

SUBALTERNITY OF WOMEN IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S KAMALA: GENDER, POWER AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala is a powerful critique of patriarchy, commodification, and the systematic marginalization of women in Indian society. Based on a real-life journalistic incident involving the purchase of a woman from a rural flesh market, the play moves beyond the issue of trafficking to expose the structures of power that determine how women are represented, controlled, and silenced. This paper examines the subalternity of women in Kamala through the interconnected yet distinctly different experiences of Kamala and Sarita. Drawing on GayatriChakravortySpivak's concept of the subaltern, feminist theories of patriarchy and representation, and an intersectional understanding of class and gender, the study argues that Tendulkar presents female subalternity as a multilayered condition. Kamala's economic, social, and gendered marginalization differs from Sarita's domestic and psychological subordination, yet both are subjected to a patriarchal structure represented most prominently by JaisinghJadhav. The paper further examines the role of journalism and marriage as institutional structures through which women's bodies and identities become objects of male control. Tendulkar's juxtaposition of the two women ultimately exposes the contradiction between public claims of social reform and private practices of domination. Kamala therefore becomes not merely a play about the exploitation of a poor woman but a broader critique of the ways in which patriarchy produces, silences, and appropriates female identities.

KEYWORDS: Vijay Tendulkar, Kamala, subalternity, patriarchy, feminism, representation, gender, intersectionality, commodification, female agency.

INTRODUCTION

Vijay Tendulkar occupies an important position in modern Indian drama because of his sustained engagement with violence, power, gender relations, and the contradictions of contemporary society. His plays frequently question the structures through which apparently respectable social institutions conceal inequality. *Kamala* is particularly significant in this regard because it places two women from radically different social backgrounds within the same patriarchal structure.

The play is based on the real-life incident involving journalist Ashwin Sarin, who purchased a woman from a rural flesh market and subsequently presented her at a press conference. Tendulkar uses this incident not merely to dramatize the existence of flesh trade but to question the morality of those who claim to expose exploitation while simultaneously converting human suffering into professional capital. Scholarship on the play has consequently identified its central concern with the commodification of women and the contradictory relationship between journalism, social reform, and exploitation.

The significance of *Kamala*, however, extends beyond Kamala herself. Tendulkar deliberately juxtaposes Kamala with Sarita, Jaisingh Jadhav's educated middle-class wife. Their social positions are different, but their experiences reveal the operation of patriarchy at different levels. Kamala is visibly bought and displayed; Sarita is socially respectable but gradually recognizes that her marriage has reduced her to a controlled and dependent subject.

This paper therefore approaches *Kamala* through the concept of female subalternity. It argues that the play demonstrates how women can become subaltern subjects through different combinations of gender, class, economic dependence, and institutional power. Recent scholarship similarly stresses that Kamala and Sarita should not be treated as experiencing identical oppression: their differences of class and social location are crucial to understanding the play.

SUBALTERNITY AND THE FEMALE SUBJECT

The term "subaltern" acquired particular significance through the work of Antonio Gramsci and later through the Subaltern Studies collective associated with Ranajit Guha. In literary and postcolonial criticism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" has been especially influential in understanding the relationship between marginalization and representation.

Spivak's argument is important for reading *Kamala* because the issue is not simply whether marginalized women literally speak. Kamala speaks throughout the play. The deeper question is whether she possesses the social and institutional power necessary to control the representation of what she says. Her story is appropriated by Jaisingh, transformed into journalistic material, and presented before a public audience. Her voice exists, but the structures surrounding her determine how that voice will be heard.

This distinction between speaking and being heard is central to the play. Kamala is not silent in the literal sense; rather, she is deprived of representational authority. Her identity is constructed by those who possess greater

social power. Jaisingh decides why she has been brought into his house, how she should appear before the press, and what her suffering should signify.

The subaltern woman is therefore doubly positioned within systems of inequality: she is marginalized because of her social location and because of her gender. Kamala's poverty and marginal social status intensify the gendered oppression she experiences. Her body becomes a site upon which economic, patriarchal, and institutional power operate.

KAMALA AS A COMMODIFIED WOMAN

Kamala's introduction into the play is deliberately shocking because she enters Jaisingh's world as a purchased object. Her value is initially established through monetary exchange. This is crucial to the play's critique: the woman who has been commodified in the flesh market is subsequently commodified again by the journalist who claims to expose that market.

Jaisingh purchases Kamala because he intends to demonstrate that women continue to be sold openly. His investigation has an ostensibly progressive purpose. Yet his method reproduces the very logic that he claims to condemn. He converts Kamala's body into evidence, her suffering into spectacle, and her presence into professional capital.

The irony is therefore fundamental. Jaisingh is not simply an observer of exploitation; he becomes part of the structure of exploitation. Scholarship on the play has repeatedly noted this contradiction, emphasizing that Jaisingh uses Kamala to obtain professional advancement and public recognition.

The press conference becomes especially important in this context. Jaisingh wants Kamala to appear exactly as she is because her appearance is part of the evidence he wishes to present. He refuses Sarita's desire to provide Kamala with a clean sari, because an improved appearance would weaken the spectacle of deprivation that his investigation requires. This moment exposes the politics of representation: Kamala must remain visibly poor because her poverty serves Jaisingh's narrative.

Thus, even an apparently humanitarian act can reproduce the power relationship between subject and object. Kamala does not control her representation; Jaisingh does.

SARITA AND THE SUBALTERNITY OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMAN

Sarita initially appears to occupy a completely different position from Kamala. She is educated, married, economically secure, and part of an urban middle-class household. If subalternity were defined only through poverty, Sarita could not be considered subaltern.

TENDULKAR, HOWEVER, COMPLICATES THIS ASSUMPTION.

Sarita's oppression operates through the institution of marriage. Her husband controls the major decisions of their shared life and expects her to perform the emotional and domestic labour required to sustain his professional and personal existence. Her identity is constructed around her role as wife.

This dimension of the play has been emphasized by scholarship examining Sarita's predicament and the domestic space. Studies describe her loss of individuality and agency under Jaisingh's dominance, while other scholarship specifically examines the home as a gendered space in which apparently "natural" roles become mechanisms of control.

Sarita's condition therefore represents a less visible form of subalternity. Unlike Kamala, she is not physically sold in a marketplace. Yet she experiences a form of symbolic ownership within marriage.

The play becomes particularly powerful when Sarita recognizes the connection between herself and Kamala. Her realization does not mean that their experiences are identical. Rather, she recognizes that different forms of oppression may originate in the same patriarchal assumption: that women can be controlled, defined, and used by men.

"NOT JUST KAMALA": THE RECOGNITION OF SHARED PATRIARCHAL POWER

The relationship between Kamala and Sarita constitutes the dramatic and ideological centre of the play. Kamala's presence functions as a mirror through which Sarita begins to see her own condition.

One of the most frequently discussed moments occurs when Sarita realizes that Jaisingh's treatment of Kamala is connected to the way he treats her. Secondary scholarship quotes Sarita's recognition in the formulation "Not just Kamala ... me too," emphasizing the moment as a revelation of her own subordination.

THIS RECOGNITION TRANSFORMS THE MEANING OF THE PLAY.

Before Kamala enters the household, Sarita can perceive exploitation as something that happens to "other" women. Kamala destabilizes this distance. The apparently respectable wife discovers a connection with the apparently powerless woman from the flesh market.

However, Tendulkar does not erase the class distinction between the two women. Kamala's vulnerability is considerably greater because her economic and social marginalization intensifies her gendered oppression. Recent intersectional scholarship specifically argues that the differences between Kamala and Sarita must be retained rather than reduced to a single category of "Indian womanhood."

Thus, the play produces both solidarity and difference. Kamala and Sarita are connected through patriarchy but differentiated by class and social location.

JAISINGH AND THE STRUCTURE OF PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY

Jaisingh is the principal embodiment of patriarchal power in the play. His importance lies not simply in his personal behaviour but in the contradiction between his public identity and private conduct.

As a journalist, he presents himself as a social investigator committed to exposing injustice. In his domestic life, however, he exercises authority over Sarita and controls Kamala's representation. The contrast exposes the hypocrisy of a social reformer who does not question the patriarchal assumptions underlying his own behaviour.

Jaisingh's power operates through several mechanisms: economic control, professional authority, physical presence, emotional manipulation, and control over representation. He determines what Kamala should wear, how she should appear before the press, and what should happen to her after the investigation. He similarly expects Sarita to accept the conventions of marriage without questioning his authority.

This makes Jaisingh more than an individual villain. He becomes a representation of a larger patriarchal structure in which male authority is normalized.

JOURNALISM AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

The play's critique of journalism is particularly relevant to the concept of subalternity. Journalism is conventionally understood as a mechanism for giving visibility to injustice. Tendulkar asks a more difficult question: Who controls the representation of injustice?

Kamala is made visible, but she does not become empowered.

Her suffering becomes news. Her body becomes evidence. Her experience becomes a professional opportunity for Jaisingh.

This distinction between visibility and agency is crucial. A marginalized person may be publicly represented without acquiring the power to represent herself. In this sense, *Kamala* anticipates concerns central to contemporary debates about media ethics and the representation of vulnerable communities.

The press conference therefore becomes a theatrical representation of power. Kamala is physically present, but the discourse surrounding her is controlled by others. Her suffering becomes an object for public consumption.

MARRIAGE AS A SITE OF SUBALTERNITY

The play's critique becomes sharper when marriage is placed alongside the flesh market. The two institutions appear morally opposite, yet Tendulkar draws a disturbing symbolic connection between them.

Kamala is purchased explicitly. Sarita's subordination is concealed within a socially legitimate institution.

This does not mean that marriage and trafficking are literally equivalent. Rather, Tendulkar uses the contrast to expose the language of ownership that can enter patriarchal relationships. The woman may be protected by the respectability of marriage while still being denied autonomy.

This aspect of the play has been repeatedly identified by feminist scholarship. One study describes the play as drawing a parallel between Kamala as a slave and Sarita as a suppressed wife, while another emphasizes Sarita's gradual movement from subordination toward self-realization.

Sarita's realization is consequently a movement from unconscious conformity toward critical consciousness.

INTERSECTIONALITY: KAMALA AND SARITA AS DIFFERENT SUBALTERN SUBJECTS

An intersectional reading makes the play more nuanced. The two women should not be placed into a single category of oppression because their experiences are shaped by different social locations.

Kamala is disadvantaged by gender, poverty, lack of education, and social marginalization. Sarita possesses educational and economic privilege but is constrained by gender and marriage.

Their experiences therefore demonstrate that patriarchy does not operate identically on all women.

The 2025 study "Monolithic Modes of Oppression" explicitly argues for an intersectional reading of *Kamala*, emphasizing the interplay of class and gender and warning against treating women's experiences as monolithic.

This approach strengthens rather than weakens the feminist interpretation of the play. Tendulkar does not suggest that every woman suffers in exactly the same way. Instead, he reveals how different forms of social power intersect.

FROM SILENCE TO SELF-RECOGNITION

Sarita's development is important because *Kamala* does not end with the mere identification of oppression. It also dramatizes the emergence of consciousness.

At first, Sarita performs the conventional role expected of her. She maintains the household and accommodates Jaisingh. Kamala's arrival disrupts this routine. Through observing Jaisingh's treatment of Kamala, Sarita begins to question her own position.

Her awakening is therefore relational. She discovers herself through the Other.

This is one of the most interesting dimensions of the play: the marginalized Other becomes the means through which the apparently privileged Self recognizes its own oppression. Kamala, who is initially presented as the powerless subject, consequently becomes a catalyst for Sarita's consciousness.

The relationship reverses the conventional hierarchy between Self and Other. The supposedly powerless woman generates knowledge that the privileged woman had been unable to articulate.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SUBALTERN/SUPERIOR BINARY

Tendulkar ultimately complicates the binary categories through which the women are initially perceived.

Kamala is not simply powerless. Her presence produces a crisis in Sarita's consciousness.

Sarita is not simply privileged. Her middle-class respectability conceals her subordination.

Jaisingh is not simply a social reformer. His reformist identity coexists with exploitative behaviour.

The journalist is therefore implicated in the oppression he claims to expose.

The wife is not merely a passive domestic figure. She develops an awareness that challenges her assigned identity.

The play thus refuses simple oppositions between powerful and powerless, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, modern and traditional. Instead, it demonstrates that power circulates through relationships and institutions.

FEMALE AGENCY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF RESISTANCE

A feminist reading of *Kamala* should not end with victimhood. Tendulkar's women are subjected to oppression, but the play also creates possibilities for recognition and resistance.

Sarita's awakening represents an important movement toward agency. Her realization that she has been treated as an object becomes the foundation for questioning her role within marriage.

Kamala's role is different. Her vulnerability prevents her from acquiring the same form of agency that Sarita begins to develop. Nevertheless, her presence destabilizes the household and forces the privileged Sarita to confront realities that had previously remained invisible.

Theatrically, this is significant. The subaltern does not necessarily become empowered by speaking in a conventional political sense. Instead, her presence can disrupt the dominant narrative and generate new consciousness in others.

CONCLUSION

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* is far more than a dramatic representation of flesh trade. It is a sustained interrogation of the structures through which women are commodified, represented, silenced, and controlled. Through Kamala and Sarita, Tendulkar presents two distinct but interconnected forms of female subalternity.

Kamala's oppression is intensified by poverty and social marginalization. Her body is literally commodified and subsequently transformed into journalistic evidence. Sarita occupies a more privileged social position, yet her identity is constrained by the patriarchal structure of marriage. The difference between the two women is essential, but so is the connection between them.

Jaisingh's treatment of both women reveals the central contradiction of the play: a man who publicly claims to expose exploitation can privately reproduce the same structures of power. Journalism and marriage become parallel institutional spaces through which women's identities are controlled.

A Spivakian reading reveals that the fundamental problem is not merely whether Kamala speaks but whether she possesses the power to determine how her speech and experience are represented. An intersectional feminist reading further demonstrates that subalternity is shaped by the interaction of gender, class, economic status, and social location.

Ultimately, *Kamala* transforms the relationship between the privileged and marginalized woman into a relationship of recognition. Kamala becomes the mirror through which Sarita sees the hidden structures governing her own life. The play therefore challenges the assumption that oppression belongs only to the visibly marginalized. It demonstrates instead that patriarchy operates through different degrees and forms of power.

The enduring significance of *Kamala* lies precisely in this complexity. Tendulkar does not offer a simplistic opposition between victim and oppressor. He exposes a social system in which women can become objects of exchange, objects of representation, and objects of domestic control. At the same time, he demonstrates that recognition of oppression can become the beginning of resistance. The play consequently remains a powerful contribution to Indian feminist drama and to literary discussions of subalternity, representation, and female agency.

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