

## POWER PRESENTATION THROUGH SATIRE IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S HIS FIFTH WOMAN

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The purpose of studying Tendulkar's wide and rich literature is to get an insight into major social events and political upheavals during his adult life; the way he courageously exposed the hypocrisy in Indian mindset is the actual point to be noted. He has used powerful expression to reveal the society. Many of his plays have derived inspiration from real life incidents or social upheavals. The reason behind his huge success is accurate and sensitive portrayal of social issues of the time. The best thing about his plays is that he exposes dynamics of power in human relations. The way he has galvanized theatre through his provocative explanation of power deserves a standing ovation.

Tendulkar's plays explore relations of power in all their complex ramifications. Max Webber's celebrated definition of power as, "The chance of a man or a number of men to realise their own will... even against the resistance of others" (197), clearly points to the fact that imposition or thrusting of one's will over another without the latter's consent constitutes power. Exercising power is always a deliberate and never an innocent act. Similarly, Wolf has defined power as, "the potential ability of one person to induce forces on another towards movement or change in a given direction, within a given behaviour of region, at given time" (Cited in Verma and Aggarwal 44). Power is, in fact, one's ability to influence other's behaviour. It may be referred to as a force exerted on another person to mould his behaviour according to his own choice.

*His Fifth Woman* uses the stock ingredients of satire as wit, irony, parody and sarcasm to expose the dynamics of power. Satire has been defined by various critics and writers in different ways. Dr. Johnson defined it in his dictionary as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured" (Pollard 1). The definition provided by M. H. Abrams is much more comprehensive when he states that, "Satire is the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it prone to ridicule and evoking towards it attitudes of amusements, contempt, indignation and scorn" (Abrams 153). The main purpose of satire, as claimed by many satirists, is the amendments of vices and follies of both man and society. Tendulkar's attack is incisive and pertinent, poignant and matter of fact at the same time. Its relevance to the contemporary scenario cannot be questioned. The play *His Fifth Woman* is a prequel to Tendulkar's well known and highly controversial play *Sakharam Binder* which he penned in 1972. He wrote this play for Lark Play Development Centre. Tendulkar Festival was being celebrated in New York and it was sponsored by Indo-American Arts Council. The Lark was also a participant in this festival for which various theatre companies had been invited to present something from the canon of Tendulkar's plays. When Tendulkar was asked if he might want to write something for this festival, he agreed to give it a try. He had many apprehensions

whether he would be able to write something with little time left, but this genius came up with *His Fifth Woman*. In this play Tendulkar explores power dynamics with a touch of humour and penetrating insight.

*His Fifth Woman*, is the first play of Vijay Tendulkar written in English. It is a short play written in five scenes. This play depicts power dynamics by presenting women's predicaments in a patriarchal society. "The play by Vijay Tendulkar brings out the essence of oppression towards the fair sex in gory details in the Indian society particularly in the lower income group of society" (Bahadur 5). The play opens with two persons conversing with each-other. Sakharam and Dawood are forty and thirty years old respectively. They rush a woman to a hospital in the middle of the night. Tendulkar's plays are essentially satiric, as in this play also the playwright introduces an interesting piece of satiric conversation between Sakharam and Dawood and illustrates thus:

**SAKHARAM** : Because you can escape being caught here, not up there. He keeps a tab on the smallest happenings on this earth. All accounts are settled when you reach there, Dawood.

**DAWOOD** : Hope so, Sakharam. Here most escape, while a few, like fools, get caught. At times for something they have not done. (*HF*W 50)

The play has echoes of *Silence! the Court is in Session* because it explores our judicial system, which many a time convicts innocent people for offences that they have not committed. Tendulkar suggests that those who escape here are likely to be caught in the life after death, when they confront God who keeps a tab on the smallest happenings on this earth. He seems to convey that life hereafter is better as compared to the life here because everything is settled there in accordance with one's deeds, good or bad.

This play is primarily concerned with the subhuman, pathetic and deplorable condition of the lives of women in society. The dialogue between Sakharam, Dawood and the nurse presents man's dominance over woman in an indirect manner:

**NURSE** : (looking at Sakharam and Dawood) Who is the husband of this woman?

**SAKHARAM** : Neither one of us.

**NURSE** : But then how are you here with her? (To Sakharam) Are you her brother, or uncle, or nephew? (To Dawood) You.

**DAWOOD** : Who, me? I mean us... (To Sakharam) What do we say to this, Sakharam? (To nurse) She was living with him.

**NURSE** : (feeling the pulse of the woman on the stretcher): He has kept this woman. *Rakhail*, you mean.

**SAKHARAM** : No, I don't keep women. I bring them home and provide a roof, two meals, and security.

**NURSE** : That's a kept woman.

**SAKHARAM** : No. They stay with me of their free will as long as they need what I provide, or as long as I need what they give me.

**DAWOOD** : He only brings women who have nowhere to go. Thrown out by their people. (50)

The nameless reference to the woman shows Shakharam's thoughtlessness towards this ailing woman, with whom he has spent some time. After the woman has been admitted in the hospital, Dawood and Sakharam argue whether she will survive or not. Dawood's following revelation is shocking:

It will be sad if she... what a life! Sold in marriage to a man older to her by thirty years and who already had a wife of her mother's age. Then not even six months have passed and he dies in an accident. The first girl throws the unfortunate girl out with only the clothes she is wearing and nothing else. Her parents refuse to take her back, motherfuckers. And you find her begging at the bus stand without food, without a bath, for God knows how many days. (51-52)

Tendulkar exposes that a man's lust never comes to an end and in order to satisfy his lust he keeps woman under his dominance. The fifth woman's first husband buys her like a slave from a slave market and marries her in spite of the fact that she was thirty years younger to him. This shows the degradation of human values where a man can stoop as low as he can to satiate his lust. The way the first wife drives this woman out of her husband's home when he dies after six months can be seen as a consequence her own suffering and frustration caused to her by her husband, when he was alive. Tendulkar narrates the dream sequence of Sakharam, driving home the real cause of the sufferings of these hapless women. The conversation between Sakharam and his fifth woman in the course of this dream is highly significant:

**SAKHARAM** : You seem to be all right.

**WOMAN** : It was his wish that I live.

**SAKHARAM** : Whose wish?

**WOMAN** : How can a wife say her husband's name? He's still looking after me from where he is... His soul lives on. A soul cannot be burnt. And his soul decides for me. I live because his soul wills so.

**SAKHARAM** : If you are so faithful to your husband how did you allow me to enter you without resistance every night?

**WOMAN** : I did what you said with him in my mind. Because I had to do it. I gave myself to him. And he understood. (53-54)

Power based rules and regulations teach a woman to regard her husband as the sole authority of her. Ignoring her husband's deformities and vices, the fifth woman thinks him to be her protector. Even after his death, she seems him as guiding the course of her life on earth. In other words, her dead husband has an indirect dominance over her. She even attributes her surrender to Sakharam in bed, to her dead husband's will. She is

a “woman who has not revolted against the social injustice and has surrendered to fate” (Pinglay 10). So strong is the hold of power system that this woman feels herself to be duty-bound to Sakharam, who has provided her with food and shelter. It is out of sheer faith in orthodox traditions and her belief in fate that she suffers all this silently. Here Tendulkar presents how traditions have dominance over people and how people’s lives are led by these traditions which bring them only miseries and sufferings.

Tendulkar also emphasises that society uses women as commodities. Once they outlive their usefulness, they are discarded. It is exemplified by Sakharam who does not even want to claim the body of his dead wife or “kept” woman, “What does it matter to her, now that she is dead? She is only a cadaver, lying in that morgue with other cadavers. A body without a soul. A bag of bones and rotting flesh” (*HFW* 56).

It is only after Dawood’s persuasion that Sakharam is ready to claim the body. His fifth woman was important to Sakharam only as long as she had a living body, which used to satisfy his lust. She does not even deserve a decent funeral after she is dead. Women, the play stresses, are of some worth only as long as they possess a charming and enchanting body. Sakharam starts his search for next woman as soon as his fifth woman is dead. His crass neglect is evident in the following remark, “Shit. She is gone Dawood, finished. I’m already thinking of the next woman. I could not even know her name. Never had the time to ask for it. She called me Aho and I called her Ay. She remained Ay to me. An anonymity. But forget it, yaar. Forget her. Will you have what little is left in the house with me? Or a session of chillum though it is not yet time for it. But to make you cheerful. Gone is gone. We must live in the present, Dawood. Present is true” (57).

The cutting edge of satire on the present day power based relationships is obvious in the play. When the Brahmin takes Sakharam and Dawood to perform the last rites of the dead woman, many groups of men are waiting there for the funeral rites of their dead ones to be performed. The conversation of the first group of men points up their total lack of feeling for the dead ones:

‘Read the morning newspaper? Kerosene rates to go up again from tomorrow?’

‘Even dying is becoming costlier.’

‘Not for the dead. For the living who have to burn the dead’.

‘Good your uncle died a day earlier. Spared you the additional expenses of costlier kerosene. Ha! Ha!’ (60)

It is true that Tendulkar underscores the thoughtlessness of people towards their dead relations, yet there is noticeable an undercurrent of bitterness towards the real problems confronted in day to day existence. The harsh realities of life cannot be brushed aside so easily. A common man, burdened with multifarious responsibilities, cannot turn a blind eye to rising inflation, when saddled with additional burden of rituals after death. However, the cutting edge of Tendulkar’s satire also brings to the fore materialistic concerns of the present day power hungry generations, “I should not ask you because it

is your family matter and your father died only a few hours ago but still... Has he made a will or not?" (60).

Tendulkar also brings corrupt priests under his gamut of satire. He asserts how funeral rites are a pretext for them to rob money from people. Their only aim is to grab money from helpless people and to enrich their power. There are many occasions during the funeral ceremony of the fifth woman, when the hypocrisy, corruption and exploitation, integral to the ceremony of funeral rites, comes to light, "Dawood (passing some money to the Brahmin): get on with the rites" (61). Again when the Brahmin asks the *gotra* of the dead woman from Sakharam, Dawood silences him by putting more money into his mouth:

**BRAHMIN :** (accepting the money passed into his hand by Dawood): I have named it in my mind and we move ahead. Your *gotra*. Family origin. *Gotra*

**SAKHARAM :** I don't know.

**BRAHMIN :** Then what do you know...

**DAWOOD :** You decide any and move on... (Passes more money into the Brahmin's hand). (62)

This reflects the hollowness of these rites which, as we come to know from the above dialogue, are a source of extorting money. Again the priest is asked to go on performing the rites without bothering for the original *Kuladaivat* and it is accomplished this time also by stuffing more money into the Brahmin's mouth. Earlier the priest says that, "The soul of the dead woman cannot be admitted to heaven unless her authentic family god is mentioned in clear terms" (62). However, shortly after getting more money from Dawood, he goes ahead, performing the funeral rites, thereby suggesting that these ceremonies are essentially money making devices. Thus, in some respects such ceremonies have their own dominance over people as sometimes people have to perform them unwillingly.

The episode in which some food is put on a banana leaf for the crows to eat is, again, full of social criticism. The crows do not even touch the food. The priest then suggests and asks Sakharam that the dead one has some unfulfilled wish and that he is required to ask the soul her last wish. Sakharam, persuaded by Dawood, says,

Damned ... (Controls himself) Ok. Ok. (To soul) So go ahead and tell the crows to eat the food and let us get this over with. Both of us have to go back to work. We are already late. He has shut his shop to be here with me, and I have taken away some time to get this damned ceremony done. I too have to be back to work in the press. (65)

The above observation bears out that modern man is too practical to be carried away by emotions. For him, things that bring material benefits and in that way bring power, matter more than emotional bonding. There is double-edged irony here. On the one hand, Tendulkar satirises the worn out customs and beliefs and on the other, he foregrounds the materialistic intent of the modern man, where there is no room for emotions. When crows do not touch the food, Sakharam gets furious and bursts out,

“(Feeling irritated): Will you do what I order or shall I...? See, Dawood? See how adamant and ungrateful she has become after her death. She knows that now my hands cannot reach her” (65). This man, who refers to himself as the self-proclaimed messiah of the forsaken women, shows his true colours here. The last sentence exposes the physical manipulation that women are victims of. Here again we find the dominance of a man over woman. M. Sarat Babu says, “A woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and Manu allows husband the right to beat his wife” (Cited in Prasad 17). The play makes a subtle plea to women to come out of their shell and protest against the injustice meted out to them.

However, eventually when the crows come to eat the food, Sakharam quips, “Dawood, can it be that those crows here are playing foul? Can it be that they don’t represent her? (Taking him aside). That they have become clever and play games with the relations of the dead who come here to free themselves from the fangs of the dead? Or can it be that these Brahmins here train those crows to earn more bucks from people like us?” (HFW 69). All are surprised on seeing crows scrambling for the left food. It also indicates that it is only the powerful priests whose wishes are needed to be satisfied and not those of the dead ones.

The scene of the heaven is also satiric. The soul of the dead women finds this place the most beautiful and safe, free from all worldly cares and oppressions. She expresses her joy in the following lines:

Wow. How I wish that I knew about this place earlier. Any day better than my previous places, including my parents’ place. No question of having a body. Getting beaten by men... at last here is freedom from being a woman. (71)

Her bliss, after getting rid off her body, which was the only reason for her being subjected to torture, finds echoes here. She is ecstatic to see no trace of male-dominance or oppression here. By employing the metaphor of heaven, the playwright also focuses on the inequality and unequal distribution of money. Heaven, as the Crow One tells, stands for comforts for those people who have suffered poverty but a hell for those who had swollen bank accounts, unaware of the travails of the poor:

Some call it heaven. The other name for the same place is hell. Depends on which route you take. Those who leave for there in poverty find it heavenly while those who leave with fat bank accounts in Switzerland get an attack of acute depression when they reach the same place. (71)

Tendulkar obviously emphasises here the powerful-powerless disparities. Satire is also aimed at those whose only happiness consists in fat bank balances. They do not care for serenity that heaven symbolises.

*His Fifth Woman* like *Silence! the Court is in Session* raises its voice against the oppression and subjugation of women. The play is a powerful satire on the lechery of man. Highlighting the greed of priests, it also satirises the preposterousness of rituals after death.

Thus, the play by satirising different sections of society present dynamics of power. Tendulkar's satire has the sharpness of a rapier. He uses this device very skillfully to caricature the vices and infirmities of mankind. He is radical in the sense that he strikes hard on the worn-out and obsolete conventions of society. Satire is the force with which he shakes the foundation of a society based on caste prejudices, conventions, social and economic inequities. It lends his plays unique quality and gives him an edge over other writers.

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