CHAPTER II

CRUELTY IN FAMILY

The Vultures enacts "the goriest of the family relations existing in our society to-day". The play portrays a family of human vultures - Papa vulture, his illegitimate son, Rajaninath; Ramakanth, his eldest son, and his wife Rama; his second son, Umakanth and his daughter, Manik. There is neither affection nor understanding in the family but a wicked deception and ill-treatment of one another for the sake of money. Hari Pitale, the Papa-vulture, has no love, no kindness for his brother, Sakharam. He deprives the latter of his share in business and turns him out of his house and shares his property with his two legitimate sons - Ramakanth (Ramya) and Umakanth (Umya). He in turn suspects the same kind of fraud from his children. Mutual suspicion and discord reign supreme in them. While suffering from typhoid, Manik suspects that the others have conspired to poison her medicine. She confesses to Rama that she has refused to take medicine and to drink even water. She is always awake. She never closes her eyes even for a second. That is how she has survived, otherwise they could have fixed her long ago. There is an undercurrent of hostility in the
family which is the consequence of continuous close breeding. Ramya treats his brother, Umya, as his life-long "bloody enemy" who is swelling his bank balance by black-marketing paper. Umya lays a vulgar wager at his brother: "If you are a man, swell a woman's belly for a change." Their relationship affirms: "There is a ruthless cruelty in the heart of man and woman." Their home itself is a nest of vultures. Rajaninath comments 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)

The play is about middle class family life and the most pervading theme is cruelty in the family. From the beginning, cruelty streams through the scenes. Ramakanth refuses to pay monthly salary to the gardener, Jagannath, and beats him so cruelly that "blood streamed from the fellow's mouth". The brilliance of verbal thrust and carry used by Vijay Tendulkar upholds the theme of the play. Papa considers himself stupid to have produced "bastards" like Ramya and Umya. He threatens them that he will see them dead first. Umya laments that "A mangy dog would have made a better
father". When Papa threatens "If I die, I'll become a ghost - I'll trample on your chests", Ramakanth retorts, "If you become a ghost we'll be bloody arch-ghosts". Umakañth calls Manik a 'cow' for blocking the bathroom and shouts at her: "She goes and rolls all over town, the cow; And then sits scrubbing herself" (p.214). Manik, no less indecent, curses them: "you bastards! you've no shame, bloody ruffians!", "worms'll rot your mouths, you bastards!" (p.215). The two brothers reveal their sadism in openly discussing their sister's illicit love-affair with the Raja of Hondur, Ramakanth mockingly enquires her "What sort of deal d'you make to get money out of that Hondur chap" (p.235). And the word 'bastard' is used repeatedly in the play:

Ramakanth. But our Papa ... know ... perfect bastard. (p.219)

... The Hondur fellow's dead! .... bloody bastard? (p.245)

Even while appreciating others they use vulgar language like "bloody reputation", "Umya was much bloody cleverer". It is said that Tendulkar's plays "are known for
realistic presentation of neglected subjects, untouched problems and outspoken language".

The three children prefer money to their father. They forget their enmity and become united in their cruel treatment of their father to get money from him. Manik comes to know that her father has still some money which is not shared to them and she whispers it to her brothers. They conspire to squeeze the money out of him. They show fake reverence to him. First they entertain their father by taking him for a ride "On a dead horse!". Then they feed him lavishly. He believes that they have really reformed themselves. Ironically, without anticipating what fate has in store for him, he compliments Ramya that he has very cleverly and bravely managed to frighten away Sakharam. Ramya, Umya and Manik please him very much with a generous offering of drinks to him. Here Tendulkar points out the cruelty and joylessness of Papa's life through Manik's observation "for so many years now, Papa hasn't smiled at all!" (p.225). Whereas the situation, a pretension of love and care for their father is amusing for the children, Papa goes on cherishing a complacency that Sakharam has cleared out of the house. As Ramakant remarks he was "in the seventh bloody heaven". Both the children and the father find a solace in
their cruelty to others. As planned earlier, in a sudden pseudo-fight against each other, Ramakant and Umakant injure Papa and the latter trembling in fear at once comprehends their evil design of murdering him and in his consternation he blurts out his secret accusingly that they would rob what little money he has got left with him. Immediately the children grasp the clue and threaten to kill him unless he writes the cheque. He realizes that he cannot escape from their cruel clutches as they have already locked their doors of the room from inside and have removed the telephone receiver from the hook, and so he helplessly writes the cheque and hastens out for his life. Rajaninath, the poet imprisoned in the garage, sings:

Of the five vultures
The father vulture's
Story thus ended (p. 223)

Thus Umya and 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 can be cruel not only to their father but to their sister also. They sense that their sister, Manik, is pregnant and discuss the prospect of blackmailing the Raja of Hondur, the man responsible for their sister’s pregnancy. They propose to warn him that she is with the child, and demand about twenty thousand rupees from him. If he refuses the money they would raise an uproar in the "bloody newspapers". Ramya defends his savage plan on the pretext that it is impossible these days to get money by the sweat of their "bloody brow" and it is not "a good man’s world any more". They do not sympathize with their sister when they hear the sudden demise of the Raja of Hondur but become frustrated 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 ‘sati’ on the death of the Raja. Ramakant builds castles in the air at the cost of his sister. He would have a house and a car and he brilliantly strikes on an unnatural inhuman strategy that the Raja is alive in little Manik’s belly and one kick at her belly is enough to avenge his death: "Let little
Manik scream till she bloody bursts!" (p. 247). With such inhuman thoughts they rush to Manik to nip off the tender life in her womb. The cruelty depicted in the play bears "great affinity to the black theatre of America. Characters rush about brandishing broken bottles and bottle openers and pregnant woman is kicked". In a moment Manik comes half crawling down in a plaster with a terrifying scream. One leg is in plaster and her white sari is soiled with blood. Pressing one hand on her abdomen, writhing in pain, looking back constantly, she exits through the front door. In keeping with the tone of the rest of the play, the scene with its horror and obscenity disturbs our peace.

The two brothers themselves hate each other and behave disgustingly to each other. Ramakant makes fun of his brother Umakant, for he remained unmarried because of his impotency. Umakant, on the other hand, hurts Ramakant's feelings by referring to his barrenness and he raises a suspicion in his brother's mind that the child in Rama's womb is not his but Rajaninath's.

Evil is innate in human nature. A man can be cruel to his wife, his "Flesh of flesh". Ramakant is inhuman
to his wife, Rama. He is a drunkard. He knows his incompetency in begetting children, still he subjects her to a kind of mental torture by taking her to each and every swami. Sudhir Sonalkar says:

Almost all characters in the play are corrupt and violent except Rajaninath and Rama. A kind of internal, interpersonal 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.

It is the cruelty of Fate that associates the innocent doe-like Rama with the vultures in the form of human beings and she succumbs to the harmony of cruelty in her anguish to become a mother. Rajaninath speaks poetically of Rama’s innocence 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
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 Raja- ninath and she mothers him. Her husband, Ramakant, malignantly mocks at her for looking after him. He accuses her 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).

She can't bear a child because of her husband's drunkenness. She laments:

I was born to be 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 weak, feeble, lifeless, devoid of virtue - then why blame the soil? (p.241)

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

Bhaiya in this living death of my wifehood - I commit 'Sati' every moment! I burn! I am consumed! .... I have felt everyday 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 out-pouring of the grief of an Indian woman trapped in the moment of feudal reaction but a diatribe against her cruel oppressor.

The fundamental cruelty guides things towards their inexorable goal, what ever the cost. In her anguish to bear a child she becomes unfaithful to her husband. 'She has her womb fructified but only to be crushed by her vulture-husband. The play thus "exposes the raw, vulgar and relentless but self-frustrating march" of cruelty:
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 is as innocent as Rama. He has nothing but contempt for the others in the play. He refuses to regard Ramakant and Umakant as his brothers. He says: "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 Rajaninath as his only true son and proposes to divide his property between Manik and Rajaninath with anti-dated letter, Rajaninath sends him out without any hesitation.

Inspite of his innocent and virtuous character, it is his Fate that he is born as an illegitimate son and he has to reside in the garage outside the house. Like Rama's life his life is barren. His life is a failure. He is a "worthless rhymester". He could understand the "torment" of her
empty womb. He pities her that there is a curse or 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.

A burning body. A burning mind. (p.242)

With this self-appeal, Rajaninath yields to the evil incipient in him. Rajaninath, an illegitimate son, fathers an illegitimate child through Rama. He acknowledges his corruption:

My blood's corrupt. It is 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 becomes pregnant in the bargain. But she is conscience-striken. She is frightened. She has a number of hallucinations. She sees terrible scenes 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 the overpowering house. She has a foreboding that it is their Fate that no one can live happily in that house.

Rama feels claustrophobic and implores him:

Take a job somewhere! Whatever you get. Never mind if it doesn't pay well. We'll live in poverty, if we have to. You, me, our baby. The three of us. We'll make a feast of crumbs. We'll eat once a day. We will endure whatever we have to. I'll slave as hard as you want, gladly. But let's finish this death by imprisonment. Let's end this dreadful play-acting. Stop this murderous deceit. Honestly! Put an end to it. Let's get out of this
over-powering house. Go far away. No one, no one at all can live happily here. Not at all ... never at all. (p.250-251)

The house itself is elevated to the status of a cruel monster by the playwright. But Ramakant, blinded by male chauvinism ignores her request:

Look here, Rama! In this house, we're not accustomed to listening to any smartness from women! No man in our family's been a bloody henpecked husband. What? I know very well indeed what to do, what not to do. No need for a woman to teach me sense. (p.251)

He is egoistic and doesn't esteem her advice.

Their sadism has blunted their intellect and has made them believe in superstition and black magic which magnify their monstrousness. Everyone believes that there is a ghost in the house. And Manik employs black magic to effect the abortion of Rama. Manik:
Cut the lemon ... rubbed the ash.

Seven times my loins and stomach!

It's going to abort—sister-in-law's
baby is going to abort—Ramyas's
brat's going to abort—it won't
live. It won't live! (p. 260)

Manik thus enjoys killing the child of Rama in the womb itself.

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 tone of the play.

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

There are some exceptions—we do not come across such families very often. But looking from another angle, these characters do exist in our society. I have not exaggerated then at all. Each character becomes more or less
symbolic as a group; they resemble a reality. Obsession for materialistic gain is not uncom-
mon 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 cannot take place. They do sound realistic. I wanted to have them as an exception to establish a theme.

So the theme of the play, cruelty steeped in the materialism of middle class families, is neither unnatural nor artificial but only exceptional.

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

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

He announces the end of 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)

The family depicted in the play seems to be different from the middle class families in general. But the cruelty in the family of Hari Pitale is the cruelty that is bred by the continued closeness in the present crumbling joint family system in our society.

"In one way or the other we all experience it. The sexual element may 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".

34
The cruelty that we find in relation to one another in the play is not uncommon in real life. The destiny of these characters cannot be changed. Rajaninath expresses their helplessness at the hands of their fate at the end of the play:

'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 cannot be liberated' .... Thus focussing the viewers' attention on this cheaply cynical and nihilist philosophy, Tendulkar leads his audience to believe that man is base, villainous and cruel.

Tendulkar himself accepts this view:

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 continues:

the perception of the writer .... looks into
the hidden depths of human nature and brings
out unperceived aspects of the eternal human
predicament, more simply known as human exist-
ence.

Thus, the play is an indictment of human relationship and its
materialism in modern life.

This play is widely acclaimed for its volcanic
criticism of middle class society. After the production of
the play, Girish Karnad wrote that the staging of Gidhade
(Vultures) could be compared to the blasting of a bomb in an
otherwise complacent market-place. Gidhade associated Ten-
dulkar's name with sensationalism, sex and violence. Tendul-
kar confessed that Gidhade was for him "a tremendous release"
and "it was a shattering of the norms".

36
Tendulkar has exploited the techniques of Indian tradition and folk theatre to a maximum extent in the play. The play begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue on the model of a Greek play but he has gone back to Sanskrit drama for the use of the technique. In a Greek play:

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.

And

A classical (Sanskrit) play traditionally opened with 'nāndī', a benediction of eight to twelve lines of verse in praise of the gods, after which sutradhar (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.

Tendulkar has not only amalgamated both these techniques but also has revolutionized the art of modern Indian Theatre. He begins the play with a prologue or 'nandi' and ends with an epilogue or 'bharatavakyam' but both are very long. And he has combined exquisitely the role of chorus and that of Sutradhar into one. Rajaninath is an integral character in the play. But he plays the role of chorus and that of Sutradhar. He comments on the play. He introduces the theme of the play and concludes it. In The Vultures, the theme of the play, however, is not explicitly stated but implicit in the prologue. It commences with the ending of the action of the play, that is, with Rama following her husband out of the house and flashes back to her innocence and its throttling in the family of cruel human vultures.

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 but ends with "The Rest is Silence", nor like that of a Sanskrit classical play where there is a benediction for
all, including the actors. But it looks into future with an appeal to be compassionate with the sufferers in the play.

Another significant modification done by Tendulkar is that instead of using gaudy scenes as in the folk theatre he suggests the action of the play successfully through the dialogues and sounds. 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. 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 - "a ruthless dissection of human nature revealing its inherent tendencies to violence, avarice, selfishness, sensuality and sheer wickedness". Greediness, materialism, hatred, cruelty and lovelessness have become deep-rooted in man and oppressed his relation with the others.
REFERENCES:

* Vijay Tendulkar, "The Vultures" (translated by Priya Adarkar), Five Plays, Vijay Tendulkar (Bombay: OUP, 1992), p.213. Further references are from this text parenthetically quoted.


3. Vijay Tendulkar, "Drama: The most Difficult, but the most Powerful Medium", Interviews with Indian Writers, New World Literature Series, 4-18, p.227.


5. Ibid., p.94.


8. Ibid., p.30.


13. Ibid., p.59.

