

Violence and cruelty: A comparative study of 'Medea' and 'The Vultures'

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Abstract

An analysis of my paper confines to the study of two plays 'Medea' and 'The Vultures'. My research is comparative and it finds the relevance of violence and cruelty inherent in human nature since ages. Both 'Medea' and 'The Vultures' are tragic in nature and show trauma of human beings.

Keywords: violence, aggression, cruelty

Introduction

My analysis confines to the study of two plays: 'Medea' and 'Gidhade' (The Vultures) where the previous play written by Euripides and the latter by Vijay Tendulkar. Both the plays have a commonality in the context of portraying violence and cruelty, reflecting the inherent negative traits in the characters which culminate their destiny into a ruin.

My research is comparative and finds the relevance of violence and cruelty a part of human nature since ages reckoning with either the period of Euripides till today irrespective of universal boundaries or peripheries. To move ahead, we will see the Greek tragedy-'Medea' and will trace the foot of violence and cruelty. Though both the plays stand pole apart in matter of Ages, the dominant themes of both the writings is violence, recoiled in horror. The titular play 'Medea' deals with infanticide and 'The Vultures' with foeticide. 'Medea' was first produced in 431 BC and 'Gidhade' (The Vultures) written in 1961 and produced in 1971. Despite a gap of a long era, both the plays deal with the complexity of human relations. Moreover, these plays show a male dominated society where women are mere puppets. Both the plays portray familiar degradation, breaking even the blood ties and the savage nature of human beings leading to bestiality. Both the plays are filled with shocking elements "consisting of blood, eeriness and mad raving"^[1]. Any mad raving is due to frustration which leads to aggression. There is considerable evidence supporting the view that frustration becomes a potent inducer of aggression when it is associated with personal attitudes. Berkowitz (1965) proposal says: (a) "that frustration induces an emotional reaction- anger that creates only a readiness for aggressive acts"^[2] These are the reasons that lead violence to cruelty in human lives? But the level of violence change in human beings in different circumstances.

Euripides (480-460BC) was a great tragedian of classical Athens and ancient Greek. He is well known for his theatrical innovations which greatly and profoundly influenced drama from ancient to the modern times. He represented traditional, mythical heroes as ordinary and common people in unusual circumstances "He was the creator of... that cage which is the theater of Shakespeare's Othello, Racine's Phaedra, to Ibsen and Strindberg. In which...Imprisoned men and women destroy each other by the intensity of their loves and hates."^[3]

Euripides raised his voice for all the victims of the society. He shocked the conservative male audience by depicting the heroine like 'Medea'.

'Medea' is a titular play (a tragedy), Medea, a sorceress, a barbarian, the daughter of King Aeetes, the princess of Colchis and the granddaughter of the sun god Helios became the wife of Jason, the male protagonist of the play. When Jason the great Greek hero, the captain of the Argonauts came from Iolcus to Colchis to claim the throne of Iolcus by retrieving the Golden Fleece, Medea helped Jason in retrieving the Golden Fleece and fell in love with him, they both got married and became parents of two children. But Medea's sufferings started when Jason betrayed Medea by declaring that he will marry Glauce, the Princess of Corinth. Medea laments, "I am finished, my friends, and any pleasure I took in life I now renounce; it's death I want. The man who was the world to me (oh how I know the truth of this!) has proved to be the foulest of traitors, my husband!"^[4] After this there was no looking back for Medea. Medea plans to kill Jason's new bride horrifyingly by gifting her poisoned robes and a headdress. She was the same person who didn't hesitate for a second even to kill her brother, betrayed her own father and even arranged the murder of Jason's uncle, Pelias. In the end, she kills her children to take revenge with Jason and flees in a chariot which was drawn by dragons with the corpses of her children, leaving Jason hysterical.

Jason pathetically says:

"I will lament this grievous day,
 And call the gods to witness, how
 You killed my sons, and now refuse
 To let me touch or bury them
 Would God I had not bred them, Or ever lived to see
 Them dead, you their destroyer!"^[5]

In the character of Medea, Euripides tries to give a psychological glimpse of the character. How extraordinary pathetic circumstances change an ordinary human being in becoming so violent? She becomes a clinical case. She enjoys such acts of violence and extracts satisfaction to the fullest. Such characters create their own world, where there is no fear

of any superpower, or any conscience: here prevails only revenge and hatred.

The Chorus in the tragedy cries.

“O miserable mother, to destroy your increase
Murder the babes of your body!

Stone and iron you are, as you resolve to be.” [6]

Yes, a miserable mother but violent, so violent that she even killed her children. How could any human being stoop down to such a level?

Somewhat a similar world of violence, hatred, and revenge is created in the contemporary literature by Vijay Tendulkar, in his plays. Tendulkar, an Indian Marathi playwright portrayed cold-blooded characters in his plays and accepted violence as a truth and a fact of life. He divided human beings into two classes- aggressors and victims and their reactions to each other. Plack (1969) “derives virtually all the evils of society, especially violence, from the abundance of denials in childhood and early adolescence” [7]. Ramakant and Umakant behave in the same manner with their father as their father Pitale behaved with his brother Sakharam.

After the production of ‘The Vultures’ (Gidhade), Tendulkar’s name became associated with sensationalism, cruelty and violence. The play gives a ruthless dissection of human nature revealing its inherent scenes of violence, greediness, hatred, selfishness and wickedness.

The story of the play revolves around the Pitale family. Hari Pitale is the head of the family who cheats his brother Sakharam in their joint business. Hari has two sons Ramakant and Umakant and one daughter Manik. His illegitimate son Rajninath has a relationship with Pappa’s daughter-in-law Rama, Ramakant’s wife. The title of the play ‘Vultures’ is suggestive of their vulture-like tendencies. What they want they want by hook or by crook. They have no meaning for a home rather they “prey on each other’s dead flesh, living on carrion” [8]. They don’t speak as human beings do, they ‘screech’. Infact, Tendulkar almost “created a new language to deal out the electrifying shocks of a family steeped in evil” [9]. Tendulkar himself commented on this play: “Gidhade was born out of a personal crisis in his life, that it poured out of him within a short span of four plays and he was shocked that he could give expression to so much violence. It was almost a cathartic process.” [10].

The kicking of a pregnant woman to cause a miscarriage froze the nerves of the audience. Believing in breaking, assaulting and plotting; all characters are cold blooded. Only Rajninath and Rama possess human qualities. At least they think for each other.

There are unbelievable scenes of violence in the play at Pappa’s home. At the game of cards Ramakant violently encourages Umakant-“Don’t bloody let her go, Umya: Drag the bloody money out: Look, how she’s wriggling: Squash her bloody neck: Twist it:”

{The Vultures Act II. Scene I, Pg 235} [14]

They forget that they are using such a vulgar language for their sister. They do not maintain sanctity for any relation. Living under one roof, they believe in inflicting pain on each other. A father feels helpless when his children trap him. Pappa gets injured, tries to escape the assault and cries:

“Please don’t kill me: I am your father, you pimp! Your father!”

(The Vultures Act I. Scene V, Pg 230) [14]

On watching such scenes in the play Amitav Kumar rightly commented in her literary review: “I was 16 or 17 when I watched the performance of “Gidh”, a Hindi adaptation of Tendulkar’s play ‘Gidhade’ (The Vultures). The abuse that I saw being exchanged between a father and his sons was shocking. So was the naked language of the market place, ----- . It was like a slap in the face of all genteel pretensions that I have so far associated with theater. The drama was no longer about putting make- up and delivering romantic lines. Tendulkar showed me for the first time that real drama was dirty” [11].

The play explores the theme of violence and lust for money. The foundation of Pitale family stands on morally weak pillars. The family is literally on the verge of collapse. The family disintegrates. The whole atmosphere of the play is gloomy and suffocating; there is no way for them to come out. Rajninath sings in vain:

“There is no escape for them. No...there is none.

For there is no escape

For them ...

Or for anyone ...”

The Vultures Act I. Scene VIII Pg (265) [14]

Vijay Tendulkar marvelously exposes the gestures and mannerisms of a middle class through vulgar and degraded language. The degenerated individuals through their characteristic of a middle class reflect their petty existence filled with frustration and repressed desire that find expression in their malicious and hateful attitude towards their fellow beings. All the members of the family create a wall of suspicion around them. Ramakant Umakant and Manik are suspicious about their father’s money deposited in the bank. Ramakant and Umakant are suspicious about their sister Manik’s love affair with the Raja of Hondur. Ramakant says:

“... Let her make love! Romance! Picnics! I tell you, in any case, sooner or later, this Raja’s going to give her the slip!”

{The Vultures Act II. Scene I Pg 236} [14]

There is a suspicion on Rama’s pregnancy. She is forced to abort the seed in her womb. Once again she becomes:

“Empty of pain

And empty of desires”.

{The Vultures Act I. SceneI. LL11-12, Pg 206} [14]

The play entirely lacks the theory of faith and feeling for each other. Just see how Manik argues with Rama:

“Rama: I called out your name. But your door was shut. ...

Manik: Ha! So I should leave it open, should I? So you can come and strangle me, all of you? Its because I take care that I’ve survived in the house! Think it’s human beings that live here? The door was shut, says she!”

{The Vultures Act I. Scene II, Pg 207} [14]

They don't at all believe in relying. One member spy on the other and stealthily watch every movement of the other. Utterly devoid of any bonding, dirt and selfishness hovers around them." At the same time, a human home mutating to 'the hollow of a tree', a nest of vultures..." [13]

This is how the home is defined. I feel that the play is in search of a home, a home where every member is welcomed, a home where every member has his identity, a home where every member maintains his privacy and freedom, a home where everyone lives together sharing their bonding and love. But the play portrays a very sad, depressing and horrifying picture of a home.

Thus, Tendulkar, gives the readers a clear insight into the lives of his individual characters and show them the victims of their trappings. He was the one who waged war against the dominant trend of the great theme that was designed to draw easy tears and applause. He took Marathi theater away from its habitual sentimentalism and drawing room themes.

The scenes depicted in 'Medea' and 'The Vultures' go beyond monstrosity, a manifestation of pure evil. The characters are beyond normal human beings and irrational. The description of chilling acts of the characters is the result of the gusto of anger leading to sheer madness and cold-heartedness. From time to time the characters suffer an attack of rage which comes to them very naturally. Particularly the characters of the play 'The Vultures' are so habitual of being violent that it is hard to believe to see them calm and poised. "Tendulkar accepted violence as an inexorable fact of life. He was fascinated by what he called the Mickey Mouse Syndrome. Human beings were divided into two classes' aggressors and victims. When the cycle changed and the victims become powerful, they preyed upon others with the gusto," [12] of such cruelty, kicking a pregnant woman froze the nerves of the audience.

In the end, I would like to say that both the plays show that a man himself is responsible for his doom and calamity.

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