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The Vultures: A Drama of Lust for Money and Moral Degeneration

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Abstract:

Vijay Tendulkar has been a provocative writer who put a very powerful impact on politics and society. He never liked the hypocrisy of the writer who hesitates to project the true pictures of contemporary Indian society. The title vultures is well intended to suggest the social disease of Indian families in general and the family of Pitale in particular. The Pitale family members live like the vultures that are ever ready and busy in fighting to fulfill narrow financial ambitions at any cost. Instead of expressing love for each other and caring the emotions of family bonding they tear apart every tissue of this familial bonding. Through Pitale family the playwright projects the social and familial deformity of modern Indian society because of blind lust for money and moral depravity.

Keywords: degeneration, vultures, moral, familial.

Vijay Tendulkar is such a name which is taken with reverence in the field of contemporary Indian English drama in post-independent India. He has been a provocative writer who put a very powerful impact on politics and society. He never liked the hypocrisy of the writer who hesitates to project the true pictures of contemporary Indian society. In his plays, he presents characters, situations and events with austere honesty which jolt the reader to extent of reaction. He is not a writer just for amusement but he was a fearless academic fighter spirit against any social, political, economic and religious issues. If the pungent exposure of moral hypocrisy and gender discrimination in Indian society gets its influential vent in *Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Sakharam Binder* then *Encounter in Umbugland* presents a scornful portrait of Indian politicians. His plucky attack on political corruption and unjust orthodox social hierarchy comes before us in the form of *Ghashiram Kotwal* then his *Kanyadaan* provoked the Dalit section of society and he had to face the rage of spectators in the form of chappal throwing. He became very sentimental when he was honored with Saraswati Samman for *Kanyadaan* as he says: “You are honouring me with the Saraswati Samman today for a play for which I once had slipper hurled at me. Perhaps it is the fate of the

play to have earned both this honour that insult. As a creator, I respect both verdicts”.¹Tendulkar does not believe in any kind of appeasement so he presents in his plays the social realities without any quixotic polish, and without any consideration of bitter protest against him. His comments in 'Afterword' to *Kanyadaan* gives a full picture of his academic personality: “I have written about my own experiences and about what I have seen in others around me. I have been true to all this and have not cheated my generation. I did not attempt to simplify matters and issues for the audience when presenting my plays, though that would have been the easier option. Sometimes my plays jolted society out of its stupor and I was punished. I faced this without regrets. It is an old habit with me to do what I am told not to do. My plays could not have been about anything else. They contain my perception of society and its values and I cannot write what I do not perceive”. (71) He further says about himself: “As a social being I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end. As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and obsessively 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. Nor that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off”. (CPT xliii)

Tendulkar's *The Vultures*, written in Marathi and translated by Priya Adarkar into English, is another evidence of his commitment to his academic purpose. In this play we observe an influential denunciation of a society for its blind pursue of material ambitions crushing all moral and social values. The lust for money and luxuries has degraded man worse than animal. The delineation of a malicious picture of our dreadful reality may upset us but we cannot deny its truth. The death of blood relations and dance of violence have become almost the identity of contemporary man. Violence and infidelity have become the trademark style of contemporary society. Tendulkar never hesitates to portray this truth. C. Coelho aptly remarks: “In his portrayal of human relations and tensions, Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egotistical man and equally self- centered society. He liberated Marathi stage from the tyranny of conventional theatre with its mild doses of social and political satire for purpose of pure entertainment.” (34) Man is so blind in his hunger for money that he is ready to lose everything and commit all acts of violence and offences without any shame and prick of conscience. Tendulkar is deadly against any hypocrisy. He deliberately and tactfully employs such incidents in his plays, that exposes hypocritical sickness and provides the opportunity to satire as K.V. Surendran remarks, “Tendulkar frowns at the society around him which is known for its hypocrisy, lack of sincerity, promiscuity, dishonesty and a host of other ills. Tendulkar’s



world is one where sex and violence have an upper hand” (85).

The pivotal point of the play is the moral degeneration and unbridled lust for money which has almost vanished the difference between man and animal. The action of the play revolves about Pitale family which includes Hari Pitale (Pappa), his sons, Ramakant and Umakant, daughter, Manik and Rama, wife of Ramakant. Ramakant is the practical owner of the house after the partition of the family property. Rajaninath who is the illegitimate son of Hari Pitale lives in the garage of the house. Now Ramakant looks after the business of construction material that was started by his father and uncle Sakharam. Once it was a prosperous business but now it is decreasing because of Ramakant's dishonest dealings but he does think something else. Pappa complains him to be the sole responsible for this decline "Every deal of his is a crooked one! He has ruined the whole business. But it's crime if I mention it." The second son; Umakant had opted for the landed property at Lonavla and seems to be financially comfortable but he is also equally greedy for money like Ramakant. The third important character is Manik; the daughter of Pappa. She is in her mid-thirties and unmarried who loves to enjoy on other's money. She also has an addiction for money. Rajaninath is living in the garage of the house but has been denied his meal, earlier being given to him, by the orders of Ramakant. During the action of the play even the tea for him is stopped, though Rama tries to bring him tea stealthily. In the the whole family it only Rama who serves selflessly. Pitale family, thus prepares the background of portraying a shocking tale of human greed that has no respect and moral scruples for any relationship. The play is the vivid illustration of how evil thoughts beget evil designs and evil actions result in demising outcome through the progression of the plot. The character of Rajaninath is very important because he along with Rama presents a contrast to other characters of the play for whom the title of the play, "vultures" stands. In the first scene of the play, we witness the anguish of Rajaninath who is a poet. How aptly he uses the adjectives like death, hell, beastliness, barrenness, sickness and rotteness to describe the family:

So Rama went away.

A statue of emotions chilled to stone.

Alive she followed after the living death, her master.

With the dogged loyalty

Of a barren beast.

The true companionship

To a leper

Of a mangy dog
On the road to hell.
For both, their future
Is lost, for good.
And there remains to them
Only death.
As when a man's nose
Decomposes, and only
A rotting hole remains. (202, FP)

Rajaninath also recalls the early days when Rama had entered that house as a young bride:

She was like a doe.
An innocent doe, untouched.
As loving as the earth.
As the first shower of the season
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. (203, FP)

The shifting tone and language dexterously put forth the theme of moral degeneration with the image of the vulture. Look at this how Rajaninath describes the house:

But it was no home.
Not a home, but a hole in a tree
Where vultures lived
In the shapes of men.
A haunted burning- ground
Surrounded by evil ghosts. (204, FP)

Tendulkar shows how social and moral degeneration pass on from one generation to



another by describing the relationship of Hari Pitale and his brother Sakharam who jointly established a business but the cunning Hari Pitale swindles his own brother to become the sole owner of the firm. This spiteful virus of treachery and dishonesty gets infected from the father to his children. They also want like Hari Pitale, to live a luxurious life without hard work and honesty. They do not even hesitate to cheat and kill their own father. See how Hari Pitale reacts when is deceived by his own children: "Shut your foul mouths, you scoundrels! Bury me, will you! Talk of burying me while I'm still alive, will you, you bastards....I could throw you all out. The property's mine! I earned it! I sweated for it. Sakharam and I went hungry day and night. We sweated tears....And now, go ruin it, go ahead, both of you!" (214, FP) The playwright shows how the blind money-addiction makes the people almost barbarous and lunatic. Every member of the family conspires to deceive the other and longs to snatch the share of other. Like the hunting animals they have the only work to snare a prey.

Thus Ramakant, Umakant and Manik are true inheritors of the moral degeneration and vicious character of their father. It is through the conversation between Ramakant and Umakant that we come to know how Pappa deceives his own brother as Umakant says, "Pappa cut his-throat! Pushed rum out'f business! Ruined' im! Turned' m out of the house. Fifteen years ago." (218, FP) They also give the reason for Pappa's behaviour-"Uncle was going to ... hrrrn! ... clean Pappa out. But Pappa found out first." (218, FP) At this Ramakant says, "They're both bloody swindlers, brother. Pappa'n'Uncle" (218, FP) This is the family legacy that Hari's children are carrying. First they target their uncle, then they victimize their own father and thereafter they began to conspire against each other. It is generally said that the parents are the first teachers and whatever good or bad, moral or immoral children learn from them become their life-long sacraments. Here in this play the children learn from their father how to deride and deceive the emotional bonding of the family. Everyone is eager to grab everything for himself or herself without any care for other. It is this shocking reality of human life and contemporary institution of family that Tendulkar successfully depicts. The children of Pappa are just like vultures ever ready to feed upon the flesh of their own near and dear. The uncle, the father, the sister and the brother all become the prey to the money-addiction of the vulture mentality. When Ramakant and Umakant come to know about Pappa's hidden treasure, they first decide to get rid of their uncle Sakharam who is so terrified that he fears for his life and runs away from there. Ramakant narrates the whole incident very innocently: "Uncle was lying flat on his back with his eyeballs turned up. I said, Let's see what's up. Yes! Or else Uncle could have hopped it in his sleep. We'd be left saying, why isn't dear Uncle up yet? So I shook him.

At that Uncle woke up. He opened his eyes. And what a bloody yell he gave! God knows why! I thought Pappa was bloody up all last night. And dear Manik probably has to get up early. To go again to that Hondur chap of hers. So I just pushed dear Uncle's mouth shut a bit. .. so! Like this, that's all. I pressed it shut, Umya, I said, Dear Uncle, don't yell for nothing! At that Umya, Uncle bounced out of bed. Like a bloody rubber ball! He stumbled to the door and then ... flight! Uncle Makes His Getaway! I tried to bloody prevent him. I rushed after him. With my rifle. But Uncle ran like a bloody deer.” (226, FP)

Ramakant threatening tactics of clamping Sakharam's mouth and running after him with his rifle, makes his uncle flee from the house. His sister Manik also asked Ramakant to throw him out while he was lying drunk so that he might die of cold. Umakant had gone a step further and offered to 'chop' him into pieces. Even Pappa also praises Ramakant for the way he got rid of his uncle: "Ramya my child ... you worked wonders. You did a good day's work today. One needs cleverness. Like yours. Bravo!" (225, FP) Quiet ironically Pappa is Little aware that the next prey to the greed of his children is he himself. These degenerated children terrify and attack their father too. In order to save his life from his sons the father cries and tries to call police for assistance, "No! Never! You're devils, you pimps! You're going to kill me! You're going to murder me ... murder! I don't want to die! don't want to! I'm not going to! I'll become a ghost. I'll sit on your chests! Murderers! Call the police! Police!"(229, FP). To avoid any problem they try to appease their father As Manik says, "It's only a tiny cut" (229, FP). At this the father retorts, asking her to "get away from me too, you she devil! You're like the rest of them! You've plotted this. You're going to kill me! You're going to take my life. Murder me! You'll rob what little money I've got left ... I know it.... [Pappa is shocked suddenly into silence. They are all startled into silence, too]." (229, FP) They pretend to hit at one another with a broken bottle and a sharp bottle opener to frighten Pappa who feels shaken to see the attack of sharp objects. Thus, his cunning children psychologically force him to confess that he still has a bank account unknown to them. Under the psychological pressure of lethal attack, he reveals the deposits of his money, "Punjab ... the Punjab Bank ... don't kill me, you pimps!" (230, FP). He is begging them to spare his life but when he feels that they will kill him, he cries Rama for assistance and save him from the murderers: "[He cries] Bahu! Where are you, Bahu! They're killing me, they're killing me! Bahu!"(231, FP). As soon as the door opens, he runs out with his gruesome expression. Rajaninath describes it as 'Father-vulture's hollowed end'. He further says: "Here ... here there trailed My father's crooked' Staggering'Dragging limbs.And I didn't stop themThe oldest vulture's own born son!“(232-33, FP)



After removing Pappa from the way, Ramakant and Umakant take Manik on their radar. Manik really outdoes his brother in the blind race of money-oriented gain. She too holds the true representative status of her vulture family as her brothers stand for. She is the addict of carefree life full of luxuries. She involves in extramarital relationships with Raja of Hondu without any sense of moral dedication and responsibility. Comparing the characters of Manik and Rama Shanta Gokhale states: Tendulkar uses bold, almost brash colours to portray Manik. She is the classic 'slut' who parties, sleeps late, smokes and drinks first thing in the morning and hops from one bed to another. Her latest affair is with a so-called rajah whose child she is carrying. If Manik is one of the vultures, then Rama is the exact opposite. She is a sparrow. She is pointed in the pastel shades of innocence, purity, goodness and willing subservience. The only shade in her life that assert itself boldly, albeit briefly, is when she expresses her desire for the body of the outcaste half-brother of her husband, the poet Rajaninath. (85)

Ramakant and Umakant deliberately mock Manik's relationship with the Raja of Hondu by saying that she is nursing false hopes of marriage. But Manik sharply reacts over it. Actually, they want to extort money from the Raja so Umakant suggests that it may be possible if she gets pregnant. Ramakant also says: "Get him in a fix, eh? Scandal or marriage! Blackmail. Then it's possible". Manik gets startled and terrified to see the monstrous intentions of her brothers. Ramakant and Umakant say "Brother, we are beasts! (215, FP). On hearing these scornful words of her brothers, Manik becomes furiously reacts, "Oh-h! These bastards'll burn me alive one-day! They'll poison me, they'll slit my throat. (215, FP). Their greed for money infringes all moral and human bounds. The way Manik has reacted makes them suspicious that she in fact is pregnant. So, they take this information as a good opportunity to materialize their black motif to blackmail the Raja to extort a large sum of money from him. However, they fear of Manik to be a hindrance to their plan so they decide to break her leg so that she may not meet her lover as Ramakant tells Umakant, "Accident! How do you like that, brother? We'll manage it. Supposing Manik breaks her arm ... or her bloody leg? Then how'll she go out? Not with a leg in plaster! If her shank's in plaster, how can any—romance—take place? Eh? Then it's agreed? It is, isn't it?" (237, FP). When they succeed in their dirty plan for money, they begin to fight for undue share: RAMAKANT: 'Put down your money! Or else—publicity in the papers! No money? Then publicity! That's all!' Brother, he'll puke out money! He won't get away now, brother. Ten for you, fifteen for me. [Umakant gets up even in that state]. Oh, all right, all right! Twelve and a half, and twelve and a half. All right? Satisfied? You're never bloody satisfied! UMAKANT: Satisfied my foot! I will make you puke

out twelve and a half. It was I who pushed Manik. No joke, that ... (244) But their entire plan comes to dust when they are informed that the Raja died of a heart attack. In their frustration, they decide to kill the raja's child that is in the womb of Manik as Ramakant tells Umakant "... Listen here! [Umakant leans towards him.] The Raja's alive. In little Manik's belly. The bloody bastard, damn him! Bloody enemy! The traitor! I'll shoot him, brother (247). Thus they pretend to be the well-wishers of their sister, but they callously kill the fetus in the womb just for their lust for money. They are the true product of spiritual deformity as M. Sarat Babu remarks: "The spiritual deformity facilitates ruthless exploitation and oppression and destroys human relations even within the family" (150, FP). Such a portrait of deformed relationships and violence really shook the people of Maharashtra from the deep which Shailaja B. Wadikar endorses: "The conservative Maharashtrian people were stunned to observe the vulgar reality of their lives presented through the sexual relations and the scenes of violence in the play" (94, FP).

The story of brutality does not end here. Pappa approaches Rajaninath with a proposal that he would make a backdated will in which he will give the house in his and Manik's name but Rajaninath refused to be the part of his plan and so Pappa's design is frustrated. Manik, on the other hand, takes revenge in her own way by performing the rituals of black magic on the body of a pregnant Rama. Umakant is the next victim. He tries to take advantage of the financial crisis of Ramakant and asks him to transfer the house in his name if he wants any help from him. But Ramakant expels him from the house. Even the financial opulence of Umakant cannot save him from a lonely, futile life; bereft of the love of his relatives. Finally, Ramakant too could not escape the consequences of his inhuman acts. The curse of despondency gradually engulfs him and nothing good is left in his hellish life. When his wife Rama pleaded him for a job to begin a fresh life away from that house, Ramakant retorts her in this way: "In this house, we're not accustomed to listen 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." (109, FP) The only ray of hope in his life is the child that Rama is carrying in her womb; the result of many visits to priests, temples and holy persons. Even this ray of happiness is snatched from him by the revengeful revelation of Umakant who in frustration tells Ramakant that the child is the outcome of his wife's illicit relations with illegitimate Rajaninath. "It's that bastard Rajaninath's! That enemy at your gates! It is your half-brother's! Your bastard brother's! That son-of-a-whore's!" (255, FP) This revelation so outraged Ramakant that he in a state of drunkenness aborts the child.



Thus, the title *The Vultures* is well intended to suggest the social disease of Indian families in general and the family of Pitale in particular. The Pitale family members really live like the vultures that are ever ready and busy in fighting to fulfill narrow financial ambitions at any cost. Instead of expressing and caring the emotions of family bonding they tear apart every tissue of it. Through Pitale family the playwright projects the social and familial deformity of modern Indian society. The comment of Prof Kohle worth quoting: “Gidhade, which has a ruthless dissection of human nature, revealing violence, avarice lying beneath the put up of personality, was as fascinating expose of social reality” (75). The curse of moral degeneration spares no one in the play. The message of the play is crystal clear that no man can lead a happy and satisfied life who is the addict of selfish motives and who believes in snatching the happiness of others by hook or crook. The moral degeneration will ultimately compel a person to live a cursed life abounding in painful occurrences and it also coerces his near and dear ones too, to share the miseries of his monstrous acts. The play is truly in accord with the trademark style of Tendulkar who once said in an Interview with Sumit Saxena: “I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle-class family and I have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My works has come from within me, as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live”.

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Abbreviations:

FP: Five Plays

CPT: Collected Plays in Translations