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Based on Real News

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Kamla by Vijay Tendulkar is a naturalistic play. It focuses on the changed role of women in society. It was inspired by a real life incident - the *Indian Express* exposure by Ashwin 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 who are ready to sacrifice human value in the name of humanity itself. The playwright exposes the innate self-deception of this standpoint. It is the story of an unfortunate woman sold away in the flesh market and a so-called happy housewife married to a daring journalist, both having a revelation of finding themselves on the common platform of sexual slavery in this male-dominated world.

Investigating Flesh Trade for Gaining Popularity

Ashwin Sarin, a journalist, investigated into flesh trade in Madhya Pradesh and purchased a woman 'Kamla' for Rs. 2,300 to establish the trafficking of women, in Shivpuri village. The journalist then wrote a series of articles exposing the prostitution trade and involvement of political bigwigs and police in it on 17th, 20th & 30th April 1981 and 2nd May 1981. Mr. Vijay Tendulkar scripted a play by name 'Kamla' based totally on the *Indian Express* exposure and staged the play for 150 times in 32 cities and in seven languages. Journalist Ashwin Sarin and *Indian Express* newspaper complained that Vijay Tendulkar infringed their copyright. The Bombay High Court held that there could not be any copyright in an event that has actually taken place.

Not Just Characters in a Play

The play expresses Tendulkar's grasp of the harsh realities in our social fabric. In the words of Tendulkar, "Kamla for me is not just a character, she is a living person, and she just doesn't remain on my papers".

The play exposes a flesh trade scoop and its aftermath. It deals with the issue of buying and selling of tribal women. The theme of *Kamla*, a two-act play, is flesh trade, and how well-known young journalists like Jaisingh Jadhav seek to capitalize on it in order to further succeed in their careers without caring, in the least, for the victims of this immoral trade in a democratic society like India. The play offers Tendulkar enough scope to scoff at the kind of trendy journalism practiced by Jadhav, and also to strike a contrast between vernacular and English journalism.

Focus on the Suffering of Indian Women

Tendulkar uses the play also to dwell on the characteristic suffering of the Indian middle class women who are made to suffer by selfish, malicious and hypocritical male chauvinists. The man-woman relationship is also deftly touched upon in the complex relationship between Jadhav and his wife, Sarita.

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Kamla is a female-centered play in the sense that it is built on the metamorphosis of Sarita emerging from being a docile wife to an assertive, mature and strong woman in the end.

Kamla is a satire on the trendy journalism we come across everywhere. Jadhav is indifferent to the humanness. He is capable of sacrificing human values, in the name of humanity itself. The husband-wife relationship between Sarita and Jaisingh is typical of the sort existing in the cities like Delhi, where executive husbands do not find adequate time for their wives who have to content themselves by being mere social beings.

The Dominating Male

At the center of the play is a self-seeking journalist, Jaisingh Jadhav, associated with English daily published by an unscrupulous press baron, Sheth Singhanian. He is an agile, adventurous journalist. He takes risks, exposes scandals and feeds the sophisticated paper with sensational news. His work boosts the circulation of the paper and the owner increases his salary, Jadhav happily moves to a small bungalow in a fashionable locality around New Delhi. Sarita, his wife is well educated and hails from a village called Phaltan. Kaka sahib, Sarita's uncle is currently in Delhi to procure his quota of newsprint with Jadhav's help. Kakasahib runs a newspaper in vernacular. He lives a simple life on Gandhian principles. Jaisingh treats the women he has purchased from flesh market as an object that can buy him a reputation in his professional life and promotion in his job. He is one of those modern individuals, who pursue their goal unquestioningly, with a single-track mind. Jadhav is never bothered of what will happen to *Kamla* after exhibiting her at the Press Conference.

Awakening through a Flesh Trade Girl

Kamla's entry in the household reveals to Sarita the selfish hypocrisy of her husband and the insignificance of her own existence in Jaisingh's life, on realizing that she holds no value in her husband's busy and materialistic lifestyle, she takes a re-birth. And finally a new Sarita emerges. She discards her submissive attitude and decides to convene a Press Conference where she would expose to the whole world the real Jaisingh Jadhav. She is determined to put forth her husband as a great advocate of freedom. She would tell how he bought the slave *Kamla* and used her for his own selfish ends. Sarita, who was asleep to her reality, was awakened by *Kamla*. She has come face to face with her domestic slavery. Frustrated, in anger, she questions her uncle as to why aren't women ever the masters? Why must only men have the right to rule?

But, then, in spite of her awakening she does not have the spirit to rebel at once against her plight. Instead, she whole-heartedly supports her husband who, by the end of the play, falls prey to a selfish conspiracy and loses his job. In the end though, Sarita returns to square one, she does not turn her face from her reality. She just hopes that a day might come when she would break away the chains. She would become a master of her own wishes and would no longer be a use and throw object. And that she would pay whatever price she has to, for it.

Attack on Sensational Journalism

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In the play Tendulkar has made a strong remark against the modern concept of journalism, which stresses on sensationalism. He does it among other things through a comparison of the characteristics of the protagonist with another character Kakasaheb. Kakasaheb is a journalist of the old school, who runs a small paper with his own resources. Kakasaheb provides the true ideals of journalism. And in contrast to these, Jadhav's concept of newspaper reporting is shown in a critical light. To quote Kakasaheb's words:

I'm a back number- a remnant of times past. A dead journalist-who's just about staying alive! Now it is the day of your husband's type of journalism. The High-Speed type! Something catches fire- and there he runs! There is a riot somewhere else and off he flies... (KL5)

That Kakasaheb edits a paper published in vernacular, while Jadhav's medium is English, also helps to highlight the elitist nature of journalism practiced by him. Tendulkar has tried to drive home the fact that it is the dailies in vernacular alone that reach the masses. And that none can affect any meaningful social or political change in India through English dailies, as they reach only a very small section of Indian population.

In the very opening scene Kakasaheb refers to the "high speed"(KL5) journalism practiced by Jaisingh. He pooh-poohs his craze for "eye-witness report" saying "being on the spot that's what is important! Never mind what you write". When Sarita defends her husband, saying "if it is (murder, bloodshed, rape, atrocity, arson) happening shouldn't he observe it?" Kakasaheb says:

Why does he have? My dear, it's not the facts of an occurrence that are important. But the topic is. Discuss that, comment on it. Suggest a way to stop it. After all, any murder, rape, or arson is like any other. What difference can there be? What sort of journalism is it that smacks its lips as it writes blood-thirsty descriptions instead of commentary? Its business isn't news-it is bloodshed! (KL6)

Kakasaheb, himself the proprietor of a small vernacular daily, is quick to discern Jadhav's real intention behind his reckless news reporting. Hence when Jadhav says

There's commitment behind it, there's a social purpose.....the common man.....needs to be shocked into looking at the truth.....We need a force that will raise his consciousness, prepare him to struggle for political and social change.(KL23-24)

Kakasaheb remarks:

... But you're doing all this for the small percent common people who have the good fortune knowing English. And these fortunate people are going to effect a change in the government of this country. The rest of the population the majority

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poor things are going to carry on in their haze. Because they don't know English.....this new journalism of yours if moneymaking is not the object of it then it's a Vandhya- language first. Speak it. Then try and teach them.

Kakasaheb says:

Five years ago you were in the shed outside a house in Karol Bagh. And today you're in a bungalow in Neeti Bagh even it is a small one. You have servants you have a car. You travel by plane all over the country. You stay in five star hotels. You get invitations from foreign embassies. You have access to ministers and Chief Ministers or even the Prime Minister! What's bad about that? The moral is: There's no harm in the game if you know to play it right. (KL24)

The corrupt administration and the hypocrisy inherent in this world of glamorized journalism are well revealed in Jaisingh's words:

... The police know it is true, but don't want to admit it. They say we reporters are sensation seekers and that's why we are digging into. And the government oh they are pure and lily white. They say, shantam papam perishes the thought! Newspaper walas have the bad habit of misusing the freedom of the press. I needed evidence. I didn't have any but I could smell something wrong. The police washed away their hands of it. The Home Minister put his hands over his cars.... I turned the whole world upside down to find this bazaar. I was the first journalist to reach it. Today I've caught them properly... (KL14-15)

Profit Making Journalists and Newspapers

The following words of Jaisingh smell of a typical commercialistic attitude in journalism. Press trade aims at lining the pockets of all those involved in it.

There's a way of doing these things. You have to build them up that way. What's so unusual about the Luhardaga flesh market? Women are sold in many places like that, all over the Country.....that's not the point. The point is how we project Luhardaga the technique of it. The art lies in presenting the case-not in the case itself? There will be a high drama at today's press conference. It'll create uproar! (KL15)

Inspiration Comes from the Society – A Lovely Bonded Labourer

For Tendulkar, the inspiration comes from the society around him. In his plays one gets a feeling that there is an underlying current of sympathy towards the women characters created by him. In *Kamla*, Tendulkar has explored the position of women in the society today.

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Sarita is also exploited in her own way as Kamla. Tendulkar exposes the chauvinism intrinsic in the modern Indian male who believes that he is liberal-minded. Like Kamla, Sarita is also an object that merely provides physical enjoyment, social companionship and domestic comfort to Jadhav. She is indeed a "Lovely bonded labourer"(KL17), taking note of all phone calls, attending to Jadhav's physical needs and running about in the house carrying out all his presumptuous instructions, an obedient and loyal wife.

The Turn in the Story and Events

Kamla's unexpected question to Sarita that "How much did he buy you for?"(KL34) enlightens Sarita on her position in the family. Though Jaisingh took a handsome dowry in marrying her, she feels like saying "seven hundred". Kamla proposes that she will do all housework while Sarita will look after accounts and such "sophisticated" things. She adds that they will share their master's bed half a month each.

Kamla's dialogue with Sarita is an eye-opener for all of us, including the characters. Memsahab. If you won't misunderstand, I'll tell you. The master bought you: he bought me, too.....so, memsahab; both of us must stay here like sisters. We'll keep the master happy.....the master will have children. I'll bring them up. You keep the accounts and run the house... Fifteen days of the month, you sleep with the master; the other fifteen, I'll sleep with him. Agreed? (KL35)

Sarita agrees to this. Somehow, she painfully and shockingly realizes that she too, like Kamla, functions as a mere pawn in Jadhav's game of chess. To Jadhav, Kamla is only an object that helps him win instant fame. Sarita is also an object to be paraded as a wife at parties to enhance his status as a successful journalist. Jadhav is referred to by Kakasaheb and Jain as an irresponsible husband whose craze for publicity overwhelms him so much that he totally ignores his wife's existence. To quote Jain's words while he addresses Sarita:

Hi, Bhabhiji, I mean, an English 'he' 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 campaign makes slave of his wife. (KL17)

When Sarita opposes Jaisingh's decision of taking Kamla to an orphanage, the dominant male chauvinist in him wakes up and he says, "It is I who take decisions in this house and no one else."(KL42) What Simon de Beauvoir says about the modern men applies aptly to Jaisingh here: "the men of today show a certain duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women; they are willing on the whole to accept women as a fellow being, an equal but they require her to remain the inessential".

Any Trade between Wife and Flesh Trade Woman?

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On realizing that in her husband's scheme of things, there is not much difference between herself and Kamla, she undergoes a great change, and becomes an entirely independent and assertive woman who has finally discovered her real identity. She comes up with an intention of convening a Press Conference to expose the tyranny of her husband. She would declare before the whole world, the real state of affairs at home:

I am going to present a man who in the year 1982 still keeps a slave, right here in Delhi. Jaisingh Jadhav. I am going to say this man's a great advocate of freedom. And he brings home a slave and exploits her. Listen to the story of how he brought home the slave Kamla and made use of her. The other slave he got free - not just free - the slave's father shelled out the money - a big sum.

These lines indicate that Sarita has come to know the egotistical insincerity of her own husband, and has realized the irrelevance of her being in the following potent and pivotal lines, Sarita reveals that:

I was asleep. Kamla woke me up with a shock. Kamla showed me everything. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights in this house. Slaves don't have rights. 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, lie on the bed-she (she is twisted in pain) why? Why can't men limp behind? Why aren't women ever the masters? Why can't a woman ever 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 an extra sense? A woman can do everything a man can.

Enlightened Sarita questions the social injustices practiced against a woman in a male dominated society.

Wife to the Rescue

But, then, she somehow overcomes her resentment and lives to console Jadhav when at the close of the play he is dismissed from his job by the proprietor under the pressure of very big people who are involved in this flesh market. Tendulkar here suggests that Sarita cannot unlearn what she has come to realize. At the end of the play she hopes to attain independence sometime in the future. She is determined to come out of the oppression of a slave-like wife:

I'll go on feeling it. But at present I'm going to lock all that up in a corner of my mind and forget about it. But a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave. I'll do what I wish, and no one will rule over me. That day has to come. And I'll pay whatever price I have to pay for it.

Evaluation of Married Life: Prohibitions of Society and Religion

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Kamla is an evaluation of the role of an Indian woman within the institution called marriage, considered to be the holiest of the holy in our society. The evaluation definitely provides a point of view showing that women are still mere slaves to their male owners in Indian society in the latter half of the twentieth century, in spite of democracy. Women bear and bring up children; do all the housework and some of them do jobs additionally. Yet they are considered a debit to the family. They are ill treated and tortured by their husbands. Ambedkar points out, "a woman under the laws of Manu is subject to corporal punishment and Manu allows the husband the right to beat his wife" Indian society, which has accepted the laws of Manu (Manu is an ancient Hindu Lawgiver and his laws are widely accepted and observed.), denies women education and thus mental growth. Manu says, "Women have no right to study Vedas".

In modern India women are allowed to study so that they become sophisticated slaves. The plight of Hindu women is peculiar. A Hindu woman is honored to bear progeny for her husband and as a partner to him in performing religious rites. But she is feared and loathed as a partner to him in performing religious rites. She cannot thus even think of sex, as she feels completely exhausted by the end of the day. Moreover, as Jandhyala points out: "with woman's sexuality so closely bound with marriage and her role as wife and mother, there was no possibility of considering her sexual needs and desires". Thus women are sexually oppressed. It is reflected in the concept of chastity, a patriarchal value. It is one of the most powerful yet invisible cultural fetters that have enslaved women for ages.

Emerging Feminism

The principal action in *Kamla* revolves around a woman protagonist. Sarita in the play stand for the central consciousness in the respective work of art, and so the play can be called women-centered. In such a play, the feminine ideology finds its complete expression. The character of Sarita consists of a great variety and depth in comparison to her male counterparts. She reacts against social injustices and the subservient position of women in the institution of marriage. In the end, the rebirth of Sarita, who is now independent, and stronger with confidence, and who looks forward to the day when she would break away the shackles of her bondage, shows that Tendulkar, though not a self-acknowledged feminist, treats his women characters with understanding and compassion. So, we see that Sarita is emerging as a capable woman who challenges man. Here Tendulkar commands our admiration as he has attempted at delineating women, who in spite of their supposed inferior status in Indian society, rebel against all odds.

Kamla the play not only scoffs at the hypocrisy of the urban middle class but also darts glancing barbs on power-hungry politicians and unscrupulous press barons who work hand in glove with one another in metropolitan centers like Delhi. For instance, Kakasaheb observes once:

Our houseboy becomes the defence minister; he's got one foot in Delhi and the other in Karad. And finally he's neither one thing nor the other.

Degraded Political System and Values of Democracy

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Towards the close, Jadhav's dismissal results from his proprietor Sheth Singhania's questionable association with some political big wigs of Delhi. The play also attacks the hawkish politicians, political figures who, instead of having the spirit of nationalism and working for the betterment of the nation are busy with their own welfare. The play stands against an allegedly corrupt system. Kamla jibes at the contemporary political set up comprising of petty-minded, mealy-mouthed and opportunistic politicians who believe that running a nation is more of a trade and every business trade is carried on with the aim of making profit. The play points out the mechanization of power at various levels and the degradation of moral values everywhere.

Satire and Sarcasm

There is inimitable satire and sarcasm aimed at the very core of male chauvinists in the Indian middle class society. When the highly domineering and egotistical Jaisingh loses his job in his bid to expose the racket of woman trade, it is no one else but his own ill-treated wife Sarita, who provides him with the required physical and mental support for coping with the situation. The play also offers Tendulkar enough scope to launch his diatribe against the presumptuous and reckless news reporters working for English dailies. It lays a strong stress on ethics.

But we should note here that Tendulkar does not launch any frontal attack on the subject ridiculed. He resorts to the employment of the device of "indirect satire" in which the characters make their opinions ridiculous by what they think, say and do as Jadhav exposes himself to ridicule all around because of his insensible pursuit after worldly fame.

Such a woman-oriented play by Tendulkar is a testimony to his wonderful insight into the inter-relationship between the human minds, psyche and body which the tripods are making up a personality. As Tendulkar puts it himself: "the basic urge has always been to let out my concerns vis-a-vis my reality: the human condition as I perceive it".

So, the overall scanning of the play reveals that the play looks at issues that disturb a sensitive mind, issues that need to be answered by every one of us. And today, also Kamla forcefully raises a voice against violence - violence against women. And to bring out awareness on such a burning issue, in India, theatrical societies like 'Sparsh' 'Abhinava' and institutions like St. Francis College for Women stage a dramatic reading of Tendulkar's Kamla bearing solidarity with the rest of the world in observing the international fortnight for violence against women.

Finally, whether women like Kamla who was bought by Jaisingh, a journalist, from a bazaar in Bihar at a measly two hundred and fifty rupees still exists or not is debatable but what exists as a poignant reality is that till today women in India are exploited, oppressed and dominated by men in varied forms. Be it physical, mental or psychological violence, the psyche of Indian male largely considers women as slaves whose chief duty is to serve him and lead a life as per his whims and fancies.

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