

THE DEMYTHICISED MIDDLE CLASS IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *THE VULTURES* AND GIRISH KARNAD'S *WEDDING ALBUM*

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Abstract:

*This paper seeks to read Vijay Tendulkar's *The Vultures* and Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* in order to understand Indian theatre's intervention in the middle class vis-à-vis their socio-historical context after the independence. Indian theatre critically engages with the class in crisis and examines their singular story of progress against a fast changing Indian post-Independence. The amorphous social segment have been demythicised on the realistic, urban stage and their tensions within exposed as they stand at the crossroads of a losing or lost glory of the past and an unforeseen or unfriendly present. The paper seeks to examine how the traditional middle class credibility comes at stake as the two plays in question unfurl the class in the crucible of family and personal relationships and rewrite their contemporary history.*

Keywords: *Middle class, family, marriage, post-Independence, consumerism, modernity.*

Introduction

Post-Independence Indian theatre and its contemporary socio-historical condition are unprecedentedly embedded into each other. The newly arrived situation witnesses a state-endorsed enterprise of national reconstitution that selectively appropriates the past for the present in order to configure a modern, indigenous nation-state. However, Indian post-Independence, which also qualifies as postcolonial (Gandhi 110-11), not only aims to build up a decolonised nation-state but also questions the very process of its build-up. It encourages the nationalist narrative of nationhood, while it also questions that narrative and foregrounds fissures and disjoints within it. Indian theatre of the time, as a product of the post-Independence and postcolonial situation, remains a prioritised form, among other cultural forms, to mediate the situation (Dharwadker 2, 221).

Among different domains of mediation such as nation, caste, class, and gender, contemporary history of the Indian middle class remains a major site that theatre loves to critically engage with. Indian theatre explores this social category, which remains important over the colonial and postcolonial decades, against the backdrop of the fast changing Indian post-Independence. The class seem to have been caught at a crossroads where they encounter the gradual decline of an increasingly obsolete past and the arrival of a difficult (or hostile) present. Their struggle to negotiate the situation captures theatrical attention that examines them through their struggle for survival. Consequently, different narratives of experience emerge, challenging the post-Independence singular story of middle class progress and, by extension, the nation. Importantly, plays of the realistic tradition undertake the critique of the class and contribute significantly to a theatrical tradition of critical and alternative thinking. The present study seeks to read two such plays- Vijay Tendulkar's *The Vultures* (1971) and Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* (2009) that engage the middle class in a realistically intimate and psychologically insightful manner. Disintegration of the middle class joint family in a volatile social context or their vulnerability to the emerging socioeconomic condition has been probed onstage in the crucible of home and individual relationships. The plays under discussion expose the tensions within the class, kept hidden under the narrative of progress, and try to

rescript a contemporary account of the class. In the present study, it remains to be seen how the plays address their crisis, while keeping in mind their compositional and operational evolution in a rapidly changing Indian society.

Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, and the Indian middle class

Vijay Tendulkar engages with the middle class to address the unacknowledged realities of contemporary urban India. Girish Karnad, on the other hand, arrives late to initiate a direct and close reading of this segment of social reality, though his delayed yet growing curiosity about the class has the potential to match Tendulkar's enduring observation of it. Andre Béteille observes: "The Indian middle class has many critics, the most eloquent, almost without exception, being members of that class itself". Interestingly, both Tendulkar and Karnad hail from the class they scrutinise (Karnad, *Theatre* 333; Tendulkar, *Interview* 10) and seem to be able to look at it in a relatively insightful and perceptive manner. Their close and extended familiarity with the class, from the Nehruvian era to the liberalised and market-oriented socio-economic condition of the present, leads to a critique of the class by exposing the gap between its notional and lived realities.

Inherited prominence in post-Independence

Indian middle class has its undeniable origin in the colonial discourse, which saw the emergence of the class of 'Bhadralok' or 'Baboo' as a consequence of Lord Macaulay's desire to form a "class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (qtd. in Varma 2). Basically germinated in the three presidency capitals of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras (Béteille), this class came to acquire enormous influence upon the nationalist movement and the fate of the nation for the following reasons - their largely upper caste background, economic affluence, and, most importantly, modern/Western outlook. Independence brings a new historical situation before them. Their unquestionable sway over pre-Independence nationalism continues almost undisturbed in the post-Independence discourse of nation-building, and it is chiefly due to their inherited professional reputation and modern/western outlook. Their former role in colonial era is no more, but new possibilities emerge to empower them again under the new circumstances. In this "Age of Hope" (Varma 26-68), which is historically the Nehruvian era, they, as educated social elite, urbane intellectual and part of the major state-apparatuses, come to assume their 'rightful' responsibility for the nation-building project; the responsibility to facilitate the goals of modernity - democracy, secularism, abolition of untouchability, education, health-care and so on.

Idealist at stake

Indian postcoloniality, after the independence, places the middle class in a situation where an increasingly obsolete, yet persisting, past encounters a difficult, yet unavoidable, present. The encounter unsettles the class as they try to negotiate the situation. Post-Nehruvian dilution of value and erosion of an ideological commitment in Indian political culture impacts the middle class immensely. The euphoria of nation-building turns downward, owing to failures in several fields of development. Plebianisation of political culture, due to corruption, criminalisation and centralisation of power, casteisation and communalisation of political discourse, makes the middle class disillusioned and discontented (Visweswaran 25). They become sceptical of the state and maintain a self-imposed distance from the 'vulgarised' public space (Krishna 2327). A gradual displacement from power begins that sees the eventual exit of the middle class from electoral politics (Visweswaran 25). Eventually, they have two alternatives before them, either to exit from power or to adopt some strategy of manoeuvre to retain their position and survive. While resorting to manoeuvre, they openly criticise the corrupt system at all levels, but this criticism comes more from their anger of displacement (Visweswaran 24) than from any moral vocation. Recourse to manoeuvre seems to cause an alleged double-standard in their class-character. Ideally, they espouse something but practice something else, thus creating a gap between 'ideality' and 'practicality'. They continue to espouse values and ethics, but when situation demands, the middle class individual can

be seen throwing off his liberal-moral values and covertly adopts means opposed to what he espouses. This alleged gap renders their progressive image untenable. Their 'ideality' comes at stake.

In post-1991 liberalised-globalised India, the middle class come to draw special attention for purely economic reasons. The 'new Indian economy' takes off their elitist, exclusive status and turns them into a category commonly perceived as a giant consumer class and valued chiefly for their ability to consume. Their power of consumption and sheer size fascinate the market and earn them an unprecedented status of prominence. The configuration of the class also undergoes a change. The upper caste, educated, and culturally-intellectually refined character changes as countless new entrants to this class arrive in the forms of "bullock capitalists' from the countryside . . . small time entrepreneurs, property agents, semi-skilled industrial and service workers, salaried households" (Varma xviii). As a result of the changing situation, the class now finds no taboo in boundless consumption, which was vulgar to "Gandhian austerity and Nehruvian socialism" (Varma xix). However, the traditional attributes of "modesty and understatement" (Fernandes qtd. in Visweswaran 24) are hard to be done away with. As a result, the gap between 'ideality' and 'practicality' widens.

Alienation, culturalism, confusion

The sudden focus as a purely consuming class increases the level of crisis within the entire middle class category. They still want to be 'modern', but their modern image now becomes largely a consumption-based identity, instead of the earlier education-intellectualism-based identity. In the current economic-cultural idiom, they become modern inasmuch as they qualify to be consumers. This seems to increase their always-already distance from rest of the country (Krishna 2327). They feel alienated from their tradition and root and, therefore, strive to overcome this loss by getting nearer to cultural signs and symbols through religiosity and culturalism. They are globalist, ideologically open, though religiosity and rituals become "important expressions of . . . [their] identity" (Kakar 90). This coexistence of consumerist modernity and tradition often proves uneasy as the middle class seem to be extra-cautious not to be fully clubbed either with the traditionalists or with the so-called rootless 'gen-next', exposing their confusion as to how to cope with the changing condition.

Now the plays

So the middle class suffer from multiple tensions within. Their exit from or manoeuvre of a hostile condition, equating consumerism with modernity, and modern-traditional dilemma widens the gap between their 'theory' and 'action' as the agents of social justice. Against this crisis, they stand open to probe undertaken by the plays under discussion here. Written from varied post-Independence perspectives, the plays try to capture serious but generally unrecognised issues, hidden inside the private zones of family and thus uncover both the tensions and their causes. Tendulkar's *The Vultures* examines the volatility of a middle class family against a backdrop of crude consumerism. Hidden realities become visible, though in an altogether different manner, in Karnad's *Wedding Album* which scrutinises the extreme interior of a household to reach out to the untenable and problematic character of the middle class in a fast changing time.

The Vultures

Although *The Vultures* was written in 1959 as *Gidhade* in Marathi and the English translation was published in 1974 (Chari and Renuka 29), the play offers a prospective view of the Indian middle class down the decades. Through its gory and violent events presented through a graphic detailing on the stage, the play successfully sends a shock-wave across the complacent middle class psyche. The self-professed conscience of society and protector of values are ruthlessly examined, and their consumerist orientation is exposed. Violence, crookedness, lechery seem to become common practices. Brothers kicking at sister's swollen womb, sons beating up abusive father for money, the deliberate connotation of incest in extra-marital relationship within the family - all holds up a gruesome picture of total degeneration destroying a family from within. Tendulkar strongly believed that violence did not exist in isolation; rather it had a lot to

do with the contemporary situation, norms, and traditions of society (*Mind* 18). This belief, perhaps, propels his realisation that the middle class as a category are not immune from society and sometimes can go to such a level of excess that calls for a review of their prevalent image.

Multiple degenerations

The Pitale family in *The Vultures* seems to be an archetypal image of middle class degeneration in contemporary India. Through its “raw brutality and lewdness” (Mitra qtd. in Chari and Renuka 33), the utter failure of a household to deal with its surroundings and its loss of power to survive are revealed. Almost all the characters show a vulnerability of the middle class condition, arising from the irresolution within their identity. The gap between appearance/illusion/claim on the one hand and reality on the other becomes so crude that their life stands insubstantial. The family boasts about a social reputation which actually rests on the corrupt accumulation of wealth by the father. As the wealth vanishes the very way it was hoarded, the off-spring of the ailing father continue to live under the mythic reputation and try to regain the lost wealth through every corrupt means possible. This gap between appearance and reality leads to some uncomfortable revelations. First, a crude gender bias is exposed in the predominantly masculine home. Secondly, violence and lewdness run unabated. Thirdly, unlimited self-centric desire undermines the preconditions of joint family as a cooperative space.

The dark underbelly

The literate and urbane look of the Pitale family has a crude underbelly. The first patriarch, Hari Pitale is now living on the mercy of his sons. But the legacy of this old and ailing 'vulture' continues through his sons, Ramakant and Umakant. Manik, their sister, and Rama, who is Ramakant's wife, are the two female hostages in the house. Against the sexist threats of her brothers, Manik sexually lures a rich guy for financial profit and intentionally becomes pregnant to entrap him. But her strategy to blackmail the man is violently opposed by her brothers as they decide to use her pregnancy to their benefit. But the sudden death of the rich guy turns the pregnancy from a profitable situation into a loss to the brothers. To eliminate any further stake in the family-share, the foetus has been brutally aborted by the brothers in a gruesome episode.

The other woman Rama is childless even after twenty-two years of marriage. Her husband's desire for a male-child subjects her to different esoteric/medical modes of scrutiny. Her counter-response reveals more dirt within the family as she becomes pregnant from her extra-marital relationship with her husband's illegitimate brother. However, the disclosure of the extra-marital liaison casts a spoiler to her dream of autonomy as her husband threatens to abort her womb. Thus the family with its so-called liberal and sophisticated image exposes itself to be a domain of sexual exploitation and gendered violence.

Total degeneration of the joint family

Another destabilising aspect of the middle class household is the sheer self-centric attitude of its members. In spite of their physical location within a joint and shared family space, each member of the Pitale family is isolated by his/her personal interest. They undermine the basic tenets of Indian joint family such as common habitation, joint kitchen, joint property, mutual obligations, and authority of the head of the family. These norms hold all the members together in a system where each is required to play his/her stipulated role. The concept of 'joint family', which is crucial in the traditional Hindu society, is upheld by the middle class because of their predominantly Hindu cultural background. But changing socio-historical developments bring them before a dilemma between tradition and modernity. Modern values, empowered by education and financial affluence, bring individual desire which the modern man seeks as necessary for his self-development. But the consumerist society seems to shape this individual desire for space and expression as a grossly self-seeking motive and demean modernity so as to posit it as totally opposed to and non-accommodative of any traditional value. This change of outlook produces mutual intolerance among the members on the basis of self-centrism. The members of the Pitale family become self-centred and ruthlessly competitive to consume materials - a tendency that delivers a serious blow to the concept of

traditional middle class joint family or the shared space of domestic world.

The play draws a grim picture of a middle class family caught in a critical conflict between the liberal, progressive image on the one hand and the consumerist compulsions of the material condition on the other. The compulsion to manage the difficult material condition, while looking progressive, makes them vulnerable to the condition itself as they recourse to all possible ways to stay 'modern'. The family becomes a commercial arrangement of convenience which stands on corruption, violence, and sexism, bereft of all traditional attributes. The portrayal explains the failure of the class to negotiate the present and the consequent gap between their public image and private reality.

Wedding Album

Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album* attempts at an in-depth study of the domestic domain of a South Indian middle class family, using its cultural manifestations as prismatic tools to probe into its safe world of hidden realities. He zooms in on a wedding in the family and uses it as an occasion to clinically dissect the family in particular and the urban middle class in general in present day India. The play shows a Saraswat Brahmin family - the Nadkarnis well known for their orthodox views of life and strict association with cultural norms, especially, marriage. The importance of marriage in Saraswat cultural life offers Karnad the scope for a close probe of the group through this event, when "members of the clan come together to celebrate and reaffirm loyalties . . . [while] behind the picture perfect smiles, simmer long suppressed suspicions, jealousies, frustrations and aggression" (Wedding). The family prepares for the prospective marriage of its younger daughter, Vidula Nadkarni, who has just finished her graduation, with an NRI (Non-Resident Indian), Ashwin Panje. The preparation compels them to assemble and talk to each other, uncovering several hidden zones of discomfort within the family. As the play progresses, we find that Vidula agrees to the marriage without ever meeting the man, simply on the basis of some telephonic conversation, SMS, video-tape exchange, and, more importantly, caste-affinity. During the preparation, the play also reveals a range of issues from the subtle politics over inviting relatives to the dark secrets of the characters - their shaded vulnerabilities, caste and communal biases within/outside home, and commercialised, business-like attitude to marriage. The play ends with Vidula's surprising decision to marry the man, who appears utmost self-centric and callous to her needs.

Karnad has divided the play into nine scenes, out of which Scene One and Scene Five compose the outer frame of the story and take place about three years after the rest of the scenes, which form the inner frame. The entire incident of Vidula's wedding, including all that happened in connection with it, is presented in the inner frame of seven scenes other than the two. In the two scenes (One and Five), after three years' gap, the past is being remembered through a televised mode of reproduction, where the outer frame actually validates the inner frame's thematic polemic. The only son of the Nadkarni family Rohit is seen as reviewing the past materials of his family in order to make a super-hit serial on the life of his sister Vidula. But the 'drab and dull' story of Vidula, agreeing to marry a man whom she never met and leading an ordinary life of a child-bearing house-wife, has been dismissed by the producer as unattractive and unsalable to the TV audience. More profitable seems to be the 'Radhabai item', the life of the family-cook, which after some melodramatic patch-up can make a clean sweep of the market. This marketing strategy ironically emphasises the validity of the main plot (the inner frame) of Vidula's so-called unsalable story and self-reflexively justifies theatre that sincerely explores layered reality, without becoming melodramatic for commercial success.

The five points of engagement: Hema and disturbed sexuality

Among the sixteen characters in the play, the following four serve as the most important points of critical engagement with the family or the social class they belong to - Hema, Rohit (the son), Ashwin, and Vidula. The eldest daughter Hema, who has left her husband and two kids in Sydney to join the marriage, opens up her life's secrets safely hidden behind the gloss of her NRI tag. She feels upset over the hurried way she was married off, vis-à-vis the thorough arrangement of Vidula's wedding. More importantly,

Hema shows the signs of disturbed wifedom and suppressed sexuality, which are non-discussable and unthinkable in a traditional middle class family such as the Nadkarnis. Both the sisters bear the scar of their traumatic childhood in the hand of their paedophilic servant, though they have never done the blasphemy of disclosure. Consequently, Hema feels horrified by her father-in-law's look at her body during her wedding ceremony. This sexual scar has also affected her normal relationship with her husband and left her lonely with a lot of desires unaddressed and unresolved. Her sexual frustration comes to be elated when a young boy of her son's age admires her body, giving her a sense of empowerment to be able to draw the attention of a young male. Hema is unique because she provides an insider's-outsider's peep at the family. She is still a Nadkarni by blood and also an outsider by marriage. Among all the Nadkarnis, she seems to be the only one who can think over the emerging criticalities with unmatched detachment.

Rohit: Commodification of marriage

Rohit, Hema's younger brother, exposes further the institution of marriage. The castiest and communal bias of the urban middle class comes to the fore when the entire family opposes Rohit's affair with a Christian girl. Marriage is further exploded when alternative proposal of arranged marriage comes for Rohit. A suitable/Nadkarni match is finally discovered by selecting from a wide and complex network of caste-kinship. What comes out from the drama of matchmaking is a set of awkward implications. First, the hysteric pro-activeness of the bride's parents undermines all standards of human relationships. Secondly, the technique of persuasion is bizarre as it involves all possible types of allurements and promises from the girl's reported love, prospect of property, and astrological assurance to emotional blackmail. Finally, Rohit shows his practical prudence in judging what to grasp and what to dump. Three years later, he has been found leading a married life with the suitable girl, whose father financed his Germany-trip.

Mrs. Nadkarni: Complicated motherhood

The character of Mrs. Nadkarni is always shown as the traditional mother. In his attempt to first build up a conventional image of a middle class family and then dismantle it by a slow and sustained process of unwrapping and digging into its secret alleys, Karnad shows the mother in most commonplace manner. She is deeply sunk into her kitchen, the only space she thinks her own. Removed from everywhere, she retreats into this small space and feels empowered over her daily squabble with the cook, Radhabai. But behind this stereotyped middle class motherhood, peeps "endless complications" (51) that disallow the situation to be as normal as it looks. The preparation for Vidula's passport and visa unearths an ominous goof-up in her birth certificate. At the place of her father's name, appears her uncle's name Ramdas. That it was her uncle who went to the Registrar's office to record the birth complicates it further. The unutterable question looms large: did uncle Ramdas have an eye on his sister-in-law? The ordinariness of life comes to be dishevelled by such wicked insinuation, and Karnad deliberately leaves it there only to let speculation run. The mother with her middle class configuration - desire for a better life, sense of personal failure, grievances against family, wish-fulfilment through her daughter - is suddenly made to stand before an unpleasant reality. Although the revelation of 'mistake' does not derail the normal course of life altogether, it temporarily unveils a hidden avenue to a possible zone of 'danger'.

Ashwin Panje: Marriage as cultural retrieval

Ashwin Panje, the proposed groom for Vidula, offers another access to shaded realities. Ashwin seems to be a hyphenated Indian-American who leads an insular life in his adopted land. He wants to be a successful American but is clueless as to the ways of overcoming his hyphenated existence. He therefore looks back to his land of origin and culture as a repository to provide him with a linkage to his lost root. For this purpose, Hindu marriage, which is "one of the most sacred and least introspected upon institutions that modern Indians continue to aggressively identify with . . . as the means to self-fulfilment" (Srinivasan viii) in a globalised world, comes to his rescue. Marriage comes to him as the only way of self-retrieval that can connect him with his root and assure him with an incorrupt space of his own in America. The rootedness is doubly registered by the fact that the girl is from the same caste and an Indian. Ashwin's approach to

marriage as a mission can be called self-satisfying in a cultural and racial insularity. What seems important is it heavily relies on gender stereotypes as the only way out for this man in crisis. Behind his mask of modernity, a crude obsession with gender and caste is obvious. The look-out for an orthodox Indian wife, visibly to have a docile embodiment of culture, seems to be the easiest way of having the authentic private world, 'a home away from home', without self-sacrificing much.

Vidula: Suppressed sexuality

Vidula, the commonplace, ready-to-giggle girl, might look unprofitable and less sensational, but her easy-to-ignore girlish look has lot of unnerving realities to reveal. Her suppressed sexuality finds a free run in the dark cubicle of an internet café, where she, under the secret name of Kuchla the Jezebel, sex-chats with her digital lover, Ananga the Bodyless. The most ordinary and stereotyped girl becomes shockingly unusual in this privacy of darkness and unfurls her heart in a way unimaginable in her social space. Several real-life events digitally interface in this virtual reality as she impersonates the family-cook's daughter, who was a kept woman of an aged trader, and compares her circumscribed life in the family with the daughter of the cook. This virtual freedom reveals Vidula. First, it exposes the ordinary girl, who makes regular escapade to a world of forbidden fantasy and converses in the most raw, sensual idiom possible. Secondly, this exposure seems to explain her decision to marry the chosen groom, despite her personal dislike. She looks at herself as a kept woman inside her norm-bound family and may continue as a kept woman with the new master after marriage, but it promises her something new - a young master, life in the US, and money. She thinks it better to give luck a try and dispassionately marry a rich NRI instead of staying in the present condition, playing the 'normal' Vidula in public and the 'abnormal' Kuchla the Jezebel in the privacy of the darkened café.

Conclusion

Karnad has made his play, *Wedding Album*, look like a simple placid tale of the joyous moment of a family assembling around a wedding. But the simplicity is deceptive because danger lurks at each and every nook. Ease of fun goes alongside the dangers of unnerving revelations. The slow-but-subtle-and-persistent narrative maintains a speculative suspense in the plot that reveals by its apparent style of concealing. Tendulkar's *The Vultures*, on the other hand, unmasks an urban middle class family with all its decadence. He is outspoken in showing the crudities onstage and leaves nothing to speculation in order to shatter the squeamishness and inhibitions of a predominantly urban middle class audience. Both the plays examine the crisis within the middle class against the backdrop of a commercialised and globalised India; the compulsion to negotiate a difficult present; the consequent gap between what they propose to look like 'ideally' and what they are actually. Through their different dramatic techniques of engagement, the plays enrich the tradition of social drama that critiques contemporary urban life in the fast changing Indian post-Independence.

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