

Women of Patriarchal Society: A Comparative study of Two Women Characters in the plays of Clifford Odets and Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract: The intent of the paper is to draw a comparison between two Women Characters who are dominant in the patriarchal society during an era when women members of a family hadn't had much courage to raise their voice against the misconduct, ill-treatment and injustice meted out to them by men at home. To elucidate the selected parlance, "Dominant Women in Macho Society", two women characters, namely, Belle Stark of the play *Rocket to the Moon* by the American Playwright, Clifford Odets and Sarita of the play, *Kamala* by the Indian Playwright, Vijay Tendulkar have been analysed. No doubt, the two leading playwrights of the two great nations have similar approach to educate their audience. Their plays are intended to be didactic. These two women characters, without doubt are women of courage who are capable of controlling their counterparts without yielding or submitting themselves to their wishes and fancies.

Keywords: Clifford Odets, Vijay Tendulkar, Dominant Women, Gender inequality, Women empowerment.

Clifford Odets is one of the American Dramatists who were didactic and committed to playwriting that could change the lives of the underprivileged. He belonged to the Jewish section of the Bronx in New York, and his family was affluent during the 1920s. He quit his school and pursued writing poetry and later decided to become a stage actor. He performed in radio plays and joined the Group theatre, founded by Harold Clurman and others. To his credit he has not less than fifteen plays, several movies scripts and film directions. His career as a playwright peaked during the Depression era. The social and economic factors prevailing during the period had an important role in his career as a playwright. He is identified as 'the White Hope' and the very mention of his name reminds one of the Great Depression of 1930s America when the capitalistic society was very much in frustration resulting from the economic breakdown. He made use of the insecure time to cast out his poverty-ridden characters to create dramatic tensions in his plays. Clurman comments, "The left movement provided Odets with a platform and a loudspeaker; the music that came through was that of a vast population of restive souls, unaware of its own mind, seeking help. To this Odets added the determination of youth. The quality of his plays is young, lyrical, yearning, – as of someone on the threshold of life" (Clurman 150-151).

American women of the 1930s were mostly traditional housewives. The role of women took a new turn when they were critically forced to take up a job for a decent living. This new trend is a result of the Great Depression that left people penniless. Women started shedding their mere home-maker identity and went in search of jobs to support their family. Gradually, they became working members on par with their male counterparts and gained power and authority not only in the family but in society as well. The husband-wife relationships in the plays of Clifford Odets showed this reversal where the women characters appear to be more dominant and symbolically, he presents the social and economic freedom that women enjoyed. Though some women seem to be conventional, in reality they too are dominant enough to take necessary decisions in the family.

Belle Stark is one such character that Clifford Odets creates in his play *Rocket to the Moon*. She has enough potential not only to run the household but also to manage the business of her dentist husband, Ben Stark. She bosses over the business and when her husband wishes to move to the Bronx, an affluent place, in order to promote his own business she advises him not to. She considers that it is cost effective and this would enable Ben not to venture into an additional financial burden that he would incur by way of getting money from his father-in-law. She manages the fiscal aspects of the business transactions meticulously. Margaret Brenman-Gibson observes:

Belle, like Odets' father, gives practical reasons which stifle his (Ben's) growth. By a most economic exchange, Odets ends the first round with the controlling wife, Belle, the victor. Indeed, she has won even before the play opens, and when she concludes the opening beat with, "Any day now I'm expecting to have to powder and diaper you." She has established herself as the parent, the boss, the obstacle in the path of the aspiring Ben Stark's creative growth. (525-526)

Belle is all clear about her role and there is no intimidation on her part as a woman of the family. She possesses the strength to fight 'the patriarch'. She boldly questions and asks the default rent from the veteran, Cooper, who shares the office of her husband. She stands up for herself and decides on the matters on her own without the acknowledgement of her husband. She visits the dentist office regularly and eases Ben. His affair with his secretary, Cleo Singer, doesn't seem to be a botheration unless otherwise, she considers Cleo somewhat more attractive than her. She blames Ben for the failure of their relationship and her jealousy towards Cleo makes her to instruct Ben to appoint her in the place of Cleo.

Though Belle seems to be unsympathetic, at times she comes out with motherly affection and shows her concern towards other characters of the play including her own husband. She allows an allowance for

Cooper to settle the default rent. She consoles Ben and convinces him that his indulgence towards Cleo is not true. Remorsefully, she excuses him. She says, “You were close together and you fell into that thing [. . .] I can forget it, Ben. I’m your wife. It doesn’t involve our whole relationship. We can have many happy years together. I’ll do anything for you [. . .] We will both forget it! We need each other, Ben.” (RM 401) Thus, though Belle endures the displeasure of Ben’s blank hopes, she dominates her husband and proves her mettle by being a strong woman in the society that is founded on patriarchal setup.

Vijay Tendulkar, the master craftsman of Marathi language has written almost all his plays in his mother tongue and later they were translated into English and several other Indian languages. He has written twenty-eight full length plays, eleven children’s drama and twenty four one act plays. Tendulkar’s plays focus on the dominance and violence prevalent in a family and these two vices result from the excessive sexual lust of the male members of the family. The issue of domestic violence against the women of his plays could be seen as a reflection of the society, recurrent in the nation that has been under patriarchal pretence since years unknown.

With an intention to show the society in its raw form, he has created his female characters who are submissive and at right time, given a chance, they show their capacity to rise to the level of their male partners. Some women characters in his plays stand in contrast to each other like two sides of a coin. It would be apt to quote Anshul Chandra, who observes: “They are quite different from each other. He portrays them as loyal, docile, religious, hardworking, self-effacing and tender-hearted; other type of woman is more selfish, wily, vicious, and assertive” (159). The women are mostly educated and contrarily they are bullied by their men and are dominated to the core.

His play *Kamala* is about an ambitious young Journalist, Jaisingh, who ventures into a new task and outwits his colleagues by his research on flesh trade that he comes to know about. His intension, though in the beginning, seems to be a great concern for the society, turns out to be selfish at the end. He is not at all concerned about the feelings of the woman whom he brought from the flesh trade. The innocent woman believes him to be a saviour of her life. But later it dawns on her that Jaisingh is not the sort of man she had thought and she, the illiterate, in turn teaches Sarita, the educated, to know her position in the family. At this juncture, Sarita comes to know of her worth as the wife of the over-ambitious man who does not spare any.

Before the arrival of Kamala, Sarita is no more than a slave under the master Jaisingh. She is, for him, a menial servant and his egoistic and deceitful nature pops out at times to subjugate her. Sarita seems to be very submissive and docile and she lives up only to the needs and tastes of her husband. The playwright stupendously introduces Kamala to expose the wile nature of the male society where women are used by men to push themselves up in life and reach their set goals at the cost of their women counterparts. And Sarita, without doubt, as the word ‘stereotype’ would define, is a woman who passively does all chores of the house and presents herself to be loyal to her husband. She takes care of his needs by providing him food, drinks and the most expensive among others, the sexual pleasure. She looks after his every need and nurtures at times and pampers him to instruct his faculties to proceed further in his venture.

As the play advances, Sarita comes to her senses and understands the fact that between herself and Kamala, there is no much difference in the way her husband treats them. She is there in the family only to fulfil the carnal desires of her husband and to accompany him to the parties that he attends. Later on, as awareness rocks her head, she dispels his commands and wishes. Sarita feels not at home and her aversion towards him triggers in her, a sense of dominance. She takes upper hand and outrightly rejects his pleas. Shanta Gokhale correctly points out drawing a connection between Sarita and Nora of the play, *A Dolls’ House* by Henrik Ibsen, “Sarita is Nora who has stopped short of the final breaking out. Though she does not make a dramatic exit at the end of the play, she has understood her situation as surely as Nora does. It is the illiterate Kamala, one step ahead of her in understanding what the man-woman relation is all about, who teaches her to see where she stands...” (41). As the finale approaches, Sarita musters up courage to act against her husband to hold a press conference to expose him of his cruelty. She does not want to be a pawn in his game and challenges every inquiry of him. Her instinctive repulsion shakes the founding of the patriarchal society and the chauvinists who had been enjoying their so-called birth right of enslaving women are dismayed. Sarita outshouts her anguish and the following lines expose her sense of oppression that she undergoes in the domicile of Jaisingh:

I saw 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. Slaves don’t have rights, do they, Kakasaheb? They must only slave away. Dance to their master’s whim. Laugh, when he says, laugh. Cry, when he says, cry. When he says pick up the phone, they must pick it up. When he says, come to a party, they must go. When he says, lie on the bed – they [She is twisted in pain] (KM 46)

These lines expose the inherent feministic attitude of Sarita and her commitment to claim rights and equality on par with that of men and she asks, “Why? Why can’t men limp behind? Why aren’t women ever the masters? Why can’t a woman at least ask to live her life the same way as a man? Why must only a man have the right to be a man? Does he have one extra sense? A woman can do everything a man can” (KM 47). She with determination says, “I’ll go on feeling it... And I’ll pay whatever price I have to pay for it” (KM 52). Sarita feels the dominant woman in her. Howsoever, she, when her husband is sacked out of his job, tries to console him,

but nevertheless, has not given up her proposal to break off the oppression, rather postpones it a little further. Driven by her innate desire for freedom, Sarita bosses over Jaisingh and becomes invincible.

Transformation of Sarita is well wrought out by the playwright. His excellence could be felt in his creation of this particular woman character who rebels against chauvinism with a quest for freedom. And, as the play closes, she tells Kakasaheb, “. . . a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave” (KM 52). Thus, Tendulkar exposes the chauvinistic, nihilistic, crooked minded attitude of men towards women and how it takes a turn when the women rebel against them. Sarita who comes to her senses represents the women who long and pine for freedom.

Thus, these two women characters of Clifford Odets and Vijay Tendulkar share an identical status, characteristic of womanhood in a society that expects them to be too submissive and dutiful whereas they break the rules and forge their attitude to teach their counterparts that they are nonetheless equal to them. They are assertive and dominant and stand aloof from their partners. They remain loyal, faithful and supportive to their men at the time of crises. They inspire and nurture them and pave way for their bright future.

Note on the primary texts:

RM -- *Rocket to the Moon*
 KM -- *Kamala*

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