



SEXUALITY AND EMANCIPATION:WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF VIJAY TENDULKAR AND GIRISH KARNAD

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ABSTRACT

The treatment of Feminine Sexuality in the Indian context has been explored here with the help of some leading women characters presented by two eminent dramatist of Indian English literature-Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad.In the light of some popular literary criticism and theory the characters of Leela Benare from Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, of Kamala from the play *Kamala* by the same playwright and of Padmini from Karnad's *Hayavadana* along with the characters of Vishakha and Nittilai from *The Fire and the Rain* by Karnad are taken here for the purpose. An earnest effort has been made to judge the characters' outward and inward sexual nature, their desire, suppression, protest, deprivation, possibility of their emancipation and other aspects related to the sexuality have been scanned here. Society and its patriarchal scheme has always been there as an omnipresent backdrop.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages, a woman and her sexuality are not treated as separate. 'Sexuality' for her is her 'Sexed being'¹ rather than her sexual desire. Though Freud is indispensable in exploring sexuality, be it of men or women, it was very unusual in his time even to acknowledge that women have sexual desire. However, the more it is denied and ignored by the patriarchal society and its Ideological State Apparatus, the more its presence is felt. Now, women's emancipation concerns a lot with their sexuality. To illustrate the point, some women characters from the translated plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad may be taken, with special references to Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court*

is in Session, *Kamala* and Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* along with *Hayavadana*.

Evelyn Reed² notices that female sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified with passivity. The characteristics that are praised and rewarded are those of castrate-timidity, plumpness, languor, delicacy and preciosity. Women's emancipation is far ahead if they cannot emancipate themselves from such demeaning concepts about their sexuality. Now, it is to examine how far Benare of *Silence! The Court is in session*, Sarita and Kamala of *Kamala*, Vishakha and Nittilai of *The Fire and the Rain* and Padmini of *Hayavadana* can be called emancipated women, or the idea of emancipation for them is always already set and limited by patriarchy.

The charge of passivity is no more working when Benare or Vishakha or Padmini is considered. As all the plays in discussion share a common Indian context, it seems that Indian mythical figures like Kunti or Draupadi or Ahalya had already paved the way for Benare and the others. But woman who trudges through this way is often termed as “femme fatale” – merciless and demonic. Otto Weininger³ in his *Sex and Character* writes that men must resist sexual enslavement by women; the elite Nazi soldiers feared being engulfed by destructive female desires. He also talks about the probability that most women have the possibilities in them, the mother and the prostitute. In fact, as we see, society always tends to binarise these two to set limit on both of their spaces. For example, this binary works excellently in Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain*. The figure of Nitillai conforms the nurturing, mother-only stature showing no sexual activity from her part whereas Vishakha conforms the prostitute, identifying herself with the all devouring ‘she-devil’ (*The Fire and the Rain*, P-15)]. Interestingly, though Nittilai is sexually inactive, it does not however mean that she is sexually subdued. Rather she exercises her sexual individuality by the act of resistance to her would be husband Arvasu’s sexual advancement. Some kind of resistance is also found in Sarita when she refuses to fulfill her husband’s hunger for her flesh. Thus, both Nittilai and Sarita fall in the line of mythical figures like Sita or Behula who has restored themselves from being sexually overpowered against their own will.

It is always remained as a serious project for the feminists to redefine sexuality in a more woman-centered way – what they want and what they don’t – which often falls in conflict with the traditional psychoanalytic explanations or ‘established’ social codes or theories. However, the ‘case-histories’ of Banare, Kamala, Sarita and Nittilai, Vishakha, Padmini are always ready to be redefined and reassessed, specially in the context of women’s emancipation.

Chapter-1

Silence! The Court is in Session

The case of Leela Benare is interesting enough to prosecute. She is educated, professional and seems to be courageous too. But her economic

independence is not enough for her to earn emancipation in a patriarchal set up. However, it is undeniable that this economic independence gives her at least a platform to speak about her sexuality, which is not only her ‘sexed being’ but also her sexual desire. This saves her from being another Mrs. Kashikar, repressed and silenced at every moment. But it is unfortunate enough for her that her financial liberty, her job, depends a lot on some powerful male members of the society, for example, Nanasaheb Sindhe. Her sense of insecurity and fear of losing the job is palpable from the very beginning:

BENARE. ... just because of one bit of slander, what can they do to me? Throw me out? Let them! ... (*Silence! The Court is in Session*, P- 5)

And it lasts till the end:

BENARE. ...For what sin they are robbing me of my job, my only comfort?

(*Silence! The Court is in Session*, P- 73)

This fear of Benare, following Freudian psychoanalysis, can be compared with the fear of castration⁴ felt by a young boy. Interestingly, it is until she fully realizes that her job which acts like the phallus of a male body is sure to be gone, her sexuality, i.e. her ‘sexed being’, is that of a ‘masculine’ type. It exercises its power by slapping Rokde, bullying Damle or laughing at the social norms. However, finally she realizes the absence of her power which is equivalent to loss of a penis. In his book *Sexuality*, Bristow quotes Freud’s remark which is applicable here as the consequence of the present case:

“...resigned to her femininity...‘she gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: and with that purpose in view she takes her father as a love-object.’” (Bristow, P - 76)

Benare’s wish for a child is strongly ventured in the final part of the play:

BENARE. ... a tender little bud – of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life – my son – my whole existence.

(*Silence! The Court is in Session*, P- 75)

It is noticeable that she speaks about a son, a male child. Freud⁵ explains such orientation as desire for having the image of her father who is her love object. Actually, Freud here hints at- Electra complex

of a girl which is quite visible in Leela Benare. As her lover she took her maternal uncle first and then professor Damle who is a middle aged man and the father of five children.

Being failed in all these love-affairs, she tries to castrate different males to marry her so that she can get sanctioned by the patriarchy. Under these circumstances, possibility of emancipation is far away from her. Only her experience of fulfillment of her sexuality (here 'sexual desire') grants a short term emancipation to her. Her body, her fountain of both pain and pleasure, is the agent of her emancipation then.

BENARE. ... It was your body that once burnt and gave you a moment so beautiful, so blissful, so near to heaven!... It took you high, high, high above yourself into a place like Paradise.

(*Silence! The Court is in Session*, P- 75)

This is the feminine jouissance that even subverts phallic authority. Whereas patriarchal norms always try to put female sexuality within a boundary, this experience of jouissance frees a woman of all boundaries. But she rarely gets such a freedom as this. The social system imposes all kinds of suppressions on her fulfillment of desire. This is why woman like Benare in most of the times desires for it as she lacks it. This is why in the opening act Benare wants to go with Samant ".....somewhere far, far away –" (*Silence! The Court is in Session*, P- 2) Thus, the urge for emancipation is there but is rarely sanctioned.

Notably, Benare's desire for exhilarating bliss of sexuality goes hand in hand with her suicidal attempt at an early age along with her keeping of bottle of poison (TIK 20) in her purse. Here is the reconciliation of Eros (Life instincts) and Thanatos (Death instincts) and this reconciliation is found in the orgasmic moment of hetero-sexual copulation⁶. Actually, death which she seeks for is as infinite and boundless as the experience of jouissance is. When Benare's attempt to die by taking poison is hindered, it symbolizes that the possibility of Benare's ultimate emancipation is negated. But if symbolical aspects are to be considered, the green cloth parrot that

Samant offers Benare at the end can be taken as a positive sign how much faint and tentative it may be.

Chapter – 2

Kamala

The rare possibility of emancipation of women within the patriarchal institution called marriage is further seen and reinforced in Tendulkar's *Kamala*. Likewise Benare, Sarita is educated, but unlike her, she is economically fully dependent on her husband and perhaps from here emerges a slave-master relationship between them. Actually, sexuality for Sarita is chiefly her 'sexed being', not her sexual desire. She is there only to satisfy her husband's sexual needs along with other needs too. And performing these all, she justly represents a married woman – hardly with an individualistic identity. She comes into visibility only when she refuses to be sexually possessed by her husband breaking all the 'established' norms set by the society. Though not legally, a husband's right over his wife's body is unquestionably sanctioned by society. Jaising is no exception in asserting his right to have Sarita when he feels his need after six day's starvation. But what Sarita does in reaction is somewhat exceptional for her position. It is interesting enough to note that the aversion Sarita shows must be a by-product of her repression – at least partially. Evidently, her husband pays a little time and shows a little concern for any of her need. Freud⁷ frequently notes that repressed elements return in a roundabout way taking a form of unpleasure. Probably, such case happens to Sarita too. Really, her need for sexual pleasure never comes into consideration. Infact, there is a difference between a woman's sexual feelings and needs and those of a man in a patriarchal society. It is almost absurd to expect equal treatment in institutionalized sexual slavery. Sarita sees her position as a slave in the mirror of Kamala who is bought by her husband from Luhardaga flesh market. She expresses it to Kakasaheb:

SARITA. Not just Kamala, Kakasaheb. [trying to control her misery.] Not just Kamala, Kakasaheb. Me too....me too.

(*Five Plays*, P- 43)

It's a greater pity to see that the affectionate Kakasaheb who takes a strong stand against mercenary journalism never really feels for the need of emancipation of a woman from the household slavery. He too imposes the responsibility of bearing with all kinds of mistakes of males upon female sexuality. Women themselves are prone to forgive men – this popular reading of their sex is always reinforced by writers also and Tendulkar here is found to be no exception. Sarita gets softer seeing Jaising sleeping like an innocent baby just after announcing her emancipatory and strong resolution:

SARITA ... And I'll pay whatever price I have to pay for it. (*Five Plays*, P-52)

In Suchitra Bhattacharya's *Dahan* Shrabana compromises with all her previous ideologies and makes physical love with her husband keeping aside the deep sigh inside her. Though Sarita's determination lasts to the finishing point of the play as the final stage direction at the end of the play indicates, it is difficult to say whether she will follow Shrabana's way or not. And if follows, her emancipation too will be proven as a short-term and brittle kind of emancipation.

For Kamala, the meaning of emancipation does not really reach her primarily because she is uneducated and her situation makes her such as beyond the realization of such thing as emancipation. She thinks herself as society turns her into – i.e. a useful object or commodity. From her 'sexed being', she probably will never rise to the vision of emancipation. However, she herself, though unknowingly, acts as instrumental in awakening Sarita into her now illuminated, disillusioned and emancipatory vision about a woman's position in a household and in a society.

SARITA. ...I was asleep ...Kamala woke me up. With a shock.... I suddenly saw things clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights at all in this house. Because I'm a slave (*Five Plays*, P. 46).

Chapter – 3 Hayavadana

Sexual characteristics often become the parameters to judge a woman rather than her intellectual capacity, physical activity etc. The core woman

character in *Hayavadana* is given the name 'Padmini' which is pregnant with the indications of the specific 'type' of her sexual characteristics. The way she is described part by part as face like 'white lotus' or breasts like 'golden urns' (*Hayavadana*, P-13) bears the tradition from Kalidasa. The tradition to curb all possibilities of emancipation of a woman is working here too. But what Padmini does is to subvert it a bit (and she does it with her sexuality) – both her 'sexed being' and sexual desire. She has two men in her life and when she puts Devdatta's head on Kapila's body and chooses to live with that good combination of a fertile head and a well-built body, she shapes her desire according to her own. Infact, desire is very much productive, even in level of psychic fantasy⁸. This is well exemplified through Padmini's desire which is strong and effective. The mixing up of head and bodies sounds abnormal enough but it is erotic conduct and French cultural theorist Georges Bataille⁹ is of opinion that erotic conduct is the opposite of normal conduct and erotic excess always implies disorder. He even observes that brutality and murder are further steps in the same direction. We find enough brutality and attempts of murder and suicidal tendency for sake of desire that further emphasizes the fact that sexual desire is always haunted by death. In the Kali temple both the men cut off their heads. Padmini does not murder them, but it is she for whom such heinous incidents take place. This beautiful lady is proved to be a destructive woman, a 'femme fatale', the 'type' which even the Nazi soldiers were afraid of. It is the reading of patriarchy for the women with active participation specially in sexual act. However, through this activity it seems, as if, she is taking her revenge with patriarchy. Men's age-old right for polygamy is somehow subverted here – Padmini simultaneously lives with two men Devdatta (his head) and Kapila (his body). And when the body of her husband again gets softer and weaker, she again feels urge for Kapila, i.e. Kapila's body. Whereas Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain* uses the metaphor of talking¹⁰ (words) to indicate sexual activity, Padmini uses the metaphor of flowing river to express the same thing.

PADMINI. Be quiet, stupid. Your body bathed in a river, swam and danced in it.

Shouldn't your head know what river it was, what swim? Your head too must submerge in that river – the flow must rumple your hair, run its tongue in your ears and press your head to its bosom, until that's done, you'll continue to be incomplete. (*Hayavadana*, p- 58)

Proposing for sexual union, Padmini subverts Indian female sexuality – silent and repressive. For not repressing her desire, sexuality is never unpleasant to her. Rather, it is the exhilarating bliss, the experience of jouissance, that keeps her full with life's vitality. She even subverts the concept of motherhood that overrules female sexuality. She is not much bothered with it. Even when pregnant or when carrying the child in her arm, she does not keep aside her desire. It overshadows her motherhood.

At the end, when she dies, she performs a 'sati' but subverts the custom by having two husbands at the funeral pyre. This kind of subversion of patriarchal values being remained within patriarchal codes – i.e. being a wife and a mother – is rarely found. This ability of subversion must push her forward, at least a few steps, towards getting emancipation.

Chapter – 4

The Fire and the Rain

There are more binaries other than mother – prostitute binary to judge Nittilai and Vishakha, the two women characters of Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain*. English novelist Charles Kingsley¹¹ associates sexuality with argumentative rationality. There are some theorists who are in contrary and think that sexuality opposes reason. If both the polarities are taken, Nittilai represents the argumentative reality whereas Vishakha represents something contrary to reason. And if reason is compared to knowledge or power, Nittilai has control over it. On the other hand, Vishakha lacks it. Therefore, in spite of having tumultuous desire inside her, Vishakha herself is always driven by others' desires.

Nittilai's control over reason gives her the power to control her body. She exercises this power when resisting Arvasu to possess her body before

their marriage. This act of resistance really seems a step ahead towards her emancipation. But this emancipation is already subverted from within as she is following only the custom of her tribe – not to lose virginity before marriage – that ultimately contributes to patriarchy which denies a woman's right over her own body.

This lack of power over one's own body is more powerfully asserted in Vishakha who has to marry a person chosen by her father swallowing her teenage love-making in the jackfruit grove with another person. The learned husband pleases her body for one year.

VISHAKHA. ...And he did. Exactly for one year. He plunged me into a kind of bliss I didn't know existed.... (*The Fire and the Rain*, P – 16)

After that, the man uses her body for his purpose, for search of something that even Vishakha doesn't know. Whatever, the experience of jouissance during that one year haunts Vishakha. Her situation is however complicated as she has her experience of pre-marital love, of sexual harassment by her own father-in-law along with the experience of that jouissance. Even her brother-in-law who is sympathetic and caring for her is completely careless about her youthful body. These all work behind her being 'angry and haggard' (*The Fire and the Rain*, P – 12) . Her repressed desires come back in a roundabout way – not only in a form of unpleasure, but also in a form of anger. The fire of desire turns, into the fire of revenge for her. She empties the water pot of Yavakri and hastens his death.

Whereas Vishakha causes the death of someone else, Nittilai dies herself. Here comes another pair of comparison for the two of them – the 'Ego' with Nittilai and the 'Id' with Vishakha. Referring Freud's "The Ego and the Id", Bristow¹² observes ego's function as desexualizing the libidinal energies rising up from the unconscious depths of the Id. Really, the character of Nittilai is a desexualized character. She resists pre-marital sex, leaves her husband after marriage and at last proposes Arvasu to live with her just like a brother and a sister. The tendency of ego is self-preservation and it is also noticeable in Nittilai :

NITTILAI. ...Arvasu. I'm still young. I don't want to die. (*The Fire and the Rain*, P-49)

However, she dies early. Nittilai is killed by her husband for betraying the sanctity of Wed-lock. Helena Wojtezak¹³ writes in her "British Women's emancipation since the Renaissance" that after marriage, refusal to cohabit was contempt of court and could entail a prison sentence. The law of Nittilai's tribal society too is not different from that. The project of emancipation of female sexuality, as it seems, is destined to be ruined by patriarchal institutions for her case also.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we see that the relation between sexuality and emancipation is not monodimensional. Rather, the two share a multifaceted relationship. They can go parallel or in a criss-cross manner. Sometimes, patriarchy uses the tool of feminine sexuality to curb the possibilities of women's emancipation; sometimes women counter this and subvert the patriarchal strategy of disciplining women and uses their sexuality to get emancipated. Association between the two has been attempted to be established with references to some women of Tendulkar's and Karnad's plays. The factors controlling the relationship between these two terms as seen so far are mainly economic, social and psychological. Women's emancipation cannot find its true meaning without having a control over all these aspects. But unfortunately none of the characters discussed so far possess all of these. They never become able to envisage the fact "that Femininity is a false entity"¹⁴ constructed and disciplined by patriarchy, and so, cannot find escape from the bondage of the myth of feminine sexuality. It may be for the shortcomings of the characters or of the dramatists (who are significantly male) also. It may be that somehow the male ego of the dramatists does not allow the characters to become fully emancipated. They can only think of permitting the women half of it and leaves them in the midway of emancipation almost effacing the possibility of reaching desirable destination (i.e. full-fledged emancipation). In this condition what as a reader we can do is to dwell on the possibilities of future.

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3. Joseph Bristow, *Sexuality*, Sexological Types, P-44
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