else. There is no real proof against her" (*Collected Plays* 33). The Inhuman treatment of Anarkali in the Jail and the conversation between them create space for suspicion in Uma's mind and her the visit to the eunuch's place vindicates her doubt and the marriage party at the Minister's residence leaves everything crystal clear. At Subbu's marriage party when the eunuchs begin dancing, they show him the photograph of Kamala with him in a bridal outfit which takes him into the past and the dead Kamala starts hovering into his mind. In a fit of love for Kamala and anger for his father, he reveals his father's role behind her murder and shoots himself. Taking the photograph, Uma reveals that Subbu, Mr. Sharma's son and Kamala, an eunuch, got married secretly at some remote temple. But Mr. Sharma could not bear it and planned to get her murdered at any cost and she was burnt to death. But police put Anarkali in the jail in the charge of Kamala's murder. Uma's realization in the end of the play unveils the rotten condition of administration:

They knew. Anarkali and Champa and all the hijra people knew who was behind the killing of Kamala. They have no voice. The Case was hushed up and was not even reported in the news paper. The police made no arrest. Subbu's suicide was written off as an accident. The photograph was destroyed. So the life of two young people.... (*CPII* 282)

It is his ambition to become Senior Superintendent of Police that forces him not to take right action against Kamala's murder.

Public/police view about marginalized: Kamala's insult in the Press Conference which is held to share Kamala's experiences reflects the deteriorating and ludicrous aspect of the Journalism. Journalists' queries related to social and economic exploitations of the tribals gradually get obscenity as they start questioning about the abuse of their bodies; they ask such heinous questions as "... if there is free sex among you, what do you do with the illegitimate children? ... you must be having free sex too. How many men have you slept with (*CPT* 29). Generalization like all advasis are indulged in free sex day and night decodes traditional mindset of the majority class which has overshadowed Journalism. Journalists in the Press Conference make fun of Kamala because it is the political issue only which they take interest in. Mockery of Kamala's vulnerability does not yield pleasure to Kakasaheb who exclaims, "fun! At the poor woman's expense" (*CPT* 30). Jaisingh suggests Kakasaheb not to be sentimental because the tribals have capacity to tolerate pain of

getting operated by the missionaries in the Mission Hospital without anesthetic injection, if clawed to the bone by bears. The issues related to eunuchs are insignificant to the administration. Munswamy suggests Uma rather to investigate into such murder cases as "Man killing wife, wife killing man's lover, brother killing brother... dowry death cases" than to work on the hijra's case because it is a shameful for the prestigious people (CP II 234). When Anarkali denies talking and sharing her experiences with Uma, he beats her heavily. Its irony of their fate that when they speak nobody listens and when they not they are tortured to speak. Jaisingh who boasts of fighting for justice to tribal women and of setting the society right treats his wife like a servant. He goes out without leaving any information with her and expects her of paying full attention to his need failing which leaves her with lots of miseries. Sarita's has to plead for lending a Sari to Kamala arguing that "She's a woman, after all. And her sari is torn" (CPT 21). Their miseries develop a good understanding between them and they start getting closer to each other. Kamala's self comparison with Sarita sensitizes unconscious self of the latter: "The master bought you; he bought me too... Fifteen days of month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him" (CPT 35). Moreover, at Sarita's insistence on Kamala's stay at their house Jaisingh's assertion, "It is I who takes decision in this house, and no one else" unmasks patriarchal hegemony in him and authenticates her subjugated position in the house. These two events perplex her mind and she starts questioning the dominating self of her husband. Kakasaheb seems progressive in a matter of the role of media but when a woman's duty in the family is concerned, he proves to be the supporter of patriarchal tradition. He efforts well to convince Sarita not to hold Press Conference to share her views about the tyrannical self of Jaisingh explaining that a man has every right to keep a slave, to behave like a master and to do what he wants because "... he is like that. That's why he is man. And that's why there's manhood in the world" (CPT 47). He also unveils that he tortured her aunt a lot believing that it was his right; he never cared for her feelings and pain and always moved ahead with the hope that she would follow in him. Uma, a woman from the elite section of the society in *Seven Steps around the Fire*, is also subjugated. When Anarkali demands money from Uma to help her out of the prison, the latter expresses her helplessness arguing that "my husband won't let me". She has no freedom to take decision on her own is quite visible from her pitiable remark, "Even if I wanted to, I could not explain to my husband why I am paying for your bail" (CP II 249). It clarifies that she has to explain everything logically which she wants to do. Male ego is easily perceptible in Suresh who denies to go for sperm count in spite of the fact that medical check-up has declared Uma physically fit for the production of children. Sarita is very much sympathetic to Kamala. She contradicts Jaisingh's idea of presenting her before Journalists in the Press Conference and also requests him to let her give a good sari. She also expresses her unwillingness at the idea of sending Kamala to the Women's house. She accepts Kamala's contribution to the awareness of

her “new self”:

Kamala woke me up. With a shock. Kamala showed me everything. Because of her, I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I'm a slave. Slave doesn't have rights... They only must slave away. Dance to the master's whim. (*CPT* 46)

The fear of physical torture by the police and the need to get freedom from the cruelty of the prison brings Anarkali closure to Uma who expresses a considerable love and sympathy. Munswamy's authoritative remark that he will beat Anarkali up until she speaks shakes Uma's conscience and she suddenly stops, “Please don't. If she doesn't wish to talk to me, I will-it's ok. Don't force her” (*CP* II 233). Perceiving in Uma sign of love, Anarkali opens spell of relationship addressing her “sister”. Touch of emotion strengthens confidence in each. Anarkali requests Uma to meet and to give some money to Champa in Shivaji Nagar behind Russell Market and Uma respects her demand. Champa and Anarkali both help Uma to bring the reality of Kamala's murder to the light. But the story does not end here. After some time Anarkali visits Uma and gifts a locket given by Champa to bless her with a child. Thus, the fight for justice to the eunuch helps her to realize her own plight in the family and can be considered as a fight for herself as well. Kakasaheb's suggestions fail to satisfy Sarita's anger against male dominance. Her voice once raised against subjugation does not mellow down, instead questions the system: “Why can't a woman at least ask to live her life the same way as a man?” (*C P T* 47). Her statement, “A woman can do everything a man can” explains a woman's urge for equal treatment (*C P T* 47). In spite of her logical arguments Kakasaheb suggests Sarita to develop understanding because her behavior does not refer to maturity. But his argument meets with resistance again: “Only a woman must! Why must she alone have it?” (*CPT* 47). Sarita's assertion, “This must be changed. Those who do manly things should be equal to man. Those who don't are women. And there will be some among them who have beards and mustaches too” challenges the sexual determinism which believes in phallus system (*CPT* 47). Her optimism about the equal treatment signals a break of male hegemony: “...a day will come... when I will stop being a slave. I will 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 for it” (*CPT* 52). Thus, Jaisingh is a Journalist, however, his behaviour is not different from other in the treatment of women; his attitude to Sarita is hegemonic but to Kamala it is fraudulent as well. Uma is a complete traditional wife but she is bold enough to revolt against her the oppression. She has a realization of the wrong practices her husband is engaged in. Awareness of oppressive male hegemony and maltreatment of the eunuchs force her to think that “If only I could tell Suresh how wrong he is. About many things... If I do help him out with this one case, it might even help him... He would disapprove. He will see it as interference...” (*CP* II 246). In spite of all the oddities, she hopes for the break of male chauvinism: “One day listen to

me. He will have to” (CP II 246). She silently but cunningly goes against her husband's wishes to unveil the plot of Kamala's murder and simultaneously she tries to break male hegemony in the family. Uma reveals her thoughts in the end of the play: “But Anarkali's blessings remain with me. I could not tell her I did not want her blessing for a child. All I want is—what they want. . . . To move on. To love. To live” (CP 282).

The duo plays present a brilliant study of gender relations and power politics. In Tendulkar's *Kamala*, Kamala and Sarita both suffer discrimination. The playwright uses Kamala to awake Sarita's unconscious self against a slave-driver, Jaisingh. Though Sarita suffers subjugation in the family which she revolts against later yet Kamala's treatment at the hands of Jaisingh in particular, and Journalists in the Press Conference in general is heart-breaking. Sarita's tenderness for Kamala in way or the other highlights the vulnerability, silence, and sheer helplessness of Kamala who is denied right to claim justice and has no voice to raise against injustice. In the same way in Dattani's *Seven Steps around the Fire*, eunuchs are discriminated due to lack of productive organs but the lack of productivity lies with Suresh as well. He is respected and has power-control because he belongs to the majority group. Uma also finds a way to see her real self through eunuchs and meets her aim of breaking male hegemony pursuing their cause. Thus, the miserable positions of women in the upper strata of the society in comparison with marginalized like eunuchs and tribal women have been beautifully woven in the texture of the plays.

References :

- Agrawal, Beena. (2008). *Mahesh Dattnai's Plays: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Jaipur: Books Enclave, 2008.
- Dattani, Mahesh. (2005). *Collected Plays* Vol 2. New Delhi: Penguin.
- ---. (2000). *Collected Plays*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Pandit, Maya. (2009). “Representation of Family in Modern Marathi Plays: Tendulkar. Dalvi and Chakrabarty.” *Vijay Tendulkar's Plays: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. E. D. Madge (62-79). Pencraft International: Delhi.
- Ramani, Venkat. (2005). “Meaning in Abyss: Dattani's Seven Steps around the Fire.” *Contemporary Indian Drama: Astride two Traditions*. Ed. Urmila Talwar and Bandana Chakrabarty. Jaipur: Rawat.
- Tendulkar, Vijay. (2003). *Collected Plays in Translation*. New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press. (1-52).

