CHAPTER IV

VIJAY TENDULKAR

PROLETARIATE WOMEN OUT OF THE MARGIN

The third playwright in the trio chosen for this study is Vijay Tendulkar, the prolific Marathi playwright who has become not only an avant-garde figure in the Marathi theatre, but one of the acclaimed "greats" of Indian drama. Like Girish Karnad Tendulkar enjoys immense popularity and prestige and his plays are on the reading lists and syllabi of colleges and universities. But unlike Karnad, Tendulkar has no interest in mythology and folklore, but chooses his themes from the lived reality of urban existence. Indeed when we move from Tagore and Karnad to the plays of Vijay Tendulkar we are moving away from the far away and long ago, from the twilight world of myth and fantasy to the harsh glare of contemporary reality. His plays are naturalistic. Having been a journalist for many years before turning to write plays Tendulkar is familiar with all the nuances of middle class and lower class life in the cities of India. He is all too familiar with violence and cruelty, exploitation and injustice and the predatoriness of human beings. And from these he spins his plays of great originality and diversity, technical mastery and innovations of style.

Before turning to an analysis of Tendulkar's plays from the feminist angle, one must stop to pay tribute to his extraordinary grasp of the principles and factors that make excellent theatre. Like Tagore, Tendulkar
was born in a family which had a great interest in drama. During an address delivered at the University of Madras in 1993 Tendulkar dwelt on this point thus:

Theatre was in my family though no one in the family had taken to it professionally. My father loved theatre, was himself an amateur actor and a director and he wrote plays which he destroyed, finding them not good enough. I played theatre as a child. I wrote my first play at the age of nine and acted in it in front of a real audience in my school.¹

The four plays chosen for this study *The Vultures, Silence, The Court is in Session, Kamala and Sakharam Binder* - illustrate Tendulkar's grasp of theatre and his great inventiveness that has created very different and original effects each time he attempted a play. However Tendulkar has drawn more critical attention for the controversial nature of his subjects than for his resourcefulness in handling theatrical effects. The fact is that Tendulkar is a gadfly of the Indian stage. Like Aristophanes, Moliere and Bernard Shaw, he has perceived the theatre as an excellent forum for the exposure and ridicule of social evil and a wonderful medium for raising social consciousness. With Shaw Tendulkar could very well say that it made him angry to see people comfortable when they should be uncomfortable and he made it his business to disturb the complacency of Indian society.
His plays are indeed disturbing. There is something oppressive and stifling about them, something like the atmosphere of Jacobean tragedy of Webster and Beaumont and Fletcher. The world of Tendulkar's plays is marked by lust of one kind or another. Avarice, cruelty, greed are exhibited as dominant human traits and a persistent theme is exploitation, one human being preying upon another. We encounter the sadistic pleasure of the torturer or the exploiter and the helplessness of the victim and the cornered prey. Illusions are torn off and the dark, seamy side of life, of human nature is laid bare.

How does gender fit into all this? Does Tendulkar's work yield results when read with gender on the agenda? Though answers to these questions can be given only when each play is analysed separately, we can say in general that Tendulkar sees woman in Indian society as the archetypal victim of exploitation and violence. The women he presents in his plays are poor prostitutes or sophisticated whores, women trapped in patriarchal marriages, or women cast by patriarchal law in the role of the transgressor. Some of these women are the lowest of the low, the most marginalized of society. Like Euripides, it may be said of Tendulkar that he delights in introducing low characters on the stage. Though he does not show them coming out of their bondage, or leading a revolution, there is in some of them at least an awareness of the injustice meted out to them, a quiet strength that comes out of a confrontation with the truth about themselves and the society that victimizes them. As the plays chosen are studied we also find that Tendulkar recognizes the power and claims of female
sexuality and explodes many stereotypes about women. The audience is left not only with a new awareness of the power relation between the sexes, but also with new insights into the ways in which women resort to strategies of survival. The playwright, at no point comes out with solutions. In fact when faced with the question if he was influenced by feminist views, Tendulkar firmly denied it. But the fact remains that arch-realist as he is, he cannot turn his back on a burning problem that marks Indian society, namely the denigration of women. An artist is not bound to give answers. His business is to raise questions in the minds of the readers or the audience and to provoke thought and to disturb people out of their complacency, and insensitiveness. This, Tendulkar does, to a very high degree and hence the controversy that surrounds him. His plays discussed below are profoundly disturbing in that their focus is on women and the violence and oppression meted out to them, no matter what social strata they occupy. Bringing the searchlight on this violence and oppression legitimized and sanctioned by a patriarchal society is itself a great contribution and service to society at this point in time.

The most chilling of Tendulkar’s plays under discussion is The Vultures, one of his early plays. Vultures provide the basic symbolism of the play and its ambience is marked by the shrill notes of these predatory, and to many - disgusting birds. This symbolism is appropriate for a play marked by violence and sadistic pleasure in torture, a play where most of the characters are decadent and depraved and prey upon one another. The setting is an old house in the interior of which the entire action takes place.
The stage direction draws our attention to the fact that the house "reminds you of the hollow of a tree", appropriate habitat for vultures. The chief characters are two brothers Ramakant and Umakant. Their moral and economic bankruptcy is matched by the impotence in one, and repelling physical flabbiness in the other. Their father Hari Pitale a former businessman is now reduced to dependence on the sons. There is no love lost between the brothers and they agree only when they ill-treat, black-mail or torture somebody. The brothers commit patricide, because the father has tucked away part of the wealth he made by cheating his brother and business partner. Pappa's debauchery in his days had resulted in an illegitimate son Rajaninath who now lives in the garage. If there is a ray of light in this play it is in the sensibility of this poetic young man and Rama, the wife of Ramakant. The tenderness that these two feel for each other grows into passion, and Rama, the meek, submissive and outwardly conservative, obedient wife resorts to an adulterous relationship with this half-brother-in-law of hers and thus gets pregnant. The irresistible way in which Rama is drawn to Rajaninath is psychologically credible and convincing. The most important claim - one which as an Indian woman Rama herself would acknowledge - is the desire for a child. To any woman of India the stigma of barreness hurts and it is an ever-present torment for her. Many Indian woman branded barren and endlessly reproached for it are in fact scape-goats suffering because of their husbands' impotence or incapacity to father a child. Many an Indian woman, under such circumstances accepts the suffering and the sense of failure and lives with
it as a good Hindu wife should. But Rama in Tendulkar's play slowly moves towards a resolution of her dilemma and in a moment of clarity pours out to Rajaninath her indignation and pain, and her humiliation when taken repeatedly to godmen who are supposed to cure her of her weakness. She is aware, with a knowledge as deep as life itself, that she is normal and that her womb is healthy.

"It's not the fault of doctors; of learned men, of saints and sages | It's not even my fault. This womb's healthy and sound, I swear it! I was born to become a mother. This soils rich, it's hungry"

And she boldly diagnoses and affirms the problem - her husband's weakness. Resorting to the same conventional metaphor of seed and soil she holds forth on her husband's rottenness and the living death to which it condemns her.

This soil's rich, it's hungry. But the seed won't take root. If the seed's soaked in poison, if it's weak, feeble, lifeless, devoid of virtue--then why blame the soil? And if still the soil should cherish that seed--should with god as its witness make efforts--beyond life itself--to guard that seed, to nourish it? Should sew a little bonnet and dress of dreams by day, by night -- should stitch them with the threads of wild hope? And then, if that seed should constantly shrivel, should decay? If
all those dreams, these hopes, should just--flow away one day?

Not once, not twice, but many, many times, the same, the same thing! That the soil should be on fire with thirst...and should have to endure a fast without water| The same thing, all, all the time. Tell me honestly, Bhaiya. If there should be a raging thirst, and it should meet with a fast of harsh drought? Day after day? Month after month? Year after year, season after season? What's to become of a person? Tell me, what's to happen? What's each breath of yours then except a death?^4

Like the flood waters breaking the dam and surging on, words pour out of her. Drawing on the veneration that Indian psyche lavishes on the Sati she claims that hers is a fate harder than the one-time self immolation of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre:

Those women long ago who used to commit Sati, we're all praise for them. They used to burn themselves alive--in loyalty to their dead husbands. But only once. Once they were burnt, they escaped. But I, Bhaiya, in this living death of my wifehood--I commit Sati every moment! I burn! I am consumed!^5

What Rama is too afraid to face is her sexuality that asserts itself powerfully in the presence of Rajaninath. Though she voices the yearning
for a child, there is something else that drives her ultimately into the arms of the young poet. It is the desire for his virile body. Then stage direction makes this clear by repeatedly insisting, "She is looking at his bare body".  

But it is not easy for Rama to take this drastic step, to cross the "Lakshman rekha" that every woman is told to remain confined to. Even when powerfully and irresistibly drawn to Rajaninath, she is filled with self-reproach, and tells herself to be all that society expects of her. "If the joy of being a mother isn't to be mine, then let me at least live as a good wife".  

But she has gone beyond the influence of such pieties and the stage direction makes it clear that when the young man, in a fit of shame and guilt turns away from her, Rama takes the initiative and embraces him. And when she conceives she is coolness itself and lies that the child is her husband's. This boldness of the heroine has been commented upon by Tendulkar's critics. Veena Nobel Das, a woman critic writes:

In the character of Rama, Tendulkar has portrayed a woman who does not believe in her fate but would do anything to change her life. Rama becomes pregnant not through her husband but through Rajaninath. She is not ashamed to accept this fact. She knows that her womb is healthy and she has every right to nurture it--if not by her husband, by any other man. Thus Tendulkar has portrayed a very bold woman in the character in his play *Vultures*. 
No doubt this boldness was new on the Marathi stage and shocked the audiences profoundly. But more shocking must have been Rama's confession that she has often been tempted to kill her impotent, drunken husband: she confides in Rajaninath, soon to be her lover;

And do you know something?--I wouldn't lie to you--recently--for the past Several years--I've felt every day like--like getting out of this | Getting free of this once and for all | In any way whatever. Let the world say what it wants. I don't care | I mean, perhaps one should set oneself on fire. Or else give him something--I mean poison--something fatal--like bad women in stories and novels give to good men. So he'll never get up again. So he'll never again show me to any new swami, astrologer or healer. So he won't make disgusting drunken love to me. Won't look at me with drooling lips--and talk to me of babies | So that hunger of mine will never blaze up. Nor be starved by fasts | I'd be spared a lot. It'd be a lot easier.⁹

The audacious leap that Tendulkar is taking here can only be grasped if we remind ourselves that he and his characters and his audience belonged to a culture that prescribed as the be-all and end-all of woman's existence, Pativratha or total devotion and loyalty to the husband, no matter what the cost, no matter what kind of being the husband is.
Rama consummates her desire and the longing of her womb is fulfilled. But the end is anything but happy for her, for the "Vultures" bring about her abortion. Thus the curse of the family overtakes her also. It is Rajaninath with the greater sensitivity and higher perception of the poet who first mentions this curse. "A curse that's on us........On us all. For us on whom this terrible curse has fallen, there is nothing but this curse."10

Another woman in the play who is at once victim and perpetuator of this curse and of hatred and violence is Manik, the sister of Ramakant and Umakant. She is not projected as the typical Indian woman. In fact she is shown as violating all the norms of Indian notions of femininity. She drinks, smokes, dances to western music and is little better than a call-girl. She flaunts her freedom and her sexuality freely but she is not really free. She is also a victim of patriarchy, doomed to economic dependence on her brothers who in turn want to make money out of her. She is literally at their mercy even when she acts as an accomplice in their crime against their father. The brothers have no compunction about kicking her into a dreadful miscarriage because they can no longer use her pregnancy to blackmail the Rajah who was responsible for it. Tendulkar has restraint enough not to present this horrendous deed on the stage. But its effect is still horribly felt as the scream of Manik rends the air and clad in her blood-stained sari and clutching her abdomen she is seen crawling out of the passage in the rear, a haunting image of the victim of brutality and violence within the family. Tendulkar rips the fond belief that the family in India is a sacred institution within which woman is protected and safe.
Manik's being made victim of such atrocity is the result of violating the sexual taboo that Indian society prescribes. An unmarried woman gets pregnant and this is a crime that carries its punishment. This very crime is the central proposition of *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the English translation of Tendulkar's play *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*. The playwright's handling of the theme of a young independent unmarried woman getting pregnant was provocative and made him the target of violent criticism and centre of heated controversy. He became at once branded as a rebel against established values of fundamental and orthodox society. But the play is brilliantly written and the sheer originality of its presentation and its artistry made it survive all hostile criticism and earn for its author the prestigious 'Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya Award' in 1970 and the 'Sangeet Natak Academy Award' in 1971. The play gave Tendulkar recognition at the national level and a secure place along with other great contemporary Indian playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sarcar and Girish Karnad. His steadfast devotion to theatre had borne fruit, and his journalistic scrutiny of life had sharpened his critical faculty. The critic Kumud Mehta sums up the impact of the play on audiences thus:

Obviously audiences were in a mood to listen to a playwright ready to fix remorseless gaze on the contradictions within a personality, even the most insignificant one, the playwright who refused to offer easy legal remedies to social problems or to pin his faith on a change of heart in men. Acutely conscious
of the violent impulses behind a respectable facade and of the overwhelming compulsions of sex, he could place his discoveries within a recognizably Indian context, essentially middle class, and rooted. His long association with the theatre had yielded dividends. It had taught him to mould this familiar material into dramatic shape.\textsuperscript{11}

Throwing light on the conception of this extraordinary play Tendulkar has stated that the stimulus came from a real life incident. He happened to overhear the conversation of an amateur theatre group on its way to a rehearsal of a play. This incident happened at Vile Parle, a suburb of Bombay where Tendulkar lives. He quickly grasped the idea of a theatre group at a rehearsal as the basic situation and Vile Parle as the spatial setting for the play. The group we learn is in the habit of meeting periodically to act out the trial of celebrated people on certain crimes they are accused of. On this particular occasion they are to try President Johnson for producing atomic weapons. The group is an odd assortment of people and most of them enjoy the role-play that theatre affords them because in real life they are each in separate ways frustrated and insecure. Sukhatme is a poor lawyer who feels successful and brilliant while acting out the court scenes. Ponkshe can forget for the time being his failure as a scientist and Mr and Mrs Kashikar can temporarily escape from the burden of their childlessness and their incompatibility. Other characters too have their own compensations in the theatrical game and so they turn up regularly for the rehearsals and performance.
On this particular day the first to arrive at the appointed venue for rehearsal is a young suburban dweller Samant, newly recruited as actor and yet uninitiated into the procedure of the Court. With him arrives a regular member, a young school teacher Leela Benare, vivacious, bold, witty and filled with *joie de vivre*. Others soon follow - Sukhatme, the Kashikars and their faithful and humble protege Balu Rokde - and a few others. But not all the actors have turned up and the Johnson trial cannot be rehearsed till they arrive. As they wait someone suggests the idea of a mock-trial to be acted out as a game. It is welcomed eagerly and the young new comer Samant is urged to watch and learn all he can about court procedure. But who is to be tried? Leela Benare the teacher is chosen behind her back as the accused and is induced to stand in the dock, all in the spirit of a game. The charge brought against her is infanticide. Benare is obviously uneasy at this but is prevailed upon to play the game. But as the mock-trial proceeds, grim forces set in and the most ferocious exposure of her personal life takes place and the young woman is prevented from protesting because the facade of the game is kept up. Bit by bit it is revealed that Benare is pregnant from an affair with a married man Professor Damle, who is also one of the troupe, but is significantly absent on this occasion. Benare’s vain attempts at finding a husband and a father for her unborn child are dragged into the open. As the game turned into a witch hunt goes on, Benare is accused of trying to seduce almost every male present. Finally in an extraordinary reversal of situation the woman in the dock originally accused of infanticide is, at the end of the "mock-trial", ordered to do
precisely that. For the verdict of the court is that the actual child that Leela Benare carries in her womb must be destroyed. This is because society cannot permit a young woman to get away with her violation of its moral code. The game has become dead earnest and the actors have become the pillars of society joined together to prevent the young delinquent from corrupting the society. Benare is judged unfit to teach young children and the educational authorities are lauded for contemplating her dismissal.

The morality which you have shown through your conduct was the morality you were planning to impart to the youth of tomorrow. This court has not an iota of doubt about it. Hence not only today’s, but tomorrow’s society would have been endangered by your misconduct. It must be said that the school officials have done a work of merit in deciding to remove you from your job. By the grace of God, it has all been stopped in time. Neither you nor anyone else should ever do anything like this again. No memento 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.¹²

This judgement, significantly, is pronounced after the accused, finding her voice at last, has given a long and impassioned soliloquy in defence of herself. Her arguments are all unheard or unheeded. She recounts the circumstances that made her a victim of male exploitation. She
recalls how she survived the most bitter experiences, the greatest anguish a young girl can experience and has at last found herself contributing to society as an excellent teacher. "My private life is my own business. I'll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to!". But the words have no effect. The ruthless verdict is pronounced. Everyone leaves the "Court". Leela Benare is left alone, still in the dock. As the curtain drops the light is focused on this solitary figure. And the audience is left with plenty to think about.

For the trial in the play is really of Indian society. Standing in the dock in effect is Indian Patriarchy with its hypocrisy, its double standards of morality, its malice and hatred towards women who have independence and exuberance of spirit, its depriving women of voice and denying them their sexuality. Leela Benare's repeated tragedy has one common factor - the guilt of the man is hardly noticed let alone acknowledged. The woman alone has sinned. Therefore she alone has to bear the punishment. All the characters who gleefully level charges against Benare are in fact props of patriarchy. Though the liason resulting in her pregnancy involved herself and a man, she is alone to bear the blame and the torment. Professor Damle is not even once blamed or accused of immorality or of being a corruptor of youth which indeed he is. And a thoroughly disillusioned Benare realises that he only wanted her body. Woman is once again perceived as the body. The fate of Leela Benare would indeed lend credence to the theory of biological feminism which locates the oppression of women in the exploitation of the female body.
Leela Benare's final soliloquy is not a feminist manifesto for revolution or independence. It is an anguished utterance, partly justification, partly outrage, with a bit of defiance thrown in. It calls to our mind Nora's defiance and Mrs. Warren's soliloquy. But Leela Benare is a far less decisive character than the heroines of Ibsen and Shaw. Tendulkar's realism would not allow him to picture any transformation in a character that is not credible within the context. This feature will strike us again when we take a look at his play Kamala.

Much less overtly than Karnad, Tendulkar brings in the issue of female sexuality in this play also. Leela Benare affirms the claims of the body. A lie that women have no pleasure in sex and that their only interest is in motherhood has been carefully planted in the cultural soil of India. But the reality is that women are not only the object of male desire, but themselves have desire. The suppression of this has been one of the aims of patriarchy down the ages. The glorification of the mother in Indian culture is a subtle attempt to make a woman cease to look upon herself as woman the moment she becomes a mother. Some of the characters in Silence The Court is in Session dish out this idea: "Our culture enjoins us to perpetual worship of her (woman as mother). Be thy mother as a god is what we teach our children from infancy". Sukhatme bases his indictment of Banare on this ground. "The woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood—which is purer than heaven itself". And then with superb irony the playwright makes the very characters urge a would be mother to kill her infant to appease the deity of social propriety.
Tendulkar, through his characters makes many a dig at the practices that straitjacket female sexuality and keep it suppressed. Kashikar who acts as judge in the mock trial says "what I say is, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a stop". This is a summing up of the classic Indian position with regard to female sexuality. Marriage which means male control is what legitimizes female desire. Even the Hindu goddesses are benevolent when they are married and have surrendered their sexuality to their husbands. Female sexuality is a dangerous force and the restraining social relationship of marriage subdues it. When it manifests itself outside marriage the most severe punishment is to be meted out so that "society" will be safe. Not only behind child marriage but behind Sati or the burning of the widow lies Indian fear of female sexuality that is not strictly under the control of the authoritarian, god of a husband.

Tendulkar's characters echo many a classic assumption of Indian society with regard to women. Sukhatme acting as Prosecutor quotes the notorious stricture of Manu the ancient and venerated Indian lawgiver: "Na Stri Swatantryamarhati"—woman does not deserve freedom --a statement that has been used to justify the most atrocious illtreatment and suppression of women.

One of the disturbing things about the play is the animosity shown by Mrs. Kashikar to Leela Benare. This is also realistic for time and time again men in India bring up the argument that it is women who oppress
women. The archetypal situation of the Indian mother-in-law making the life of the daughter-in-law a veritable hell is cited as example. But it is one of the triumphs of Patriarchy in India that it has turned the victims into oppressors of other victims. In a culture where women's economic and social security depends entirely on pleasing men it is but natural that these will be women like Mrs Kashikar who outdo men in condemnation of the woman who appears to be deviant and non-conformist.

When viewing the play from the feminist angle it is easy to overlook the many touches of brilliant artistry that they play exemplifies. The symbolism of the cage is introduced right from the first moment of this play, anticipating the very trap into which the protagonist is eventually caught. The latch of the door that hurts Benare’s finger at the outset and draws blood is a prefiguring of the way the play turns out to be a witch-hunt aimed at drawing her blood. The reversal in Benare’s position and her mood is also dramatic. A vivacious, playful and mischievous woman whose comments on her fellow actors are witty and accurate, she turns out to be a vulnerable crushed and tragic figure. Her innocent words “Games are very good for you. I often play quite happily with the children at school. It’s fun” assume sinister retrospective irony. For, the game proves to be anything but fun for her. It’s fun for the others and the pleasure is largely sadistic deriving from the fact that this victim is a woman. Sukhatme admits it unwillingly when he says "when there is a woman in the dock the case does have a different complexion, that is true".18
Why is there a woman in the dock when a man is equally guilty is a question that naturally arises in the mind of the readers/audience. The fact that the man who caused Benare's pregnancy is absent shows his total withdrawal of moral and social responsibility. The refusal of "the Court" to even mention his culpability is a measure of the double standard of society. There is no doubt at all that the court is a microcosm of the larger world of Indian society. Before this accusing body Leela Benare stands alone, like Hester Prynne of Scarlet Letter, the man involved with her in illicit love taking refuge in absence or anonymity.

The total volte face of the court with regard to the crime of the accused is utterly revealing. The charge to begin with is infanticide and the woman is to be tried for this crime. But when the reality of the accused woman's pregnancy unfolds itself and a respectable member of society is identified as the man responsible a shift takes place. Leela Benare's insistence that she wants to bring up the child is perceived as a threat to social values and she is ordered to kill the foetus. Indian society is thereby shown as lacking in ethical absolutes. It is expediency and hypocrisy and double standard that prompt the court's decision.

The third play of Tendulkar's that we have to examine takes us away from the middle class milieu of Silence | the Court is in Session. Sakharam Binder is an excellent depiction of certain aspects of the low life of suburban Maharashtra. With the shift from the middle class to the proletariat we leave behind hypocrisy and double standard. Sakharam Binder the
protagonist is one who prides himself on his frankness and openness. He is a violent and foul-mouthed, Bohemian Brahmin who flaunts his un-Brahmin like behaviour. He is a man of "appetite" and he is unashamed about it. He despises the institution of marriage and takes in any woman who has left or is left by her husband. He gives her food and she in turn has to be a wife to him. He puts forward his terms unambiguously and the woman concerned is free to make her choice. She can stay or leave. When the woman outlives her utility, Sakharam unceremoniously throws her out and turns to greener pastures. When the play begins Sakharam is seen spelling out to the seventh woman the terms of their contract. This woman is Laxmi meek and pious who still worships the man who was her husband and who has turned her out.

The arrangement works and Laxmi though intimidated by Sakharam's violent language and bullying behaviour stays content. What is more, tries in a very unobtrusive manner to "tame" Sakharam into reducing his drinking and doing his puja regularly. But soon her queerness appears too much for him and her frigidity frustrates him. He feels he is going mad with her around. Laxmi is asked to pack up and go. In her place comes Champa, ex-wife of a policeman who has just lost his job. Champa has walked out on him to live with Sakharam Binder. The latter, however finds her very different. Fascinated by her voluptuous body he is intimidated by her violence of language and violent behaviour towards her husband who comes to see her. Laxmi now comes back begging to be taken in. Surprisingly it is Champa who gives her refuge, having agreed on a
division of labour between them - Laxmi to do the household chores in return for food and shelter and Champa to cater to Sakharam's personal needs.

Very subtle changes now begin to take place. Sakharam, extremely jealous of Champa keeps his friend Dawood away from the premises. Laxmi, devout and religious as ever, instals her gods back in the house and prays to them daily, taking care to make her prayers audible to Sakharam when he makes love to Champa. The effect of her incantation "Sitaram Jai Sitaram"\textsuperscript{19} on him is to erode his manhood. Eventually Champa is forced to fling the truth at him: "A sound from the kitchen and you go cold.... you're not a man - not since she came. She’s made an impotent ninny of you. Don’t have the guts to take me before her. You turn into a corpse - a worm".\textsuperscript{20} Sakharam’s fury is turned on Laxmi and he orders her to leave the place at once. But finding ‘the strength of a cornered animal’\textsuperscript{21} Laxmi uses her ultimate weapon - she reveals to him Champa’s relationship with Dawood. She is beaten right and left for this but it is Champa who pays the ultimate price. Sakharam strangles her and then breaks down in fear and remorse.

A different Laxmi now emerges, strong for both of them. Self righteous and crafty, she takes full control of the situation and decides to bring Champa’s body inside the house. To a limp and dazed Sakharam she keeps talking non-stop, her words a mixture of self-praise, denunciation of Champa and comfort and flattery to Sakharam. It is she who goes out to bring the shovel. It is she who starts digging the grave as Sakharam stands
and stares. The stage direction tells us, "All the sap has been squeezed out of him. He's just an empty shell".\textsuperscript{22}

The effect of this play on the readers and the audience is powerful. The psychological reversal, the dramatic change in the situation, the shift in power all these make the most impressive and powerful theatre. It is no wonder that Girish Karnad praised the play as "the greatest play in the Indian theatre in a thousand years". But how does the play reflect gender issues in Indian society? Tendulkar has indeed plenty to say about this. Through his unusual protagonist Tendulkar gives a very incisive commentary on the sexual hypocrisy of society and more than that on the institution of marriage. He points out that marriage empowers the husband to treat a wife like a slave | ".....the husband, he's a proper swine! He ties her down; he doesn't get tied down himself\textsuperscript{,23} he says. Again, commenting on his previous woman he recalls to Laxmi "she used to worship her husband's shirt. The man was out to kill her, but as far as she was concerned he was God | .....she worshipped his shirt for two full years. She had T.B. She died hugging his shirt to herself".\textsuperscript{24}

But Sakharam himself is guilty of the attitude that he condemns in married men. Though no husband he is very much the male in a highly patriarchal society and so the irony of his own remark escapes him. "May be I'm a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper.....But I must be respected in my own house. I am the master here".\textsuperscript{25} Being master, in his opinion entitles him to use violence against these women. Though he professes to be fair to
them, it becomes very clear that power is unequally distributed between Sakharam and each of his women. Laxmi, we are told in the stage direction, trembles when he addresses her sternly. She has reason indeed to do so. For he thrashes her violently, and she is helpless against him bullying fury. It is only Champa that forestalls his violence by being violent herself. She is vulgar, but autonomous in many ways. But like Manik she too becomes the victim of forces that combine with patriarchy to defeat and destroy such women.

Tendulkar powerfully projects the idea that it is lack of economic independence and acute poverty that places women in India so pathetically at the mercy of men. In a Welfare State where the State provides sustenance and support to its unemployed, no woman would submit to the kind of humiliation that Laxmi and women like her put up with. Shelter and food are basic needs and for these women compromise their dignity, their physical safety and even their happiness. When they feel threatened of being deprived of these basic needs women find the strength of cunning in them - a cunning that even a cornered animal will resort to for survival, Laxmi illustrates this.

The most important point regarding gender that the play raises is that gender-stereotyping is false. Sakharam is the strong, bullying man and Laxmi is the weak, trembling woman. The tables are turned and a new definition of strength and weakness comes into play. Even between the two women we find the breakdown of popularly held notions about good and
bad, strong and weak etc. Champa, the loud-mouthed, swearing, hard-drinking vulgar violent woman has a tenderness for another woman and this tenderness causes her untimely end. Laxmi, pious, scared, cringing, shivering, weak woman has the craft and cunning that reduces a man to nothing. Then, when he is weak and scared she takes over control of the situation. It would not be far-fetched to think that Tendulkar is inviting women to look into their own inner resources and discover a strength that will see them through situations of extreme harassment and degradation.

A woman subjected to extreme harassment and degradation is Kamala, the protagonist of the play of that name, the last of the Tendulkar plays selected for this study. Kamala is situated in a world intimately known to Tendulkar. It is the world of journalism. But the picture that emerges of this profession is anything but pleasing or flattering. Tendulkar here exposes the ruthlessness of modern journalists who climb to the top of the success ladder at the cost of human values.

Kamala is unmistakably and unambiguously the story of the exploitation of women. Describing the study as "characteristically topical and intensely sensational", Veena Noble Das writes; "It is based on a newspaper story and Tendulkar used the world of journalism to drive his point home". The study is about a girl Kamala who is bought by a journalist. Jaysingh Jadhav, to show the world that this kind of bondage still persists in India. Jadhav is an ambitious journalist and he purchases
Kamala from a 'flesh market' and hides her like a prisoner in his house for a few days. At the end of this period he presents her at a press conference, during which Kamala becomes the target of male attacks. The journalists make insulting remarks about her person and ask lewd questions about her sex life. The interview over, and his point proved, Jadhav has no more to do with Kamala. She is no longer of any use or interest for him and she is ruthlessly sent to a shelter home. Ironically, Jadhav feels convinced that he has saved a prostitute from infamy. There is already a woman in Jadhav's life and that is his wife Saritha. The point that the play makes is that this self-promoting journalist does not do justice to either Kamala or his wife Saritha. When he makes the lofty claim that by holding a Press Conference in Delhi he was able "to drag this criminal sale of human beings into the light of day", he is rightly reminded by another character that he "sold a woman - a poor illiterate woman by doing so". It is this poor illiterate woman who causes the scales to fall from the eyes of Saritha, Jadhav's wife. The most overtly feminist statements that Tendulkar ever put into the mouth of a character come from Saritha after Kamala shocks her into an awareness of the truth of her situation. "How much did he buy you for" asks Kamala and all at once Saritha realizes that her marriage has been a legal purchase by which Jadhav was empowered to own her. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if Saritha's awakening was allowed to lead to the ultimate consequence. Would she have left Jadhav and walked out of the house as Nora did? Expectations of this nature are raised, no doubt in the audience. But then Saritha is overcome
by a consciousness of duty or by love or tenderness or motherly protectiveness of her husband who has been unfairly sacked. Whatever it is she stays with him and her newly formed feminist resoluteness is shelved for future implementation.

Why should the play have ended go tamely? Tendulkar was asked at a lecture given in the University of Madras. His answer was simple. Saritha is an Indian woman not a European. No Indian woman is ready to walk out of her house, leaving her husband. She will not be welcome in her own home. She will not be supported by the State. Tendulkar was aware of this and he would not sacrifice realism for ideology.

The portrayal of the two women characters Kamala and Sarita can serve as illustrations of the feminist critic Andrea Dworkin's paradigm of two models of women in patriarchal society. In *The Desire to Control the Matter*, Dworkin argues that men value women not as unique individuals but as members of a class who serve them sexually and reproductively. The two models of women in patriarchy are the 'Brothel modal' and the 'Farming model'; the former relating to prostitution and the latter to motherhood. Dworkin's point is that although people have been led to believe that prostitutes and mothers have nothing in common, in point of fact they have almost everything in common. The denouement of the play is the realization of Sarita that essentially she is not very different from Kamala in her position within a patriarchal marriage.
A brief analysis of the four selected plays is apt to justify their author’s label as the angry young man of the Maratha stage. He is an arch rebel who questions the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society. And he delights in portraying characters - fighting against these norms and values. Often this fight involves characters who are the dregs of society, characters who are on the fringe, characters who are trapped in some way or other. Regarding his characters Tendulkar has this to say:

The characters I write about reflect my interest ..... Besides it is one thing to be assured of your security and stage a fight against the accepted norms and values, and another to fight for the same when cornered altogether. It is the latter that catches my eye.  

And among the people who are ‘cornered altogether’ are Tendulkar’s women character, trapped for good by patriarchy. The plays which are compelling and disturbing show that the condition of being subordinated by and to men have turned women into an ‘inferior species’. But as the heroine of feminist writer Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* comes to realize, the most important thing for a woman is not to consent to being a victim. Tendulkar’s women characters struggle in their separate ways not to be resigned to being victims, not to sink under the weight of patriarchy’s brutalities and suppression. They do not quite consent, and therein lies their appeal to women readers, their power to move us.
END NOTES


2 "The Vultures" *Five Plays*, (Bombay OUP, 1992) 201.

3 Ibid 241.


5 Ibid 242.

6 Ibid 243.

7 Ibid 242.


10 Ibid 243.


13 Ibid 117.

14 Ibid 114.

15 Ibid 98.

16 Ibid 115.

17 Ibid 71.

18 Ibid 73.

20 Ibid 193.

21 Ibid 195.

22 Ibid 130.

23 Ibid 129.

24 Ibid 127-128.

25 Ibid 126.

26 Veena Noble Das, "Women Characters in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar". *New Direction in Indian Drama* - 13-14

27 Ibid.


29 Ibid.

30 Ibid 34.

31 Rose Mary Tong "Radical Feminism on Reproduction and Motherhood" in *Feminist Thought* (London Urwin Hyman, 1989) 81.

32 Renuka E, 'Casanova as the Saviour'. A study of Vijay Tendulkar's 'Sakharam Binder'" *New Directions in Indian Drama* - 37.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

People who cling to an ancient past have their pride in the antiquity of their accumulations, in the sublimity of time-honoured walls around them. They grow nervous and angry when some great spirit, some lover of truth, breaks open their enclosure and floods it with the sunshine of thought and breath of life, Ideas cause movement, and all movements forward they consider to be a menace against their warehouse of security.¹

- Rabindranath Tagore
(Lecturers & Addresses)

In the foregoing chapters what has been attempted is a feminist critique of selected works of three eminent Indian playwrights. All the three of them belong to this century and two of them are living practitioners of contemporary theatre. All the three of them are men playwrights and are linked together in this study for the remarkable sympathy they show in their portrayal of women characters. Rabindranath Tagore whose plays belong to the early decades of the century, Girish Karnad, the Kannada dramatist of multi-faceted talents and Vijay Tandulkar whose fame as a provocative playwright has spread beyond the sphere of Marathi theatre are studied together because in their individual ways they have presented on