

Exploring Female Subjugation through Language: A Comparative Study of Manjula Padmanabhan and Vijay Tendulkar's Plays

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Abstract: *They say a pen is mightier than a sword for a reason. Words have power; therefore, language has power. It can be used as a weapon to fight or even subdue. Language was initially meant to communicate, convey or express meaning or emotions. However, like all things humans developed through the ages, they also learned to use it as a weapon. Language can and is, used as a weapon to exert control over the marginalised or weaker sections of society in a subtle and bloodless manner. Despite this, the wounds inflicted by the use of language are more profound than any mortal wound, and its effects are felt deeply in our psyche, where no eye can reach. Using the help of psychology, it is easier to understand the negative effect of language on a person's psyche. Language has been one of the most effective tools to oppress women for the longest time. This paper will combine the fields of literature, language and psychology to better understand the depth of female subjugation through language and how it achieves this. The plays undertaken in this study are *The Mating Game Show* and *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan; and *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session* by Vijay Tendulkar.*

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The reasons for taking these particular playwrights and their plays are that both Padmanabhan and Tendulkar are modern Indian playwrights whose primary concern is to present social issues prevalent in their times to a broader audience. *Lights Out* was based on a real-life incident of a woman being raped in an under-construction building surrounded by societies, and no one reports the violent act to the police. Similarly, *Kamala* is about a real journalist who exposes the sex trade by buying an enslaved person himself, only to abandon her once he is done basking in the glory of having exposed the trade. Meanwhile, *The Mating Game Show* and

Silence! The Court is in Session reflect the issues in society and its mindset.

One common thing that ties all four plays together is that they all show minimum to no physical violence. However, all the women in these plays are abuse victims, albeit through language. They are cursed at or made to feel hopeless or ganged up on by the male character in the play. Forget receiving any help; their pain is shown as a source of entertainment for society. Hence, this paper takes a closer look at how society uses language to subjugate females.

1) Sexist Language

Using sexist language is not only insulting or demeaning to a woman but also makes her feel weak and inferior. Sexist language confines a woman to a lesser role just because she is of a particular sex. The language that is used, then, aims at reducing the value of a person and degrading them.

In the play *Kamala*, Jaisingh buys a slave from an illegal market in order to expose the sex trade going on in the country. He calls for a press conference and presents the woman he bought- Kamala, in front of insensitive journalists who do not spare the chance to ask inappropriate and degrading questions to the innocent Kamala, who has no knowledge about this new world. Jaisingh narrates the incident with his friend at the press conference but does not

realise how wrong it was.

JAININGH- He thought all adivasis indulged in free sex day and night. What nonsense!

JAIN- With that, another one began to itch to ask a question. He asked, you must be having free sex too. How many men have you slept with?

SARITA- [*She can't help it*]. Weren't they ashamed to ask such questions? (Tendulkar, "Kamala" 29)

Sarita does not like how Kamala was exposed to such people and how they openly asked her such abhorring questions just because she was sold as a sex slave. She believes that even Kamala deserves basic respect, but Jaisingh and Jain do not seem affected at all and treat such questions and behaviour very lightly. Banerjee writes:

"Though not a political play in any sense, *Kamala* too is a tropical drama, as *Damladoipada Muktabal* is. It was inspired by a real-life incidence of the Indian Express, exposed by Sarin who actually bought a girl from a rural flesh market and presented her at a press conference. But using this incident as a launching pad. Tendulkar raises certain cardinal questions regarding the value system of a modern success-oriented generation which is ready to sacrifice human values even in the name of humanity itself" (Banerjee 581)

In *Lights Out*, it is very apparent that there is a clear distinction between the unknown woman being raped and the women of the house. Leela and Naina are decent women, and it is incomprehensible that they would have to go through the same atrocity the stranger female is facing. However, both of them are made fun of and not taken seriously when they voice their opinions because they are women, and women do not know what goes on in the world; they are an ignorant species. This is reflected in Naina's husband's language when she advises him about something. Surinder immediately cuts her off by shouting at her- "You shut up! This is no time for women's nonsense!" (Padmanabhan, "Lights Out" 52) This is

ironic, considering that the men think of themselves as saviours who will save the woman being raped.

The Mating Game Show also portrays crude language being used against the female contestants by the males. They are called 'bitches' and 'whores', and they are not treated or seen with respect at all. One of the contestants, Rocky, in particular, does not call his fellow contestant by her name at all, instead choosing to address her as 'bitch'. Such crude language is used only against females, strengthening the view that women are of lesser value than men.

Sexist language is not only about using crude language but also through it limiting one's freedom because of their particular sex. *Silence!*... gives us ample examples of such language used throughout the play.

MRS KASHIKAR. [...] That's what happens these days when you get everything without

marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility. [...] It's the sly fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society. (Tendulkar, "Silence!" 99-100)

Mrs Kashikar though being a woman herself, becomes a part of the patriarchal society that places the blame of promiscuity solely on the shoulders of the female. Rather than sympathise with Miss Benare, she plays an active role in tearing her character apart in front of everyone just because Benare is not like her. Underneath the pronounced issues of this play, Tendulkar also presents the vicious problem of women tearing women down.

2) Objectifying Women

Another thing that works to solidify women's inferiority in everyone's minds is their objectification of them. If women are treated as mere commodities, they can also be replaceable.

They can also be bought, sold, and damaged with no great consequence. This is strongly felt in *The Mating Game Show* when Rocky justifies killing two of his previous wives secretly by saying it was not murder.

ROCKY: [...] Ask any man on the street - does he think his wife is his property or not?

Cent per cent he will say "Yes, she is ". And if a man is dissatisfied with his property, he has the right to get rid of it. Or do anything with it. It's his property! (Padmanabhan, "Mating Game" 83)

According to Rocky, a man has the right to do anything he wants with his wife, and he can get away with it because she is essentially her husband's property to do as he pleases. Jaisingh from *Kamala* echoes this sentiment because he also believes it is a husband's right to have sex whenever he pleases, and the wife has no right to refuse him. When Sarita pushes her husband to stop his advances, Jaisingh lashes out, saying, "Don't I have the right to have my wife when I feel

like it?" (Tendulkar, "Kamala", 32) When repeated, such language solidifies the idea that women have no right to complain about their treatment and must submit to everything a man does. This language goes on to establish in the minds of everyone that a woman has no right or will of her own because she belongs to her husband.

Jaisingh is a reporter, and he buys a woman, Kamala, to prove that the sex trade exists in some parts of the country. He comes across as a person who is more concerned about how exposing this news will help him than actually eradicating the slave trade. He thinks of himself as a very liberal and educated person, but he takes a particular pleasure that is severely lacking in any empathy towards the condition of Kamala, and this is clear when he is telling Sarita about what he did.

SARITA. They auction- women?

JAISINGH. Yes, women. Can't believe it, can you? 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 thighs and...

SARITA. Enough.

JAISINGH. This upsets you, perhaps. This Kamala had no customers at all. [...] I bought her dirt cheap. (Tendulkar, "Kamala" 14)

3) Dismissive Language

Talking with women in a condescending and dismissive tone is a common trope in all four of these plays. This shows how unimportant women are in Men's world and that men consider them insignificant things or targets to vent their anger and frustration.

Psychology says that when you dismissively talk to someone, you disregard their values and opinions. You treat them lesser than you, and continuous behaviour of this sort makes the person feel this way too. It is a condescending manner to talk with someone. Dismissive language is used often in all the plays, and there are numerous examples to prove it.

The most prominent example can be seen in *Silence! The Court is in Session* when Benare is tried against her consent; everyone hatches a conspiracy to expose her secrets. She is forced to witness as everyone assassinates her character, and when she argues against it, she is reprimanded for disturbing the court proceedings. She is silenced while everyone weaves tales and tells the story with the objective in mind to malign her character before everyone. The "Silence!" in the title might as well be aimed at Benare as she is never given a proper chance to defend herself.

In *Lights Out*, Bhaskar does not heed Leela's complaints regarding the screams she hears from outside. Despite her continuous insistence, he refuses to call the police. When Leela says that not doing anything against a crime is also being a part of it, both Bhaskar and Mohan scoff and dismiss

it as "ridiculous". The men in the room try to convince Leela that whatever is happening outside is not rape, but a domestic fight, or exorcism, owing to which they cannot interfere. However, when Naina enters the scene and sees what is happening, she is shocked that Bhasker and Mohan are concocting such ridiculous theories.

NAINA: You're... you're mad! Both of you- you're talking nonsense! Just one look outside the window and you'll know it's rape!

MOHAN: My! You must've seen a lot of rape, Naina, to recognise it at one glance! (Padmanabhan, "Lights Out" 44)

Instead of acknowledging the truth, Mohan undermines Naina by making fun of her. He dismisses her claims, but when her husband makes the same claim, Mohan and Bhasker accept it without question.

Kamala also includes cases of dismissiveness when Sarita refuses to go to a party with Jaisingh, saying that it is her will; Jaisingh responds sarcastically, "Never noticed any signs of it before". (Tendulkar, "Kamala" 45) It surprises Jaisingh when Sarita exercises her own will, and he is irritated by it because it inconveniences him.

While Jaisingh's reaction is irritation, Rocky's from *The Mating Game Show* is much more degrading and insulting. He compares a dog and a wife when discussing women's rights after marriage, by saying "But there's a difference between a dog and a woman. A dog's parents don't pay you to own it. A woman's parents do. That's what a dowry is. Payment for taking a girl off her father's hands." (Padmanabhan, "Mating Game" 83)

Dismissive language is damaging because it treats a person as less than human. A woman is openly being compared to an animal because she is viewed as a person with no significant value. This is detrimental to females because this limits and restricts them and forces them into boundaries they cannot free themselves from. What starts as simply ignoring or not letting a woman speak, after continuous exposure, results in her being no better than dogs.

4) Cement Traditional Gendered Roles

Language is often used to reiterate how females should and should not behave. Women are not expected to be as free and wild as men are and will often face harsh criticism from all spheres of society if they are. No matter if the woman is successful and independent. If she does not behave the way society dictates a good girl should, she will face their wrath. This is seen in the case of Benare.

MRS KASHIKAR. [...] Just look at the way she behaves. I don't like to say anything

since she's one of us. Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman? No matter how well she knows him? Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out! (Tendulkar, "Silence!" 100)

One cannot fail to notice that in all of Mrs Kashikar's criticism, only the female is blamed. Miss Benare is not the only one committing these so-called crimes, yet she is the only one being charged. Her complete character is called wrong according to societal standards, from how she laughs to how she talks with men. In Mrs Kashikar's ideal world, people like Miss Benare would not exist. There would be no laughing, cracking jokes, or singing and dancing- certainly not for the women.

SARITA. [...] 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. 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 to 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.*]. (Tendulkar, "Kamala" 46)

If unmarried Benare is criticised this much for being free, married Sarita has even lesser rights. She thought her husband was her partner, yet she does not know how he became her master. She is expected to do everything she is told, unable to exercise her will.

However, this is how Sarita feels, though she has never been called a servant. If feeling like a slave is this distressing, calling wives enslaved people would leave an even more significant impact on a woman's psyche. While Sarita can even think of revolting, a woman who is called a slave will not even be able to speak against it because her rights have already been shredded. In *The Mating Game Show*, Rocky says- "[...] a wife's better than a servant. She provides her own salary, for one thing!" (Padmanabhan, "Mating Game" 81) What kind of slavery is this, where you pay to be treated like a slave?

5) Double Standards

There are various kinds of ways in which the double standards of society have been exposed in all of these plays. For instance, in *Kamala*, Jain, a friend of Jaisingh, comments in jest about the change in Sarita before and after her marriage, but it is a harsh reality.

JAIN. Hi, Bhabhiji, I mean, an English 'hi' to him, and a Marathi 'hai' to you. This

warrior against exploitation in the country is exploiting you. He's made a drudge out of a horse-riding independent girl from a princely house. *Hai, hai!* [*Theatrically, to Jaisingh.*] Shame on you! Hero of anti-exploitation campaigns makes slave of wife! (Tendulkar, "Kamala" 17)

So people desire to marry independent girls but wish them to work as slaves after they are married. Their independence is not valued after marriage, and they are expected to obey and submit to their husbands. If a woman chooses to remain unmarried and continues to be independent and successful, she becomes a threat to society.

HONEY: [...] my mother was always sick. She sent me out to "work"- that's what she

called it, anyway- on my back, staring up at ceiling fans! Five fans per day meant food on the table for all of us. [...] earned us enough to eat and me a commerce degree. I opened a tailoring business and did well. But no one would marry me. Because of my early "work", maybe, but also just because I was too confident, too successful. Men only want wives they can kick around! (Padmanabhan, "Mating Game" 76)

Women like Honey, who are clever and resourceful, are not desirable for marriage. Men want women whom they can make feel inferior. If they married someone independent, they would not feel superior, so they find them undesirable and try to break them like they tried to break Benare.

KASHIKAR. Motherhood must be sacred and pure. This court takes a serious view of

your attempt to dynamite all this. [...] No momento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed. (Tendulkar, "Silence!" 118-119)

A woman seeking independence and control over her life is seen as an effort to "dynamite" society. Meaning a female cannot be independent without going against society. She must either choose to live with society or forsake her freedom. Moreover, this sentence that the court has declared, is against the charge of infanticide. The made-up court starts with declarations of how motherhood is sacred, later declaring that the unborn child out of wedlock must be destroyed. This court represents the judgmental society and its double standards. Its definitions of right and wrong are as fickle as the whims of a child but infinitely more malicious. Virginia Woolf aptly summarises the double standards of society that Kashikar seems to echo:

"Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger... (and) in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband." (Woolf, 66)

Justice for women also differs according to the class they belong to. In the following lines, we can see how Bhasker and Mohan do not think a whore should have the same rights as other women, and hence they have no right to justice because, according to their twisted logic, if they were "decent" women, then other people would have come to their rescue.

NAINA: A whore! Do you think that's what she is?

MOHAN: Decent women would never submit to this sort of thing.

LEELA: (*dully*) If she's a whore, does it mean you won't call the police?

BHASKER: If she's a whore, Leela, then, this isn't rape... so on what grounds could we call the police? (Padmanabhan, "Lights Out" 45)

The males in this scene go from contemplating that the woman being raped must be poor, or a whore, so they do not have to help her. They hide their cowardice by shaming the woman. They call her a whore, as if that excuses them from not going to help her, and as if she is less than human not to have the same rights or justice provided to her if she is being attacked. Mohan and Bhasker say she is not decent because a "decent woman" would not submit to rape. Are crimes something people- decent or not, can choose to submit to or not? For all the distress Leela and Naina face, they make no move to help the woman, instead wholly relying on the men. However, those who cannot fight for their own rights can probably not fight for anyone else's.

6) Entertainment

Language is used as a tool for the entertainment of people at the expense of women. This is seen in the case of Kamala in the form of sensational journalism, where stories are spiced up, and people are asked ridiculous and debasing questions, all in the name of breaking news. Jain narrates how the press conference went, and instead of seeing how twisted this was, he sounds equal parts proud and envious of Jaisingh for being able to create a "tamasha" among all other journalists. The questions asked are deliberately demeaning with no goal of focusing on the truth or serious matters.

JAIN. [...] 'You must have had some free sex with this new Sheth- tell us something about it- how did it compare?'

KAKASAHEB. This is your Press Conference!

JAISINGH. Just a minute. Don't misunderstand, Kakasaheb. We people ask serious and

good questions too. If the subject is serious, sometimes they leave an intelligent politician speechless. (Tendulkar, "Kamala" 29)

One would think that the matter of the sex trade would be serious. However, maybe because Kamala is an illiterate woman, they find that they can poke fun at her through such questions for everyone else's entertainment.

While language can be used to make fun of someone, it can also be wielded to suppress a person. By creating a court-like manner, Kashikar and his motley group of amateur dramatists manage to silence the free-spirited and independent Miss Benare. They openly judge her, publically humiliate her, and also sentence her under the guise of a mock trial. Moreover, after it is all done, the sentence is passed, and they leave Benare in just a shell of her former self, all the while calling it just a game.

SUKHATME. [...] We had some good fun! Felt just like fighting a real case! MRS KASHIKAR. She's taken it really to heart. How sensitive the child is!

KASHIKAR. You're telling me. She's taking it much too much to heart. After all it was- SUKHATME. Just a game! What else? A game! That's all! (Tendulkar, "Silence!" 120)

In *The Mating Game Show*, Padmanabhan drops all pretence and openly depicts the idea of a reality TV show where men and women who otherwise cannot get married come to find their partners. Perhaps it is surprising that despite the staged deaths, people still gather to watch it. Honey says- "Many people think it's horrible but they still scrape their eyes raw watching it!" (Padmanabhan, "Mating Game" 75) This game show presents incredibly private questions to the contestants, all for the entertainment of its fifty lakh viewers. Based on the answers to these frivolous questions, partners will be assigned based on matching answers and expected to get married.

While the concept of the entire game show is meant to entertain the audience, the questions, in particular, are where the entertainment is derived from. Language, hence, becomes a means for public amusement too.

Throughout the four plays of Padmanabhan and Tendulkar, it is observed how language plays a pivotal role in the subjugation of females, whether it is used to confine them to their gender, silence them, abuse them, or entertain everyone. Language is used as a tool to accomplish all this by inflicting damaging wounds on a person's psyche.

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