

Encounter in Ubugland: A Political Intrigue

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Abstract

Encounter in Ubugland is essentially a political play. It unveils the essential nature of the game of politics and also the basic craving for power in human nature. The play unravels the treacherous political intrigues designed to attain positions of authority and the corruption and hypocrisy involved in holding on to them. The cabinet ministers make princess Vijaya the queen of Ubugland to use her as their pawn, but their anticipations were belied by her diplomacy and autocracy. This strife for power launches them on an encounter. And the play is interspersed with the shrewd comments on the nature of politics and on that of politicians, Prannarayan, a man of third sex.

Keywords: *intrigue, autocracy, decrepit, abdicate, drudgery, obdurate, condescend.*

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Introduction

Encounter in Ubugland is a minor play written by Tendulkar. It exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy in politics and politicians of all times. The king of Ubugland, Vichitravirya, is a power-thirsty ruler. His cabinet ministers - Vratyasam, Bhagadanta, Karkashirsha, Pishtakeshi and Aranyaketu - are typical diplomatic politicians. After the death of the king, the cabinet ministers install princess Vijaya as their queen with a selfish motive of using her as their puppet, but she proves to be a hard nut, contrary to their anticipations, and this precipitates in an encounter between the queen and her cabinet who is ultimately subdued to her autocracy.

The life of politics is diplomacy and the breath of politicians is hypocrisy and inhumanity. King Vichitravirya keeps his ministers waiting for hours and goes on speaking on insignificant subjects to the public. When he returns to the ministers, without any conscience of having humiliated them, he boasts eloquently how he has touched on various subjects in his address to the public and how they listened spell-bound to him. He is unaware of the passage of time. He is decrepit and old. He is celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of his coronation. He has lost his wits and suffers from loss of memory. For instance, he forgets why he has called a painter but pretends as if he remembers it.

Even though he is aged and feeble, he aspires to rule his kingdom for at least another fifty years. He tells his ministers that Umbugland needs him: The time will certainly come to hand the reigns of this island's government to you people and retire. But we must consider the future of the island and the schemes for general development. We have in the past sixty years only laid their foundation. The island badly needs our leadership for at least another fifty years. (*p.227).

Vichitravirya is a hypocrite. He adheres to power but he tells his cabinet: "Power is a crown of thorns. Power is a sword hanging over you!" (p.279) He would not wish even his 'enemies to be punished with power'. He is ready to 'abdicate, and become a hermit'. He considers power as a source of pain but he has planned to undergo an experiment in rejuvenation after which he would be able to rule Umbugland for at least a hundred more years. Ironically, he dies within a few hours of expressing his unnatural ambition to regain youth and rule his kingdom for a hundred more years.

The wickedness of the king is evident in the agony of the cabinet ministers. They entered politics when they were in twenties and they are old now. They have endured for forty years the humiliation they were subjected to by the king. They served the king like slaves. At first, they were very enthusiastic and regarded their service to the king as their 'sacred duty'. Then they swallowed their humiliation as a 'temporary stratagem'. Later they waited for the king 'as a matter of policy' and this has now become an 'entrenched habit' with them. They were so treacherously oppressed that they were ashamed of themselves and their king. They lament: "Our hair's grown white in the service of the island. And still we are treated in this fashion" (p.273). They have to play false to themselves. They have to dissemble their discontent and delight the King sycophantically: **Pishtakeshi:** His Majesty is the sole artist of the island's destiny. **Vratyasam:** His Majesty is Umbugland and Umbugland is his Majesty. (p. 277)

They have to go on increasing the period of his rule from fifty years to five hundred years. They are insulted directly. The king criticizes them as inefficient.

Service to the king becomes such drudgery to them that they wish him death to be liberated from it. The two men who play the role of the chorus comment on the dictatorship of the late king: He made puppets of Cabinet men. He made a cake of the government! Of democracy he made a noise. (p. 283)

After the sudden demise of the king a puzzling question is asked by everyone: 'After Vichitravirya, who?' Mutual suspicion and discord is rank among the cabinet ministers and so they fail to elect their leader unanimously. Vratyasam still hates their late king. So he refuses to perform the customary salutation to his memory. The others are offended with his behaviour and immediately Karkashirsha, the ever-raging minister, accuses him as 'a traitor to the island'. Vratyasam retorts that every one of them is a traitor for having allowed the king's madness to go on for forty days and says: A true politician can be loyal only to himself. (p. 288)

Like the present-day politicians, Aranyaketu hires supporters. As it happens in State Assemblies and Parliament, as a mark of deep disagreement with these insulting and careless words from Karkashirsha, he walks out of the council. He seeks the support of the public and threatens the other ministers. As soon as the ministers are informed of the fierce riot of the Kadamba tribe, each indicts the other. When the attendant tells that in the East the rebellion is against Vratyasam, he at once doubts the honesty of Karkashirsha. When the agitation is in the West against Pishtakeshi, he stares suspiciously at Aranyaketu. Even the silence of Bhagadanta is derived by Vratyasam: "This is what a perfect ruler should be. The two men remark 'each one's a rascal!' and each aspires to become the King of Umbugland. They assess the situation:

As each has his claim, the problem remains unresolved. The cabinet ministers are opportunists and exploiters of the innocent in the game of power. When they are hankering in dilemma as to their future ruler, princess Vijaya suddenly

* The page nos. in parentheses refer to Vijay Tendulkar's "Encounter in Umbugland," Trans. Priya Adarkar, Five Plays, Vijay Tendulkar, (Bombay: OUP, 1992).

intrudes into the council by mistake. The appearance of Vijaya at this crisis flashes a solution to the quick-witted Vratyasam and at once he declares: Meet our new leader! (Vijaya shrinks) His Majesty's heir! This one in front, five of us behind! She'll be the rule, we'll be the rulers! An excellent plan till we agree on a firm decision! (p.293)

The cabinet ministers make Vijaya the queen, with the selfish motive of using her as their pawn. They like to depute power to her and rule the kingdom under the mask of deputation. But their hopes are blasted by Vijaya and the race for power begins between the cabinet and the queen. They try to control and persecute each other and the play "unveils the essential nature of the game of politics as also the basic craving for power in human nature"¹.

The moment Vijaya takes the oath as the queen of Ubugland, she becomes a different person. She proves that she is made of a sterner stuff than her ministers have expected...“Femininely obdurate, over ambitious not so competent and inexperienced that she is, power goes to her head and results in an encounter -an encounter between the queen and her cabinet ministers.”²

As soon as she is installed on the throne, she becomes stubborn, cruel and dominating like her father. She insists on cutting the legs of the throne. She orders Prannarayan, her eunuch, to play hopscotch with her. She has been a child crying for freedom: "What crime did I commit, that I've been imprisoned in the palace since childhood?" (p.303) But gradually she begins to enjoy power. Under the guidance and advice of Prannarayan and by her natural instincts as the daughter of the late king she flowers into a seasoned politician and a ruthless ruler. She could keep the cabinet ministers waiting for hours together as her father did. And she could bluntly remark that they were used to wait for her father. She could call her ministers 'bloody Cabinet' in their absence and compliment them in their presence. Even Prannarayan wonders at her diplomacy. She dumbfounds the cabinet ministers by commanding them to bow to her. She orders them to remember the value of their 'high rank'. Even they feel that there is no alternative for them but to condescend to her whims and fancies. She daringly ignores the programme fixed for her by the cabinet and meets the Kadamba tribe: "She isn't prepared to confine herself prudently to the framework", (p.312) What is said of Indira Gandhi can be applied to Vijaya...“Indira becomes prime minister. She displays the enigmatic and relentless skills that make her a formidable presence at home and abroad.”³

The cabinet ministers find in her a threat to their political existence and discuss it furiously: This brat of Vichitravirya's is not ready to be persuaded, or to become wise or mature. Or perhaps we should say for Aranyaketu's sake that she hasn't the capacity for it. Yes, let's not give her false blame. But say what you wish there is no longer any room for doubt. In the past seven months, she has proved vain all the high hopes we had when we planned to put her on the throne. (p. 312)

Immediately Karkashirsha proposes a solution for the problem: 'Depose her!' And there follows a fierce argument among them and finally they agree to give a strong warning to Vijaya to make her understand the importance of the cabinet ministers in her administration.

The political conflict between the queen and her cabinet mounts to its peak as she prepares a blueprint for the upliftment of the Kadamba tribe. She thinks if her plan operates successfully then in the following five years this original tribe will become economically stable and self-supporting. She is a typical self-centered politician and longs for power. The Kadamba plan is intended to establish her power in the kingdom.

But the ministers oppose the plan because they consider the tribesmen as 'dirty animals', 'drunkards' and 'rats'. So the ministers except Aranyaketu and Bhagadanta are not ready even to listen to the plan. They like to keep them down—trodden and exploit. Vijaya rises to the situation. She declares emergency and without the consent of the cabinet, she orders the operation of the Kadamba plan. The ministers become furious and feel insulted. And they decide to kill this insolence at its source! They call Vijaya's method of operating the Kadamba plan a 'Murder of tradition' and an 'abandonment of principle!' She is 'a born dictator'. The ministers prepare for confrontation with Vijaya. Vratyasam proposes that they should create a

public uproar against the plan. Even though Karkashirsha advises him that they should not bring the public into the encounter, Vratyasam insists on it because the mob can do wonders.

Bhagadanta refuses to agree with their intrigue as he is a Kadamba, and he leaves the cabinet. Aranyaketu very feebly supports the plan of Vijaya. "Even if her Majesty's methods are wrong, the plan for rehabilitating the Kadambas is quite good in principle." (p.336). But he is snubbed by Vratyasam's ironical criticism of Vijaya.

Warned seriously by Vratyasam, Aranyaketu succumbs to the will of the cabinet and supports their plan. The cabinet ministers conclude that a battle against the queen is inevitable, "In the cause of democracy, for the sake of principle and for Umbugland's glorious future" (p.336). And to succeed in their encounter with their queen, Vratyasam proposes a massacre: At least fifty martyrs must sacrifice their lives. Property worth at least five or seven thousand must be wrecked. This is the cruelty of politicians towards their people. They-attempt to get power at the cost of people's lives. The cabinet incites the mob to destroy the palace and to kill Vijaya. The cabinet plots to besiege the palace with the support of the public. (p. 337)

But Vijaya is a woman of indomitable strength. With the cooperation of Bhagadanta and with the dedicated service of Prannarayan, she confronts them with an unexpected tact. She remains stubborn to the persuasions of Aranyaketu to call for a cabinet meeting and insists that the cabinet ministers should apologize for their conduct towards her. She reveals her aspiration to Prannarayan: I want to rule a hundred years, a thousand years.... There are so many problems, so many dilemmas and obstacles and wants. Umbugland has to develop yet! If I am not here, how will it? If I am not on the throne, what will these useless old men do to the island? I must look after everything, do everything myself. I will have to do it. (p. 345)

Like her father, Vijaya is over-ambitious. She longs for ruling Umbugland for over a thousand years. She is insolent. She thinks she alone can uplift the country. Her aspirations reveal that craving for power, egoism, and aggressive nature are the innate qualities of men or women.

The cabinet ministers are as crazy as Vijaya for power. They intrigue against her. Except Bhagadanta, they incite the mob to surround the palace, to pelt stones at it and to burn some vehicles if possible. They watch the hectic violence of the crowd and its activities from a room in the palace hoping that fifty or sixty people will be killed. The irony is that Vratyasam wishes, "This golden page in Umbugland's history must be inscribed in blood!" (p.348) He shouts 'Death to the Queen! Death to the Queen! Victory to the people! Victory to the Martyrs!' This is the pure sadism of man. The conflict between the cabinet and the queen is a barbarous struggle for political domination.

In the struggle for power, Vijaya emerges successful with her superb resourcefulness. She diverts the rage of the mob towards the ministers and stones rush into the room through a window to their alarm. Immediately, contrary to their anticipations, Vijaya appears before them and assures her protection to them. The cabinet begins hypocritically to disown their connection with the riot.

Pishtakeshi suggests that perhaps Her Majesty would be able to calm the crowd. Vijaya at once seizes the opportunity and makes him confess that the crowd would listen to her. Vijaya mockingly corners him.

She asks them directly whether the crowd makes the demands or the ministers and baffles them. She becomes a tactful politician and shows them that the crowd demands the blood of the cabinet ministers but not that of the queen by making the mob kill Bhagadanta, which is, of course, a trick played by Bhagadanta and Prannarayan. Like Satan, the leader of the fallen angels, who proposes to go himself in search of the Garden of Eden and face all the horrors of the passage, Vijaya consents to meet the unruly crowd at the request of the cabinet. She comes back alive and bewilders the cabinet. She recounts to them what had happened in her encounter with the mob. First, they demanded her life. They threw stones at her. Then she admonished them: "Enough of this foolishness! First stand still and be quiet!" (p.354). For a moment it was all silence. She

asked the crowd to explain themselves. She assured them that she would strive for the welfare of her people. Even then, their silence persisted. She said that taxation is hereby abolished. Yet they were silent. At that the crowd brightened up. She said that those ministers who are found guilty will be punished severely. The crowd brightened up still further. She shouted, 'down with the cabinet'. The crowd repeated the slogan louder than her. Then someone with a whining voice shouted from behind: 'The Kadamba plan must be scrapped'. She shouted again: 'Down that with the plan - and the Ministers who made it'. They shouted deafeningly: Death to Vratyasam! Death to Karkashirsha! Death to Pishtakeshi! Death to Aranyaketu! (p. 354)

Then to the dismay of the cabinet, she tells them that she has promised to hand over them to the mob and so they have to go out and meet the mob. Terrified by the memory of Bhagadanta's death they refuse to go out and appeal to the throne for their protection.

Thus, Vijaya superbly manipulates the situation so that the very cabinet ministers who have revolted against her implore her to give them shelter and safety. Vijaya enjoying herself the displeasure of the cabinet ministers promises protection to them and starts governing them as her late father had done earlier, by the end of the play. Arundhati Banerjee says, "Tendulkar has portrayed this character with utmost care. There is a definite development in her from a head-strong, self-opinionated but politically inexperienced young princess to an intelligent yet whimsical ruler who devises her own (successful) methods of vanquishing her enemies."⁴

The play is a biting satire on the hypocrisy, selfishness and cruelty of modern politicians and politics. The crookedness of politics is revealed in the statements of Prannarayan, the eunuch. Prannarayan is: "the incomplete man who, the playwright feels has the right to comment on the baser qualities of the complete man. He performs the function of the Sutradhar, narrating the story as well as commenting on the situation and incident."⁵

The comments made by Prannarayan on politics and its nourishers are memorable. When Vijaya enquires him after taking the oath at the coronation ceremony, he mocks at such formalities. He teaches her the code of conduct of a diplomatic politician. A ruler has to be super-human, or even divine. She has to remember the importance of her ministers and behave accordingly with them: "one must insult them so lightly that their self-importance won't suffer" (p.299). He asks her to "Insult them but don't wound their egos. Prannarayan defines politics with absolute precision. Politics is more clearly defined by Vratyasam earlier in the play. Prannarayan describes his role in the play.

Prannarayan is a character in the play who holds mirror up to nature. He brings home to Vijaya that her ambition to rehabilitate the Kadambas is a consequence of not her goodwill to them but an attempt to feed her pride.

He is an embodiment of wisdom and can be compared with Shakespeare's fools like Feste in **Twelfth Night**. After going through the letter of Vijaya informing them of the operation of the Kadamba plan, when the ministers order his dismissal, Prannarayan, quietly but firmly answers that he would obey only the queen's orders. Whenever Vijaya treads on an unguarded path in her irritation with the ministers, he guides her. He is the only person who sees things as they are, without any bias. At the end of the play, he criticizes people who make the hypocritical leaders: ...I see your upside down, a formless, characterless, lifeless, existence less gathering. The blind, deaf and dumb spectators of the whole encounter - who allow men to become politicians, politicians to become statesmen, statesmen to become cunning, and cunning men to become robots, mechanical men. You are a force that claps its hands, makes noises, with its mouth, an amazing untiring force. (p. 356)

Tendulkar uses a number of significant techniques like chorus who with their running commentary create a sensational atmosphere in the play. The role of Sutradhar is played by Prannarayan. Introduction of Prannarayan, a man of third sex, in the place of Sutradhar adds a new dimension to the play. Like Rajaninath in **The Vultures** has with Rama, he has a close association with Princess Vijaya, the main character of the play, and moulds the evolution of her personality.

The play is a political satire. It reveals the cruelty, hypocrisy and diplomacy of politicians. The politicians struggle for power at the expense of humanity itself. Vijaya's endeavours to establish her dominion over her ministers and the ministers' hectic efforts to use her as their pawn reveal man's implacable and ferocious fervor for power. The play exposes man's craving for power and authority. It is a treasure-house of stark comments on the nature of politics and politicians.

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