VI
VULTURES OF THE STATE

Encounter in Umbugland is a minor play written by Tendulkar and it is not as popular as his other plays. The plot of the play is very plain. After the death of the king of Umbugland, the Cabinet installs the princess, Vijaya, as their queen with a selfish motive of using her as their puppet, but she proves to be of a sterner metal against their expectations and this results in an encounter between the queen and her Cabinet who are finally subdued to her wishes.

The play is a very interesting political satire. The situation of the play we can come across in any Umbugland like country. The Cabinet ministers Vratyasom, Bhagadanta, Karkashirsha and Pishtakeshi are typical politicians of any time. Another young Cabinet minister, Aranyaketu is a statesman but he has no nerve to act on his own.

The Cabinet ministers entered politics when they were in twenties and they are old now. They have
endured for forty years the ill-treatment meted out to them by the king. They served the country, rather the king, like slaves. First they were very enthusiastic and regarded their service to the king as their sacred duty. When the king kept them waiting for hours together they bore it patiently first as their 'sacred duty', then as a "temporary stratagem" and then waiting for the king turned into a "matter of policy" and this has now become an "entrenched habit" with them.

On the day of the "Sixtieth anniversary of King Vichitravirya's coronation" they are kept waiting while the king himself is giving audience to the people. They have lost their patience and forgetting their individual differences for a moment, they try to console one another and honestly wish the death of the king so that they can be free from this drudgery. But they know that the culmination of their troubles is not within their foresight, Pishtakeshi regrets:

And the end to it all is not even remotely in sight over the last forty years. His Majesty, having come successfully and safely out of the ordeal of four calamitous accidents, and seven moderately serious illness, has managed to cast such a deep
spell of infatuation over the people, that there is no public danger to him for atleast the next hundred years.¹ (p.274)

It is not only the feeling of the Cabinet ministers that we see in these lines but also we find a Tendulkar's sting on the foolishness of the public. That is how the public sympathize with their ruler who falls sick and prolong the longevity of such ruler's power.

The king when he actually comes to the Cabinet, is unmindful of the inconvenience that he has caused for his ministers and goes on boasting how he touched various topics during his address to the public and how the public cheered him. Even though he is old he wishes to live for hundred years more and he feels that the island needs his leadership for atleast another fifty years. He is both ambitious and hypocritical. Even though he is power-thirsty, he tells his ministers very cunningly "power is a crown of thorns. Power is a sword hanging over you!" (p.279) and he would not wish even his "enemies to be punished with power". This man who could analyse power as a

¹ "Encounter in Umbugland", Vijay Tendulkar: Five Plays (Bombay: O.U.P, 1992). All further references to the text are from this publication.
source of agony has strangely enough planned to undergo an experiment in rejuvenation after which he would be able to rule for atleast a hundred years. Ironically this king dies within a few hours after the statement of his earnest desire to become young again and to live and to rule for hundred more years.

Tendulkar has used 'The Two' men as chorus. After the death of the king they comment on the cruelty and the dictatorship of the late king:

He made puppets of Cabinet men.
He made a cake of the government!
Of democracy he made a noise. (p.283)

The question of the next ruler of Umbugland comes into focus. The power-thirsty ministers compete with one another. Each of them wish to become the king of the island. But

Four are senior
Five superior
Some are naughty
Some are crafty
One is dumb and one is irascible
To choose between them's quite impossible! (p.285)
Anticipations continue to swing to this side or that side. The Cabinet ministers start discussion. All these ministers individually aspire to ascend to the throne but none deserves the kingship as commented by 'The Two'. Only Aranyaketu is worthy of the name of statesman. He tells the other ministers that he came late to the assembly because he had to give "an assurance to the public that "the welfare of Umbugland would be considered in whatever decisions were taken here" (p.286) He has no lust for power as the others.

At the beginning of the conference Vratyasom refuses even to express the customary salutation to the memory of the late king. The others are offended and they start finding fault with one another. Karkashirsha, the ever furious minister, calls Vratyasom "a traitor to the island". On the other hand Vratyasom retorts by saying that everyone of them was a traitor for having allowed the king's madness to go on for forty years. He concludes with these words:

In short, politics itself is treachery. Treachery to the King, the country, the people. And various other kinds of constant
treachery. A true politician can be loyal only to himself. (p.288)

These words even though spoken by an unworthy minister are a telling comment on the nature of politics. Karkashirsha is disgusted with politicians like Aranyaketu who hires supporters. And just as it happens at present in the State assemblies and Parliament sessions Aranyaketu walks out of the council. He says:

as a mark of deep disagreement with these insulting and careless words from Karkashirsha I hereby walk out of this council. The people of Umbugland will never endure this. (p.288)

The Cabinet ministers suspect one another. Once the attendant informs them of the fierce riot of the Kadamba tribe, each of them holds the other as responsible for the revolt. When the attendant tells that in the East the rebellion is against Vratyasom and immediately Vratyasom doubts Karkashirsha's honesty. When it was told that the rebellion in the West of Umbugland is against Pishtakeshi, Pishtakeshi looks suspiciously at Aranyaketu. Even Bhagadanta's silence is misunderstood. Vratyasom
ironically admires and also derides him: "This is what a perfect ruler should be. A man of few words, and a bastard!" (p.291). So in the words of "The Two" "Each one's a rascal!" (p.291) and each desires to become the king. 'The Two' men clarify the situation at the end of the first act:

Vratyasom's arguments are reasoned.
Karkashirsha's are well-seasoned.
Pishtakeshi's not deficient.
Bhagadanta's quite proficient.
Aranyaketu is-sufficient. (p.292)

When the Cabinet ministers are hankering in dilemma as to their future ruler, Vijaya, the princess, suddenly intrudes by mistake into the council. The appearance of Vijaya at this juncture flashes a solution in the quick-witted head of Vratyasom and at once he declares:

Meet our new leader! (Vijaya shrinks)
His Majesty's heir! This one in front, five of us behind! She'll be the rule, we'll be the rulers! An excellent plan till we agree on a firm decision! (p.293)

Princess Vijaya becomes the queen of Umbugland. The Cabinet ministers make her the queen, with the selfish motive of using her as their puppet. But the
moment she takes the oath she becomes a different person and she is made of a sterner stuff than they expected:

Femininely obdurate, over ambitious not so competent and inexperienced that she is, power goes to her head and results in an encounter.2

As soon as she is installed on the throne she insists on the cutting of the legs of the throne. She orders Prannarayan to play hopscotch with her. She is not as innocent as expected by the Cabinet ministers. Under the guidance and advice of Prannarayan and by her natural instincts as the daughter of the late King she becomes a seasoned politician and a ruthless ruler. She could keep the Cabinet ministers waiting for hours together as her father did when he was living. And she could even remark that they were used to waiting for her father. She could call her ministers names like "bloody Cabinet" in their absence and compliment them in their presence. Even Prannarayan wonders at her tact. She dumbfounds the Cabinet ministers by forcing them to bow before her and by

asking them "to remember the value of their high rank". Even they feel that there is no alternative for them but to condescend to the whims and fancies of Vijaya. She goes out of the fixed programme to get in touch with the Kadamba tree. "She is n't prepared to confine herself prudently to the framework" (p.312) prepared for her by her ministers. This naturally enrages them and they are at their wits' end. What is said of Indira Gandhi can be said of Vijaya:

Indira becomes prime minister. She displays the enigmatic and relentless skills that make her a formidable presence at home and abroad.3

The Cabinet ministers find a threat to their political existence in Vijaya and they discuss it helplessly:

This brat of Vichitravirya's is not ready to be persuaded, or to become wise or mature. Or perhaps we should say for Aranyaketu's sake that she hasn't the capacity for it. Yes, let's

not give her false blame. But say what you wish there is no longer any room for doubt. In the past seven months, she has proved vain all the high hopes we had when we planned to put her on the throne. (p.312)

Immediately Karkashirsha proposes a solution for their problem: "Depose her!" And there follows a hot argument among them and finally they agree to give a strong reminder to Vijaya to make her understand the importance of the Cabinet ministers in her administration.

The political conflict between the queen and her ministers mounts high when she prepares a plan for the uplift of the Kadamba tribes. Her intention is very simple. If her plan operates successfully then in the following five years this original tribe "will become economically stable, and self-supporting". She sympathizes with them for looking at them she remembers how the opportunists grew rich by exploiting this tribe during his father's reign.

How the tribes and minorities are exploited by politicians is pictured vividly and beautifully by Tendulkar. The ministers are against this plan because
they think that it is unnecessary to take the trouble of uplifting the tribesmen as these tribesmen are "dirty animals", are "drunkurds", they are just rats. So none of the ministers except Aranyaketu and Bhagadanta is ready even to listen to the plan. They don't allow her to proceed with the topic.

Vijaya rises to the situation and without the consent of the Cabinet she orders for the operation of the Kadamba plan. The ministers become furious and take it as an insult to them:

Vratyasom: This is humiliation for the cabinet!

Karkashirsha: Insolence! (p.330)

And they decide "to kill this insolence as its source!"

They call Vijaya's method of operating the Kadamba Plan a "Murder of tradition" and an "abandonment of principle!" The Cabinet ministers get ready for a confrontation with queen Vijaya. Vratyasom proposes that they should create a public uprising against the plan. Even though Karkashirsha advises him not to bring unnecessarily the public into the encounter, Vratyasom insists on it because mob can do wonders and Vijaya
has n't as yet seen the angry roaring tiger of the mob. Brave men tremble when they see this fourteenth wonder of the world rushing towards them, shouting till throats are hoarse, attacking with stones. (p.334)

Among the ministers Bhagadanta refuses to agree with the plan because he is a Kadamba, and he leaves the Cabinet. And another minister, Aranyaketu, very feebly supports the plan of Vijaya: "even if Her Majesty's methods are wrong, the plan for rehabilitating the Kadambas is quite good in principle". (p.336) But he is frightened by Vratyasom's ironical analysis of his opinion and warning:

Ha! 'Quite good!' Why won't it get into your thick skull, Aranyaketu, that this plan is not for the rehabilitation of the Kadambas, but for the destruction of the Cabinet. This is the Queen's political malice! And you have feelings of partiality for the Queen - you remain in the Cabinet and try to stay on her side too — you propitiate her — the Cabinet may at any time decide to take a serious view of all this — (p.336)
Thus warned seriously by Vratyasom, Aranyaketu succumbs to the will of the Cabinet and supports their plan. The Cabinet ministers conclude that a battle with the queen is inevitable. "In the cause of democracy —", "For the sake of principle —" and "for Umbugland’s glorious future —" (p.336) And to succeed in the encounter with their Queen Vratyasom tells:

At least fifty martyrs must sacrifice their lives. Property worth at least five or seven hundred thousand must be wrecked. (p.337)

The Cabinet invites the mob to destroy the palace and to kill Vijaya. That is, the Cabinet tries to besiege the palace with the help of the mob.

But we find that the Cabinet has failed to estimate the strength of Vijaya. With the co-operation of Bhagadanta and with the help of the dedicated service of Prannarayan, Vijaya turns the tables against them in an unexpected masterly way. She remains stubborn to the persuasions of Aranyaketu to call for a Cabinet meeting and insists that the Cabinet ministers should apologize for their conduct towards her. She tells Prannarayan:
I want to rule a hundred years, a thousand years .... There are so many problems, so many dilemmas and obstacles and wants. Umbugland has to develop yet! If I am not here, how will it? If I am not on the throne, what will these useless old men do to the island? I must look after everything, do everything myself. I will have to do it. (p.345)

Like her father Vijaya is over-ambitious and she longs for ruling Umbugland for over a thousand years. She thinks she alone can uplift the whole country. However, we can't deny her intelligence and an innate statesmanship. Her tackling of the whole-situation is marvellous.

The Cabinet ministers except Bhagadanta incite the mob to surround the palace, to pelt stones at it and to burn some vehicles if possible. They watch the whole crowd and its activities from a room inside the palace hoping that fifty or sixty people will be killed. Vratyasom wishes that "This golden page in Umbugland's history must be inscribed in blood!" He honestly longs for "Death to the Queen! Death to the Queen!", "Victory to the People! Victory to the Martyrs!" But they get frightened by the
stones that rush into the room through a window.
All these ministers who have been watching the whole
show through a window with a suppressed delight at
the prospect of the Queen's death become at once
alarmed at the sight of Vijaya in the room and she,
taking the situation into her hands, immediately says:

    Arise, Vratyasom, Karkashirsha, Pishatakeshi.
    We guarantee your safety. (p.349)

The hypocrisy of all the ministers is
brought to light in their attempt to disown their
connection with the riot:

    Karkashirsha : Lamentable! (the show outside)
    Vratyasom    : Pitiful!
    Pishatakeshi : Infuriating!
    Karkashirsha : I scorn this bestial
                  behaviour! (p.349)

Pishtakeshi suggests that perhaps Her Majesty
would be able to calm the crowd. Vijaya at once seizes
the opportunity and makes Pishtakeshi confess that the
crowd would listen to her. Vijaya mockingly asks:

In other words, Pishtakeshi, you mean
to say that the crowd which won't listen
to you, will listen to us?
Pishtakeshi : I just say that it is
possible. (p.350)
She asks them directly whether the crowd makes the demands or the ministers and baffles them. She becomes a seasoned politician and shows them that the crowd demands the blood of the Cabinet ministers but not the Queen's by taking Bhagadanta to the public who is killed by the riot, which is of course a trick played by Bhagadanta and Prannarayan. Just as the leader of the fallen angels, Satan proposes to go himself in search of the Garden of Eden and face all the horrors of the passage, Vijaya consents to go before the crowd at the request of the Cabinet. She tells:

> It is the request of the Cabinet - no, of the remainder of our Cabinet - that we should go before the crowd. We are agreeing to the Cabinet's request according to our democratic customs. (p.352)

And she comes back alive to the consternation of the Cabinet. She recounts to them what happened during her meeting with the riot. First they demanded her life. They threw stones at her. Then she shouted, "Enough of this foolishness! First stand still and be quiet!" For a moment it was all silence. She asked the crowd to explain themselves. She assured
them that she would strive for the welfare of her people. Even then, their silence persisted. She said that taxation is hereby abolished. Yet they were silent. She said "we shall institute public enquiry into the private property of our Ministers, who have today gone against the interests of the people". At that, the crowd brightened up. She said that those Ministers who are found guilty will be severely punished. "The crowd brightened up still further". She shouted, "Down with the Cabinet". The crowd shouted it back louder than her. Then some one with a whining voice shouted from behind, "The Kadamba plan must be scrapped!" She shouted down that with the plan and the ministers who made it must be scrapped. They shouted deafeningly: "Death to Vratyasom! Death to Karkashirsha! Death to Pishtakeshi! Death to Aranyaketu! Bhagadanta was already done for". (p.354)

Then to the dismay of the Cabinet Vijaya asks them to meet the crowd. Terrified by the scene of Bhagadanta's death which they have already witnessed the ministers refuse to go before the mob and appeal to the throne for their protection:
Pishtakeshi: My God, The protection of the Cabinet is hereafter the d-duty of the Throne! (p. 355)

That is how Vijaya superbly manipulates the situation so that the very Cabinet ministers who have revolted against her come to implore her to give them shelter and safety. Vijaya enjoying herself the displeasure of the Cabinet ministers promises protection to them and starts ruling them as her late father did earlier, by the end of the play:

Vijaya: We are delighted to find that our Cabinet is alive

(Suddenly in harsh tones)
ATTENTION: CLOSE RANKS!
(They all stand in a line)
RIGHT. ABOUT-TURN!
(They turn and stand with their backs to the audience. Vijaya starts walking round them like a ring-master, after the manner of Vichitravirya, and giving them a visible sermon. That is what it looks like, and that is what their attitudes are like.) (p. 356)

The play is a very poignant satire on politics and politicians.
Tendulkar has introduced the character of a eunuch, Prannarayan, the incomplete man who, the playwright feels has the right to comment on the baser qualities of the complete man. He performs the function of the Sutradhar, narrating the story as well as commenting on the situation and incident.  

At the outset of the drama Prannarayan welcomes the audience to the sixtieth anniversary coronation of King Vichitravirya. And in the address he tells that it is all conventional and diplomatic. He also analyses truth:

We too have three kinds of truth: conventional truth, diplomatic truth and the real truth. (p.269)

Thus the subject of the play is introduced to the audience through Prannarayan's inviting address. In his next address he gives the audience further information about himself and acquaints us with the princess Vijaya:

For I am the -er-third sex of man. People such as I are appointed attendants in the

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harem. These days I am in the service of the Princess Vijaya, the only daughter of His Majesty! (p. 270)

The comments made by Prannarayan on politics and its nourishers are jewelled expressions that are to be memorized by the students of political science and the politicians. The remarks made by Prannarayan when Princess Vijaya enquires him after taking the oath at the coronation ceremony are noteworthy for his wisdom:

Vijaya : .... Why do these oaths at court have to be so long, Prannarayan?

Prannarayan: Probably so that they will at least be kept until one has finished taking them.

Vijaya : You mean one doesn't have to keep the oath later?

Prannarayan: Promises in love and promises at court are of different species, your Majesty. Promises in love are made unrestrainedly and have to be kept through restraint. Promises at court are made with and are usually broken unrestrainedly. That is one's experience. Love's promises are made in secret and
have to be kept publicly.
Political promises are made
publicly, but usually have no
witness but history when they're
broken. (p.295)

Again he tells her that a ruler "has to be
super-human, or even divine". He advises her to
remember in her dealing with the Cabinet ministers:
"Insult them, but don't wound their egos. And
diplomatic language!" (p.299)

Prannarayan's advices to Vijaya remind one
of Polonius' exhortions to Laertes in Shakespeare's
'Hamlet' even though the former is not a foolish brat
like Polonius. He defines politics beautifully:

Politics means sweetly-smiling enmity and
the experience of sacrifice. A show of
sacrifice is always profitable in politics.
(p.306)

Prannarayan is a speaker of proverbs like
"Age has some unfair advantages", and "refreshment
is better than argument".

In the course of the play he describes his
virtues and weaknesses:
Prannarayan: .... Being different gives one understanding. I am different. To any two kinds, I am a third. In any three, I am a stranger. I am different. I am not an actor. I am purely spectator, an onlooker. I am just a bird on a boat of life. I am on the boat but not of it. (p.306)

He is a character in the play who brings to conscious level, what is unconscious to the other characters. Rather he holds mirror up to nature. Thus he brings home to Vijaya that her wish to rehabilitate the Kadambas is a consequence not of her goodwill to them but an attempt to feed her pride i.e., she wants "to have the credit of achieving what had not yet been achieved. You wish to show that you are not just your father's daughter, nor a puppet ruler". (p.325)

He is an embodiment of wisdom and can be compared with Shakespeare's fools like Feste in 'Twelfth Night'. When the ministers order his dismissal after going through the letter of Vijaya conveying that she has ordered for the operation of the Kadamba plan, Prannarayan quietly but firmly says that he would obey only the Queen's orders. Whenever Vijaya treads an unguarded path, whenever she is irritated and unrestraint with the ministers he guides her, thus preventing her from any catastrophe.
"The 'two' who are unnamed perform the function of the chorus". They comment on the situation, on the other characters in the play and on the developing events. And what happens around in Umbugland and the reaction of the public to the political crisis are related to the audience by the chorus. In the beginning of the play 'The Two' stand for the public and congratulate the king on the sixtieth anniversary of his coronation.

After the death of the king Vichitravirya, the Two sing different opinions of the public:

The king was just an inspiration.
All the rest was prevarication!
Self was his only consideration.
His love for the country, a mere fabrication!
He made puppets of cabinet men.
He made a cake of the government!
Of democracy he made a noise.
Threw sixty years dust in our eyes! (p.283)

Immediately after the mourning they take the audience to the future action of the play:

After Vichitravirya, who?

... ...
Some (loudly) : Karkashirsha!
Others (loudly) : Pishtakeshi!
Still others (loudly) : Bhagadanta!
Yet others (loudly) : Aranyaketu! (p.284)

The Two in Black not only foretell the future action of the play to the audience but also comment on the different characters in the play. They comment on the Cabinet ministers:

Four are senior,
Five superior,
Some are naughty,
Some are crafty,
One is dumb, and one irascible. (p.285)

And again the Two comment:

Vratyasom's arguments are reasoned.
Karkashirsha's are well-seasoned.
Pishtakeshi's not deficient.
Bhagadanta's quite proficient.
Aranyaketu is-sufficient. (p.292)

These kind of instances can be enumerated in plenty from the play.

The play is thus a powerful political satire where Tendulkar has also used a number of significant dramatic techniques like chorus, and Sutradhar's role is played by Prannarayan, mixed with an element of
farce and humour in the scenes where Princess Vijaya insists on playing child-games and makes a royal decree to this effect and where she enjoys the inconvenience that she causes to the Cabinet ministers by asking them to appear before the furious mob.

This play is a pure biting political satire interspersed with amusing comments on the Cabinet ministers and with the affection between Vijaya and Prannarayan. Introduction of Prannarayan, a man of third sex, neither male nor female, in the place of Sutradhar adds a new dimension to the play. Prannarayan not only plays the role of Sutradhar but has close association with the main character of the play, like Rajaninath has in The Vultures.