II

A FAMILY OF VULTURES

The Vultures enacts "the goriest of the family relations existing in our society today."¹ Tendulkar uses the analogy of vultures for his play. The play portrays a family of human vultures - Papa Vulture; his illegitimate son, Rajaninath; Ramakant, his eldest son; and his wife, Rama; his second son, Umakant; and his daughter, Manik. Rajaninath remarks scornfully at the outset of the play on their home:

But it was no home
Not a home, but a hole in a tree
Where vultures lived in the shape of men. (p.204)*

Hari Pitale, the Papa vulture, duped his brother out of his share in business and turned him out of his house fifteen years back and has shared his property with his two legitimate sons - Ramakant (Ramya) and Umakant (Umya). But "Mutual suspicion and discord reign supreme in them."² When Manik had typhoid she

* Vijay Tendulkar "The Vultures" (translated by Priya Adarkar) from Vijay Tendulkar - Five Plays (Bombay : OUP, 1992). Further references are from this text parenthetically quoted.

2. Ibid., p.30.
suspected that the others plotted to put poison in her medicine. She tells Rama that she refused to take medicine and even to drink water. She was always awake. She never closed her eyes even for a second. That's how she has survived or they could have fixed her long ago. And Ramya looks upon his brother, Umya, as his life-long bloody enemy who is swelling his bank balance by black-marketing paper. He lays a vulgar wager at him: "If you're a man, swell a woman's belly for a change!" (p. 213)

The play is about middle class family life and "the most pervasive is the theme of violence." From the beginning of the play violence streams through the scenes. Ramakant refuses to pay monthly salary to the gardener Jagannath and beats him so violently that "blood streamed from the fellow's mouth". Every character in the play except Rajaninath and Rama use foul language for the others. Papa considers himself stupid to have produced "bastards" like Ramya and Umya. He warns them that he will see them dead first. Umya regrets that "A mangy dog would have made a better

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father". When Papa threatens "If I die, I'll become a ghost. I'll trample on your chests!" Ramakant retorts, "If you become a ghost, we'll be bloody arch-ghosts". Umakant calls Manik a "Cow" for blocking the bathroom and shouts at her that "She goes and rolls all over town, the cow! And then sits scrubbing herself" (p.214). Manik again, no less violent, curses them, "You bastards! You've no shame, bloody ruffians!", "Worms'll rot your mouths, you bastards!" (p.215) The two brothers could openly discuss their sister's illicit love affair with the Raja of Hondur. Rajaninath enquires her "What sort of deal do you make to get money out of that Hondur Chap"? (p.235). And we find the word 'bastard' used repeatedly in the play:

Ramakant : But our Papa ... y'know ...
Perfect bastard.
....
Ramakant : The Hondur fellow's dead! ....
Bloody bastard?

Even while appreciating others they cannot but voice vulgar language like "bloody reputation", "Umya was much bloody cleverer!" That is why it is said that Tendulkar's plays "are known for realistic
The three children sink their differences only to extract from their father the money he has hidden. Manik comes to know that her father has still some money which is not shared to them and whispers to her brothers. They plan secretly to squeeze the money out of him. As a first step in their plot they plan to entertain their father by taking him for a ride "On a dead horse!" and flatter him. They feed their father very lavishly. He thinks that they have really changed. Ironically enough, without knowing what fate has in store for him, he complements Ramya that he has very cleverly and bravely managed to frighten away Sakharam. Ramya, Umya and Manik entertain him by generously offering drinks to him. Here Tendulkar seems to point out the sordidness of their life through Manik's words. She notices that "For so many years now, Papa has n't smiled at all!" (p.225) where as the situation, a pretension of love and care for their father, is amusing for the children, Papa

4. Vijay Tendulkar, "Drama : The most Difficult, But the most Powerful Medium", Interviews with Indian Writers, New World Literature Series, 4-18, p.277.
goes on cherishing a complacency that Sakharam has cleared out of the house. As remarked by Ramakant he was in the seventh bloody heaven. And when it is least expected by Papa, Ramakant and Umakant in a pseudo-fight against each other injure Papa and he trembling violently at once sees the truth that they are going to murder him and in that state of consternation he blurts out his secret to his shock, that they would rob what little money he has got left with him. Immediately the children seize this clue and threaten to kill him unless he writes the cheque. They have already locked the doors of the room from inside and have kept away the telephone receiver from the hook. As it is inescapable for him, Papa helplessly writes the cheque and runs out for his life. Rajaninath, the poet imprisoned in the garage, sings:

Of the five vultures
The father vulture's
Story thus ended. (p.233)

Thus Umya, Ramya fight and tear each other to squeeze money from their father and succeed.

"The play reveals that greed for money and materialism has steeped so much into middle class society
that people would go to any extent to get hold of it." The two brothers smell that their sister, Manik, is pregnant and discuss the prospect of blackmailing the Raja of Hondur, the man responsible for her pregnancy. Ramakant proposes a plot to blackmail the Raja of Hondur. They plan to warn him that she is pregnant, and demand about twenty thousand rupees and otherwise they would raise an uproar in the bloody newspapers. Ramya defends his satanic plan on the pretext that it is impossible to get money by the sweat of their bloody brow and it is not a good man's world any more. They become frustrated when they hear the news of the sudden demise of the Raja of Hondur and curse him for having died and missed them the chance of making money easily. Then they fancy that they would sell tickets for "a bird's Eye View!" of Manik's Suttee on the death of the Raja. Ramakant builds castles in the air that he would have a house and a car and his master-mind strikes on a new inhuman strategy that the Raja is alive in little Manik's belly and one kick at the belly is enough to avenge the death of the Raja, "Let little Manik scream till she bloody bursts!" (p.247) With such bloody thoughts they rush to Manik.

to nip off the little budding life in her womb. The violence depicted in this play bears "great affinity to the black theatre of America. Characters rush about brandishing broken bottles and bottle openers and a pregnant woman is kicked". In another moment Manik comes half crawling down in plaster with a terrifying scream. One leg in plaster, her white sari soiled with blood. Pressing one hand on her abdomen, writhing in pain, looking back constantly, she exits through the front door. Though in keeping with the tone of the rest of the play and with the intention of Tendulkar to depict violence raw but not to sugar-coat it with fancy trappings the scene is strangely suffocating and stunning and fills one's mind with a sense of horror and obscenity. Sudhir Sonalkar comments:

Almost all characters in the play are corrupt and violent except Rajaninath and Rama. A kind of internal, inter-personal family violence pervades the play and it seems that almost out of a sense of helplessness and a turning away from the ugliness around, Rama turns to Rajaninath and he makes her pregnant.

6. Ibid., p. 94.
Rajaninath lives in the garage outside and Rama lives constantly in fear in the house of vultures. She says:

This house is devouring me. So is this room .... All the time there is a weight on my chest. I feel suffocated! I feel my life's going ... (p.249)

Rajaninath speaks poetically of Rama in the Prologue:

She was like a doe
An innocent doe, untouched
As loving as the earth
As the first shower of rain
Translucent, hesitant
Now the ripple of a stream
Now a rushing flow
And so in a moment
Full to the brim, unshed
A tender, tender - hearted
Idol to adore
Like the coral flower
Or the honeyed sweetness
Of dreams at dawn. (p.203)

She entered:

A haunted burning-ground
Surrounded by evil ghosts. (p.204)
From these ghosts she turns to the innocent Rajaninath, she almost mothers him. For looking after him she is ironically ridiculed by her husband that she likes her brother-in-law better than her husband.

She'll take him tea. Even if he says no to it. She'll force it on him! And if he won't drink it, she'll feed him too. (p.216)

Rajaninath too has nothing but contempt for them. He refuses to call Ramakant and Umakant, his brothers: "It humiliates me to call such people my brothers! And such a corrupt man, my father". When Papa vulture, the opportunist, enters the garage and praises Rajani as his only true son and proposes to divide his property between Manik and Rajaninath with an anti-dated letter Rajaninath throws him out without any hesitation.

In these two characters Tendulkar portrays the barrenness of their lives. Rajaninath who is an illegitimate son fathers an illegitimate child through Rama. He says:

my blood's corrupt. It's in the family. First your blood rots. Then your brain decays. And then through out the body,
it is as if a wild animal's rampaging. Thirsting for blood. Your humanity itself gets destroyed. (p.238)

Rama knows that her husband is a drunkard, and she can't bear a child. She laments:

I was born to become a mother. This soil's rich, it's hungry. But the seed won't take root. If the seed's soaked in the poison if it's week, feeble, lifeless, devoid of virtue—then why blame the soil? (p.241)

Her husband takes her to each and every swami. She complains to the poet about her predicament:

Bhaiya, in this living death of my wifehood — I commit Sati every moment! I burn! I am consumed! .... I have felt every day like - like getting out of this! .... I mean, perhaps one should set oneself on fire. Or else give him something - I mean poison .... So he'll never again show me to any new swami, astrologer or healer. So he won't make disgusting drunken love to me .... and talk to me of babies! So that hunger of mine will never blaze up .... I know what to do. But not how .... I am weak. I am timid. Despicable. Useless. Quite, quite useless .... Not good enough to live — I'm going. (p.242)
This is not merely a passionate outpouring of the grief of Indian woman trapped in the moment of feudal reaction but a diatribe against her oppressor. Rama in the play will have her womb fructified only to be crushed by her vulture-husband. The play thus exposes the raw, vulgar and relentless but self-frustrating march of violence. It is not the symbolism of vultures that brings out the absurdity but the motif of the womb. It is continuously crushed and killed. The women (Manik and Rama) who carry it are maimed, mauled, raped and aborted in violation of life.

Rajaninath's life itself is a failure. He is "a worthless rhymester". He could understand the "torment" of her "empty womb". He pities her and feels that there is a curse on all of them. If she can escape that curse, he asks,

If I can be used for that why should I say 'no'? Why? virtue and vice are for other people! For us on whom this terrible curse has fallen, there is nothing but this curse. And a burning body. A burning mind. (p.243)

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And Rama becomes pregnant in the bargain. But all is not well with her conscience. She is frightened. She sees terrible things in her sleep. The house itself devours her. And she can't bear her sister-in-law and father-in-law peeping into her room "with eyes like live coals." Overwhelmed with a sense of fear and guilt she advises her husband that they should leave this over-powering house. She has a foreboding that no one can live happily in that house. But Ramakant comes to suspect her fidelity. That is, Umakant incites Ramakant against Rama by expressing the doubt that the child in Rama's womb is not his but Rajaninath's.

This play is of lower middle class with beliefs in superstitions and black magic and whose intellect is blunted by their sadistic temperament. Every one believes that there is a ghost in the house. And Manik uses black magic to effect the abortion of Rama. Manik says:

"cut the lemon ... rubbed the ash. Seven times on my loins and stomach! It's going to abort - sister-in-law's baby's going to abort - Ramya's brat's going to abort - it won't live. It won't live!" (p.260)
The screeching of vultures at the end of almost every scene, and the reference to the characters as vultures throughout the play is in keeping with the atmosphere of the play.

When Tendulkar was asked whether such characters exist in our society, he said:

There are some exceptions - we do not come across such families very often. But looking from another angle, these characters do exist in society. I have not exaggerated them at all. Each character becomes more or less symbolic as a group; they resemble a reality. Obsession for materialistic gain is not uncommon in our society. This does not stop at external stage only, it becomes a race, a cut throat within the family which leads to the process of elimination. Unless there is elimination, these gruesome episodes you find in certain subtle tones and they cannot take place. They do sound realistic. I wanted to have them as exception to establish a theme.9

So the theme of the play and the characters in the play are neither unnatural nor artificial but only exceptional.

Rajaninath the poetic spirit of the house bottled up in the garage is used as chorus in the play. His soliloquies offer objective comments on the action. When Rama follows her husband and goes out of the house, he says:

The true companionship
To a leper
of a mangy dog
on the road to hell. (p. 202)

The play ends with his completing the story of the vultures:

The tale of the five Vultures
Had this end.
The story of men accursed
or else vultures cursed.
To live their lives as men. (p. 265)

"However different from ordinary middle class families this one may seem, the violence probable in the play is family violence—the violence bred by the continued closeness in the by now almost crumbling joint family system in our society. In one way or the other we all experience it. The sexual element may often be absent, the sordidness of this family may be excessive, but some where at the root of it all, it
is all too common today, all too real to be ignored."  
This violence is different from that of a Greek tragedy.

The violence of Greek tragedy moves and enriches. Tendulkar's violence shocks and even when it disturbs, the ethical question remains both untouched and unanswered.  

In the play Rajaninath tells the audience about human destiny. 'Here ends the story of vultures .... Please show them mercy ... show them a way, give them a helping hand, send them to the bier where they can burn themselves and get rid of their existence; send them to death, relieve them ... because they have no other future. That is their destiny. They can not be liberated. No body can be.'

"Thus focussing the viewer's attention on this cheaply cynical and nihilist philosophy, Tendulkar leads his audience to believe that man is base, villainous

11. Ibid., p. 21.
and cruel". Tendulkar himself clarifies the theme of the play, he says:

As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end.

He continued that "the perception of a writer .... looks into the hidden depths of human nature and brings out unperceived aspects of the eternal human predicament, more simply known as human existence". Thus the play is a criticism of social relationship linked with materialism of humanity in modern life. But this is a very down-right thrust on society.

That is why after the first production of this play, Girish Karnad wrote that the staging of Gidhade (Vultures) could be compared to the blasting of a bomb in an otherwise complacent marketplace.

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13. Ibid., p. 23.
15. Ibid., p. 60.
Gidhade associated Tendulkar's name with sensationalism, sex and violence. Tendulkar confessed 'Gidhade (vultures) was for me a tremendous release .... It was a shattering of the norms'.

In spite of the nightmarish vision of the corrupted world of humanity that Tendulkar presents in the play, he has not left man in chaos. He hints at the possibility of man's redemption and leads him to an optimistic view of life just as T.S. Eliot does at the end of his poem 'The Waste Land'. Even though Rama and Rajaninath succumb to the corrupted nature of the play, their fall is a glorious fall. It is for the fulfilment of the one craving of her throbbing heart to become a mother that she involves herself in an illicit affair with Rajaninath and that too with a clear-sighted knowledge of her husband's inefficiency in this respect.

Rajaninath concedes to the wish of Rama just to make her happy, eventhough his action is the result of a disgust with his own state of life as an illicit son of Papa. As his birth itself is corrupted birth he pities Rama and falls into the tone of the play. However their relationship is free from any spark of
sex and violence which are considered to be the twin sins of Tendulkar's plays.

Tendulkar has exploited the techniques of Indian tradition and folk theatre to a maximum extent in the play. Superficially the play begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue on the model of a Greek play but he seems to have gone back to Sanskrit drama for the use of this technique. In a Greek play it is said that:

The problem would first be stated in abstract terms as a theme - after which the chorus, the official voice of society, would comment on it. The actor then presented the problem in more concrete terms, the chorus continuing to elucidate, administer, judge and pity. The play was resolved in purely conventional - but always instructive ways. 16

And

A classical play traditionally opened with nāndī a benediction of eight to twelve lines of verse in praise of the gods, after

which the sutra-dhara (stage-manager) entered with his wife and described the place and occasion of the action. The last sentences of his prologue served as a bridge leading to the action of the play.\textsuperscript{17}

Tendulkar appears to have not only amalgamated both these techniques but also has revolutionized the art of modern Indian theatre. He begins the play with a prologue or nāndi and ends with an epilogue or bharatavakyam but both are very long. And also he combines the roles of chorus and sutradhara into one. That is, Rajaninath, who is an integral character in the play unlike chorus or sutradhar who has just an external role in their respective plays, introduces the theme of the play and concludes the play and also acts as a commentator. In \textit{The Vultures}, the theme of the play, however, is not explicitly stated but implicit in the prologue. It begins with the ending of the action of the play that is with Rama following her husband out of the house and flashes back to how her innocence is crushed in this family of human vultures.

\textsuperscript{17} "Indian Theatre" Knowledge in Depth, The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia, Vol.17, Founded 1978, p. 165.
Even the epilogue which concludes the play does not end with a rounding off of the action of the play like that of a Shakespearean play where there is no message for the future and ends with "The Rest is Silence", nor like that of a Sanskrit classical where there is just a benediction for all, including the actors. But it looks into the future with an appeal to be compassionate with the sufferers in the play.

Another significant modification done by Tendulkar is that instead of using lavish sceneries as in the folk theatre he suggests the action of the play successfully only through the dialogue and uses the technique of sounds also. For example, when Manik describes how she performed the black magic by cutting the lemon and by rubbing it on her loins and so on even though the action is not shown on the stage the audience can imagine it. That is, an artistic illusion is created in the minds of the audience. And the screeching of an owl repeatedly heard is used to keep the audience alive to the theme of the play and has a similar effect.

Viewed artistically, however violently realism is presented in the play, the violence in
the play ceases to be an obsession with a critic and his mind hopes to see "what resolution we may gain from hope" as a ray of redemption is revealed in the characters of Rama and Rajaninath.