

Chapter IV

The Middle Class Demystified

The Indian middle class as a social category has a significant presence in Vijay Tendulkar's dramatic oeuvre. Girish Karnad, on the other hand, arrives late to initiate a direct and close reading of this segment of social reality. However, the post-Independence Indian middle class as an object of critical study can be taken for an important point of common interest between both the writers. And the reason is Karnad's growing curiosity about this class. His newly found interest has the potential to match Tendulkar's enduring observation of it. They both seem to be remarkable in their treatment of this clearly-visible-yet-variously-inscrutable category by exploring its nuanced nature and functions in different temporal and spatial conditions. Quite interestingly, the growing importance of this class since India's independence seems to have found a befitting scrutiny in these two writers who themselves hail from the class under focus (Tendulkar, *An Interview* 10; Karnad, *Theatre* 333). Andre Beteille, perhaps, correctly observes, "The Indian middle class has many critics, the most eloquent, almost without exception, being members of that class itself" (*Indian Middle*). Besides, Tendulkar's and Karnad's long and extended presence in literary and intellectual circles has also added an edge to their observation. They both have the privilege to witness the multi-faceted development of this class from its post-Independence growth in the Nehruvian era to its formidable presence in the fast changing world. This extended familiarity, informed by intellectual insight, leads to a deep understanding of the middle class households vis-à-vis related social conditionalities. Through their wide thematic spectrum, they propose to negotiate several problematic issues, kept stable by the dominant discourses of continuity, and produce a critique of the said class. Whether it is the (re/de)formation of the middle class joint family in a fluid social context and its disturbing locale of traditional domesticity, the individuals caught in the doldrums of a highly consumerist society, or their unavoidable vulnerability to the emerging social atmosphere, each has been negotiated in the domain of individual relations within the home/family. Tendulkar's *The Vultures* (1971), *Kamala* (1981) and Karnad's *Wedding Album* (2009), written from varied spatiality of the post-

Independence situation, are examples of the middle class addressed and exposed. What these plays offer is a critique of the predominant discourses of the middle class condition. They closely observe how a certain group of individuals and their families operate against a social backdrop of transition and instability. The present chapter seeks to assess this observation, keeping in mind the configurative and functional developments of this class in an independent and consumerist India.

Tendulkar and Karnad engage the middle class to penetrate into its critical relation with a fast changing social environment. The educated, urbane, and liberal class, which has always a crucial role to play in the larger social context, cannot escape different conditionalities and finds itself in a peculiar situation. Its 'modernity' finds it hard to cope with some aspects of the present condition. The relation between the middle class, embodying 'modernity', and the contemporary surroundings, which manifests pervasive corruption and crude consumerism, rocks this category to such an extent that it stands wide open to a probe. Its so-called claim to 'modernity' becomes debatable for multiple reasons. Karnad is concerned about this problem in its image, and his immediate interest seems to be in a slow and subtle exposition of the 'mythic' middle class. Such type of exposition, as Karnad's, indirectly refers to the middle class crisis that Tendulkar focuses on in a rather straightforward manner. Both the writers attempt to understand this category at the backdrop of a socio-economic change and adopt a demystifying method. This process of demystifying the middle class is inevitably variable; the outspoken style of Tendulkar does not often resemble Karnad's restrained manner, though both seem to be equally effective in capturing the critical situation that this class is in.

Before we move to discuss the plays, a brief survey of the critical development of this social category, called the Indian middle class, might prove useful. The Indian middle class has its undeniable origin in the colonial discourse, which saw the emergence of the class of the '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 (Beteille, *Indian Middle*), this class came to acquire enormous influence upon the fate of the nation for some reasons – their largely upper caste background, economic affluence, and, most importantly, modern outlook. Their modernity is invariably rooted in the premise of Western ideals of progress, and from this

theoretical position they play a major role in formulating the nationalist approach to modernity. They represent the powerful nationalist discourse that seeks to accept the modernist ideals for the vision of an independent nation-state. Their participation in the nationalist movement, which is allegedly 'Bhadralok'-centric (Batabyal 3835), consolidates their hold over the mainstream political culture of the country. Independence brings a new historical situation before this class. Their unquestionable sway over pre-Independence nationalism seems to have remained almost undisturbed in the post-Independence discourse of nation-building. Their inherited professional reputation and modern outlook ensure them prominence in the official mechanism of the new state. From their side, they also self-prepare to meet new challenges and enhance acceptability. Their former role during the colonial era is no more, but new possibilities emerge to empower them again under the new circumstances. In the form of educated social elite, urbane intellectual and stake-holder in the major state-apparatus, they come to perceive their 'rightful' responsibility for and role in the nation-building project. They enthusiastically develop an axiomatic role of leadership to implant the latest of modernist and liberal values, which they have learnt from the West, in the growth of the newly born nation. Pavan K. Varma has termed this phase of post-Independence middle class formation as the "Age of Hope" (26-68). In this "Age", which is historically the Nehruvian era, they are the inevitable instrument to facilitate the modernist goal of democracy, secularism, abolition of untouchability, education, health-care and so on. They become the most prominent agent of Nehruvian nationalism. But one important thing to note is that they also remain instrumental behind the formation of state-institutions with inherent colonial legacies, and this, perhaps, is to do with the theoretical premise of their modernity, which is European/colonial. The parliamentary democracy, the civil service, the judicial structure, the armed forces, the education system, all are in tune with the British/Western model, and this poses a serious question to the claim of postcolonial character of the middle class. Their reliability as a true facilitator of development and everything modern and progressive seems to come under scrutiny and become increasingly unstable and complex.

The post-Nehruvian dilution of value and erosion of an ideological commitment, seen first in the political culture of the country since Independence, impacts the middle class immensely. The euphoria of nation-building turns downward, owing to failures in several fields of development. Power politics seems to step in to compensate for

developmental failures. 'Legitimisation' of corruption, criminalisation and centralisation of power, casteisation and communalisation of public domain – all these are on the rise, while politicians shamelessly resort to sycophancy and vote-bank politics to retain power. This plebianisation of the political culture makes the middle class disillusioned and discontented (Visweswaran 25). They become sceptical of development as well as of the state and maintain a self-imposed distance (Krishna 2327). Their modern principles of reason and progress, as they claim, cannot co-exist with this vulgarisation of public service. But this display of modernity as the sole motive of protest seems to be problematic. They themselves have taken active part in the state machinery and power and therefore cannot claim, historically/empirically, immunity from corruption. Their discontent seems to betray a different reason. The reported plebianisation of politics witnesses the rise of other elements in politics (Visweswaran 25). They are the lower classes and castes with an anti-modern outlook, which have so far been marginalised by the upper-caste-dominated middle class modernity. Thanks chiefly to vote-bank/number-based politics, these elements begin to assume significance, undermining middle class centrality. A gradual displacement from power begins that sees the eventual exit of the middle class from electoral politics (Visweswaran 25). It is their displacement that seems to make them discontent about the state of affair. Eventually, they lose interest in it and have to exit. They openly criticise the state for corruption, and the core of this criticism springs rather from their growing dislodgement from it (Visweswaran 24) than from any moral faith. The dislodgement and discontent seem 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'. The class claims to be the chief harbinger of modern values, but more for their theoretical posture than any practical application. This seems to be true in various domains of their social life – whether the working place, or the domestic sphere of home, family and marriage. When situation demands, the middle class individual never hesitates to throw off his liberal-moral values and covertly adopts illegal means. Ironically, it is supposed to be their modernist ideals that have seen the nation prosper, but in a moment of crisis the middle class seems to be unhesitant to compromise on the very ideals they stand for. This alleged gap renders their honest and progressive image untenable. Their 'ideality' comes at stake.

Ever since 1991 the middle class has drawn special attention for purely economic reasons. The 'liberalisation' and 'globalisation' of the Indian economy has turned them

into a category which is commonly perceived as a giant consumer class. Their ability to consume and sheer size fascinate the market, and they seem to have gained an unprecedented status of prominence. This new phase of development shows that the middle class has indeed come far away from their pre-Independence elite and exclusive status. The upper caste 'Bhadraloks' and 'Baboos', who flourished chiefly by the power of English language, western education and access to government jobs, were small in size but powerful as an intellectual group. They were perceived as "the subject and agent of nationalism" (Visweswaran 23). This perception continued even after Independence in Nehru's India, where the middle class proudly participated in the nation-building. "This began to change in the 1960s and 70s, and more dramatically after 1991" (Varma xviii). The cultural exclusivity of this class, comprising educated and refined intellectuals who were financially comfortable if not affluent, now fast declines. There are countless new entrants to this class in the forms of " 'bullock capitalists' from the countryside...small time entrepreneurs, property agents, semi-skilled industrial and service workers, salaried households" (Varma xviii) with working husband and wife. This new configuration of the class helps bring changes in its overall outlook. The new entrants do not depend solely on government jobs, as the private sector (e.g. the Multi-National Companies) opens up new possibilities to become rich. Boundless consumption, which was vulgar to "Gandhian austerity and Nehruvian socialism" (Varma xix), is no longer a taboo to them. By virtue of the new economy, they prosper and grow in numerical size and therefore unhesitatingly accept its mantra of consumption. Under the circumstances, crisis seems to be acute for the traditional members of this class. Their amazement knows no bounds at the rapid rate of prosperity around. They find consumption more feasible than the once espoused Nehruvian ethics of middle class "modesty and understatement" (Fernandes qtd. in Visweswaran 24). But their popular image is hard to be done away with. As a result, the gap between 'ideality' and 'practicality' widens.

The sudden focus as a purely consuming class increases the level of crisis within the entire middle class category. They achieve recognition as a powerful agency and facilitator of development in the 'new economy' but come to be afflicted with multiple problems in the new context of consumerist culture. They seem to be carried away by the sudden focus they get, and their modernity, which is already suspect, begins to be influenced by the consumerist system of thought, which also comes from the West. The middle class man still wants to be modern, but modernity now seems to be a consumer-

based identity. In the current econo-cultural idiom, he becomes modern inasmuch as he qualifies to be a consumer. The chief qualification of his present identity, i.e. ability to consume, undermines his other attributes, and he ends up merely as an unrestrained consumer. This seems to increase his always-already distance from the rest of India (Krishna 2327). He again feels alienated from his tradition and root and, therefore, strives to overcome this loss by getting nearer to cultural signs and symbols. Sudhir Kakar observes that the middle class largely comprises the urban, educated flexible Hindus (90). They are globalist, ideologically open, though religion and rituals occupy significant space in their concern (Kakar 90). For the flexible middle class Hindu, religious occasions and rituals are "important expressions of his identity" (Kakar 90). This attachment with culture, which is criticised by the Hindu traditionalists/nationalists for its superficiality (Kakar 94), can be viewed as his effort to avoid being rootless. Importantly, this coexistence of consumerist modernity and tradition is not always smooth and easy. He seems to be extra-cautious not to be fully clubbed either with the traditionalists or with the so-called rootless 'gen-next'. Perhaps, this is why the popularity of the spiritual "healing gurus" (Kakar 91) is on the rise along with McDonald's/KFC among this class. Somewhere it implies a tension or anxiety in the self-understanding of its identity. They seem to be confused about themselves as well as about their social surroundings and, as a result, stand volatile in the present situation.

So the middle class suffers from multiple tensions within. Beside the modern-traditional dilemma and mistakenly equating consumerism with modernist principle of progressive life, he is equally disturbed by the growing gap between his theory and action as an agent of social justice. Truly, he moves away from active politics as a protest against the debasement of political culture. But this is more because he is displaced by the rise of the lower classes/castes in politics than for the reason of debasement as he claims it to be. His new-found identity of vigorous consumer also disallows him to fight all he is supposedly opposed to. Here, we have an individual who protests against social and political decadence and at the same time finds himself prone to it. Against the backdrop of these unresolved crises, the middle class stands open to the critical probe undertaken by some of the plays of Tendulkar and Karnad. Written from varied post-Independence perspectives, the plays try to capture the uncertainties and tensions increasingly found in this category. They try to know, in a demystifying method, serious but generally unrecognised issues, hidden inside the private zones of the family, and thus uncover both

the tensions and their causes. For certain, this probe proves highly productive to capture different challenges to the traditional image of the Indian middle class. In Tendulkar's *The Vultures* and *Kamala*, middle class individuals and family against a backdrop of crude consumerism is the subject examined. Similar issues surface, 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 Pitale family in *The Vultures* seems to be an archetypal image of middle class degeneration. Through its "raw brutality and lewdness" (Mitra qtd. in Chari & Renuka 33), the utter failure of a household to deal with its surroundings and its loss of power to survive is revealed. Almost all the characters show a vulnerability of the middle class condition, arising from the irresolution within its 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. So reputation is very important for Mr. Hari Pitale's sons, who try to sustain it for a modern look of the family and go unbound in their quest for money. This causes the gap between theory and practice. The family tries to be modern the way it understands modernity, exposing crude corruption and its volatile image. The gap between appearance and reality is further widened by the revelation of some other odd aspects of their condition. First, the authority is predominantly masculine in nature. It is the male members who decide about every mode of operation and thus expose a crude gender bias. Secondly, violence and lewdness know no bound among the family members. Thirdly, unlimited self-centric desire, despite the preconditions of a joint family, becomes a determinant factor behind almost all actions. The individual dreams always tend to undermine the definition of family as a co-operative space. Grounded in a highly consumerist condition, the very existence of a middle class family thus comes under challenge.

The literate and urbane look of the Pitale family has a crude underbelly. The first patriarch, Hari Pitale, is now old and ailing, living on the mercy of his sons. But his chauvinist legacy continues through his 'able' sons, Ramakant and Umakant, who

exercise their power to retain the masculine set-up of the household. The two female victims are Manik, who is their sister, and Rama, Ramakant's wife. Though shown as one of the 'vultures', Manik is, however, less powerful than her brothers for being a woman. Against the sexist threats of her brothers, all she has as her resource is her withering body, and she wants to cash on it. She sexually lures a rich guy for multiple profits. First, it definitely asserts her right over her body. Secondly, this act, which inevitably draws the wrath of standardised morality, empowers her to escape the male-vultures. She intentionally becomes pregnant to entrap her prey. But her strategy 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 now to be aborted. This gruesome treatment of Manik's pregnancy explains the loss of woman's control over it and the simultaneous tight grip of patriarchy – a condition that is the Pitale household itself.

The male power victimises Rama as well. She is childless even after twenty-two years of marriage. Her life is ruined by Ramakant's unbound masculinity that resorts to several strategies to cover up his impotency to produce a child. He wants a male-child to continue his legacy and, for this, subjects his wife to different esoteric/medical modes of scrutiny. From her less-empowered position, Rama, however, formulates her counter-action. She becomes pregnant through her liaison with Rajaninath, the illegitimate brother of her husband. With pregnancy comes her husband's attention to her, and this seems to serve two purposes. One, the masculine power is (though temporarily) satisfied, and the other, Rama's right over her body is established. However, the disclosure of the extra-marital liaison casts a spoiler to Rama's dream of autonomy as Ramakant, at the end, threatens to abort her womb. What is important in this site of sexual oppression is the exposure of the underbelly of a middle class family. The so-called image of educated liberals comes to be heavily undermined as we find that a family, supposedly built around some of the modernist principles such as education, sophistication, affluence, civility, nakedly exposes itself to be a domain of sexual exploitation and gender-backwardness. Here, the mask of modernity gradually falls down, and the ugly masculine face comes out.

As a play, *The Vultures* is said to have blasted a bomb in a complacent marketplace (Banerjee xii). 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, the middle class is ruthlessly examined here, and its consumerist orientation is exposed. Violence, crookedness, lechery seem to be the common indulgences for them to get their pound of flesh in the competitive market of life. Brothers kicking at sister's swollen womb, sons beating up abusive father for money, the deliberate connotation of incest in the extra-marital relation between the sister-in-law and the "Bhaiya" (241), i.e., her brother-in-law – all holds up a gruesome picture of total degeneration destroying a family from within. This spectacle of the supposedly civil middle class blowing all norms to air and revealing a ghastly side is enough to destabilise their identity and uncover the unsettled issues therein. 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 (*The Mind* 18). This belief, perhaps, propels his realisation that the middle class as a category is not immune from society and sometimes can go to such a level of excess that calls for a review of its prevalent image.

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. The concept of 'joint-family' is said to hold a key position to the traditional Hindu society, and the middle class, predominantly with a cultural Hindu background, can be found to have upheld, to a certain extent, this tradition. But the social and historical developments down the decades after Independence bring the middle class before a dilemma, which arises from a dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Modern values, empowered by education and financial affluence, bring with it individualism which the modern man seeks as necessary for his self-development. But the commercialised society reshapes this individual-desire, basically concerned about self-space and expression, as a grossly self-seeking motive and demeans modernity so as to posit it as totally opposed to and unaccommodative of any traditional value. This change of outlook produces mutual intolerance among the members on the basis of narrow self-centrism. It redefines the hard-earned value of individuality and causes misplaced emphases where the selfish scope of boundless consumption appeals most to the 'modern' middle class. He/she

becomes self-centred and ruthlessly competitive to consume materials – a tendency that delivers a serious blow to the traditional concept of joint-family.

The basic tenets of the joint-family, as it is mostly found in India, are common habitation; joint kitchen, joint property, kindred relationship, common worship, mutual obligations, authority of the head. These are some norms which hold all the members together in a system where each is required to play his/her stipulated role. It is evidently a condition of shared interests that asks for willing conformity to certain codes of conduct for the sake of sustenance of the system. The extended version of this joint structure is the greater society, which is also based upon similar principles. The Pitale family here shows the degeneration of these principles. Individual urge takes the crudest form possible among the siblings of the corrupt father, as the brother-duo and their unmarried sister contrive to have their own share of the family property. Ramakant, the eldest son, appears the most self-centric and destructive force. He harbours a dream of having a 'home', which will be financially affluent and where a non-existent show-piece, called wife, will be provided with facilities like cook, car, cosmetics and club only to strengthen her husband's social status. It is a dream about a home, where husbands are not henpecked and wives are allowed to be smart only in producing sons. Importantly, among many of his violent and socially unacceptable characters such as Sakharam and Arun Athavale, Ramakant remains close to Tendulkar's heart (Tendulkar, *An Interview* 10). His despicable qualities, in fact, allow Tendulkar to shake off the middle class inhibitions in order to explore the zones, prohibited by standard morality.

What comes forth from the above study of the Pitale household is a grim picture of a middle class family caught in a critical conflict between a liberal, progressive image on the one hand and the consumerist compulsions on the other. First, they have to keep externally a progressive look, which is an important class qualification. Secondly, they have a misconception of modernity as a permit for boundless consumption. Their over-emphasis on material status makes them easy prey to the prevailing situation. The middle class dream of a posh lifestyle accompanied with car, chauffeur, chef, other beautiful materials including a wife, is considered modern, and this aspiration asks for corrupt modes of amassing wealth. They resort to all sorts of violent and crooked ways to squeeze the last drop of money from the family and look like vultures tied to each other through a cruel relation of power. Violence becomes a familiar method to contain not only the

women, but also the male competitors; financial scam is no longer a taboo; the traditional joint set-up of family is inwardly destabilised by ruthless self-centricity. As a result, the family stands hollow as a petty subscriber to the culture of consumption, rendering itself bereft of all liberal and progressive attributes. Although *The Vultures* was written in 1959 as *Gidhade* in Marathi and the English edition was published in 1974 (Chari and Renuka 29), the play offers a prospective view of the critical developments in the middle class down the decades. Its portrayal of a family as a commercial unit, whose members are knit to each other solely for material needs, has lot of implications to offer in the present context of unbound consumerism.

If *The Vultures* is an explication of middle class hypocrisy at the domestic level, Tendulkar's *Kamala* performs it through an individual's relation with his surroundings within and outside the family. Here, we have a play at hand that draws upon an individual, Jaisingh Jadav, to uncover the dark side of the so-called middle class modernity and liberalism. Jaisingh is equipped with all the qualifications, supposedly required to belong to the category, called middle class – education, income, sophisticated-urbane culture and a refined wife. Moreover, he claims to have a great sense of value. A journalist by profession in a new-age English daily, he considers himself to be a crusader against corruption and wants to reform the society by mass-awareness against all kinds of exploitation. But in spite of his clean image, Jaisingh stands extremely vulnerable in this play. Through his relations with his family members and the people outside, he seems to display the crises of consumer-based modernity. Commercial gain and personal success hold highest importance for him, and he mistakes them for social service and progress. His commercial approach to life exposes a lot of unknown issues safely hidden behind the modern-mask – the crude masculine side in the master-slave conjugality, the opportunistic use of media to ensure career-benefit and many other hollow sentiments and conceits associated with a successful middle class identity.

One important attribute of the intellectually sound middle class is their stance against all sorts of exploitation and corruption. The voice of conscience and social reform is said to be an essential quality that sets them apart and ensures currency in the society. Their moral self implicates politics as the source of general disorder, and hence their distance from it. But this political invisibility does not necessarily bring any social or cultural invisibility for them. After their departure from politics, they do not sit back idly;

rather they try to hit back through different modes of participation, presumably incorrupt and capable of critiquing the culture of corruption. But presumption differs from reality, as this alternative and other-than-political participation fails to bring the desired result and ends up compromising with those conditions, theoretically they are opposed to. The anti-corruption and anti-politics role, which tends to play a moral crusader in the society, is thus heavily undermined, rousing serious concern about the validity of such role. This seems to be the case with Jaisingh.

Jaisingh Jadav represents a maverick journalist, risking his life and receiving life-threats for the sake of a 'mission'. From a sense of social commitment, he takes up his pen to expose all the rot in society and make people aware of it. He wants to blow the whistle on corruption, upholding "moral principles, moral norms, moral values" (24). In short, he claims to represent a middle class intellectual-activist, who stays away from politics and resorts to alternative modes of protest to change the society. Media is that socio-cultural apparatus of protest which seems to suit Jaisingh's anti-politics and anti-corruption mission. It is theoretically an apolitical instrument of shaping and mobilising people's orientation and beliefs. It has an enormous command over the public opinion. People, according to N. Couldry, believe in the authority of the media discourse because they believe that most others also believe the same (qtd. in Sinha 2803), and on this basis, media can shape/reshape the public sphere. Evidences are in plenty in contemporary India where media's aggressive campaign exposes corruption and ensures justice to the victims. Jaisingh wants to exploit this authority of media over people in order to form strong public opinion against corruption. The play shows him risking his life by going to Luhardaga, a remote village in Bihar, to eye-witness the auction of women and purchase one as an evidence to be shown at a press conference in New Delhi. His endeavour, as it appears, strengthens the image of a conscious and intellectually sound middle class individual, who feels disturbed at the slightest instance of corruption and does not give a damn even if some mighty and powerful get hurt for his exposure.

The play *Kamala* is, however, more about the exposure of this 'great' prober himself and his social context than the very issue probed by him. The play is not about the auction of women in rural India. It delves deep into something else, something perceived as progressive, liberating and modern and busts it out to review the preset meanings. The outcome of this exposure clearly renders the middle class image more vulnerable than

before, as many of its popular attributes come to be questioned. The exposes show us that a modern middle class man, despite his anti-corruption stance, can be utterly corrupt and exploitative to push his career-graph up. And media, on the other hand, can miserably fail to perform its supposed role of a watchdog and play in the hand of the power quarters to act just like another apparatus of the prevailing system. In this play, Tendulkar sets two different schools of journalism against each other. One is the old-styled, vernacular, traditional and ethical journalism represented by Kakasaheb, uncle of Jaisingh's wife Sarita; the other is the new-age, fast and smart, chic-English style, practised by Jaisingh. This new style wants to redefine journalism altogether by changing its areas of emphasis and technique of handling news-items. Adventurism and risk become the catch-words here, where the journalist acts like maverick explorer, hounding down issues and adopting, sometimes, inconceivable ways to bring them in print. Going to a remote flesh-trade centre, purchasing a woman there, and keeping her in one's own house are such tasks daring enough to make the reporter larger than the report itself. During the process, he becomes a star reporter, whose name shines above the reports he makes. He is self-obsessed – so much so that he wants to write everything under his name. For once, he had almost resigned over an error, when the newspaper forgot to print his name (7)! The style of presentation also takes a new turn. The old method of calm restraint while reporting sensational incidents gives way to a style that “smacks its lips as it writes blood-thirsty descriptions . . .” (6). As explained by Jaisingh himself, the point lies in the technique of presenting (or, packaging) the case – not in the case itself (15). The presentation has to be dramatic and sensational just because it sells.

The play has a fine illustration of the consumerist encroachment on the concept of value-based, welfare journalism, which professes honest reporting of incidents. The press conference arranged by Jaisingh, supposedly to uncover the plight of women and poor people in India, has become ironically a revelation of the corrupt nature of journalism and the media-houses. Kamala, the tribal woman, is reduced to an object of ‘tamasha’ in front of a class of elite, educated and urbane audience. First, she becomes an item of curiosity for being a woman purchased in an auction – an issue sensational enough to fire the imagination of the city-bred male minds. They have heard of the stories of human-auction or, at best, read about them, but this tribal woman gives them the chance to physically enjoy the thrill of eye-witnessing some part of it. They flock to the conference not to feel the pain of the victim but enjoy something new and sensational. Secondly, Kamala's sex

is vital here as it adds an extra edge to the press conference. She would have definitely drawn a smaller audience than this, if she were a male. The over-enthusiasm of the photographers and the sex-starved male audience over her half-covered body, deliberately kept so by Jaisingh, shows her as a well-thought out pawn in the hand of a very calculative journalist, who simply rides on her for his career-gain. 'Sex sells' is the mantra of this new-age reporter, who never hesitates to cash in on it even at the expense of a poor woman. For circulation, advertisement and profit, this mercenary journalism can become shamelessly masculine and project woman in a derogatory manner, but all under the pretext of social activism. For growth and sustenance, it can also sacrifice its role of a watchdog and work as a compliant force with the establishment, a seasoned player in the political game of power, changing its guard according to the need of time. Tendulkar's another play, *Encounter in Umbugland*, (discussed in Chapter One), also explicates such nature of media. Jaisingh's pathetic end is very much inevitable in this system. He is finally fired by his own newspaper as his press conference rouses brows of all the big-shots involved in the flesh-racket. The media-house, which once found business in his heroics and stood behind him, readily clears its hand off when pressures start mounting from above. Nothing is unusual in this reaction. It is all in the game! And Jaisingh is a conscious and willing player in it. The only thing that goes wrong with him is that he has crossed the given limit and come in the way of the big and mighty. In this world of commercial journalism, he wanted to become bigger than the institution itself, which he is a part of, and as a result he is cut to size. The rise and fall of this man clearly shows how media operates in a consumerist society and the standard pattern of journalism. Here the journalists and the media-houses function on mutual benefits, and any middle class claim to heroic journalism on moral grounds often tends to be nothing but sheer commercial exercises for individual gain.

Through Jaisingh Jaday, Tendulkar thus exposes the untenability of a social image at two different levels. First, the image of a sensitive, moral and courageous journalist, who claims to be a champion of the poor, is vigorously contested. The commercial motive of the big media houses is also uncovered, but more importantly, the high-profile, new-generation journalist stands naked. His fall reveals that underside of the middle class which is conveniently wrapped up by a moral and progressive image. Secondly, the character also comes out as a crude representation of masculine excesses in the domestic sphere. The master-slave relation, which he maintains with his wife through the

institutional licence called marriage, strips him further of all his progressive attributes. His sense of sexual superiority is thus combined with his mercenary ambition, and both permit him to carry out his moral agenda at the expense of, in fact, two women – the illegally purchased one and his legal wife. The success of the play, *Kamala* largely depends on these two levels of engagement. It reveals Jaisingh as a typical middle class man, who is proud of a notional superiority and whose commercial orientation supports his preset sexual outlook.

Tendulkar reveals the crises within the middle class regarding its character, position and role in the society. His probe is characteristically carried out within the domestic plane of personal relations, mediated by the prevailing social condition. The characters as individuals or a family unit seem to be prone to the growing impact of the consumerist-commercial culture. As a result, they uncover their oddities and bust out different notional realities associated with this category. A similar investigation is carried out in Girish Karnad's *Wedding Album*, originally written in English. For its content, the play holds enormous importance in his dramatic oeuvre. It directly penetrates the middle class home in an urban setting, negotiating different hidden cultural spots in a close-to-reality manner. He has written *Broken Images* (2004) before with an obvious urban setting, but that is chiefly a psychological exploration of a modern female writer which does not extend to a critical survey of any social group or category. But here the focus is on a thread-bare presentation of the domestic domain of a social group and using its cultural manifestations as prismatic tools to probe into its safe world of hidden realities. He zooms in on a wedding in a particular South Indian middle class family and uses it as an occasion to clinically dissect this social body. This probe results in an uncovering of multiple shades of existence, raising some serious questions about this body vis-à-vis its social context. Some pre-acknowledged notions about this familiar middle class locale come under challenge. One significant aspect to notice in Karnad's reading of this class is that he, unlike Tendulkar, does not show any particular character or a group of characters vigorously pursuing some commercial dream and rendering themselves as well as their family open to calamitous consequences. What we find is that a varied group of people, whose homogeneity depends largely on some religious and cultural affinity, is living against a social backdrop which is fast being submerged in a consumerist pit as well as religiosity. And the people cannot, inevitably, live unaffected and un-intervened against it. It is a slow but persistent understanding of the middle class condition, which is

mediated by more than one factor of contemporary society. Karnad appears absolutely relevant to considering some of these factors like religiosity, casteisation, along with consumerism, while assessing this class.

The play presents a traditional South Indian Brahmin household – the Nadkarnis, a Saraswat Brahmin family, well known for their orthodox views of life and strict association with cultural norms, especially, marriage. Karnad takes up this highly valued institution of marriage as the central incident and explores the shady nooks and corners of this family through it. Since marriage holds the highest importance in the Saraswat cultural life, it offers Karnad a perfect scope for close probe. The family prepares for the prospective marriage of its younger daughter, Vidula Nadkarni, who has just finished her graduation, with an NRI, Ashwin Panje. Marriage seems to provide a homely occasion to its members to sit and interact with each other, a scope that becomes hard to come by in today's busy life. Its preparation compels them to assemble, as the elder daughter Hema flies in from her 'home' in Australia, and talk regularly with each other. This scope for conversation allows the playwright to delve deep into the internal layers of life and uncover several issues. 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, a whole series of other revelations crops up. Some of them are the subtle politics over inviting relatives and 'saree' allocation, the inner world of the family members, the unhappiness of the elder daughter, the shaded psychology of the mother, the caste and communal fervours, and the commercial, businesslike attitude to marriage. After a sustained and skilful examination of several members, the play ends with Vidula's surprising decision to marry the man, who appears utmost self-centric and callous to her needs.

The middle class household of *Wedding Album* becomes an important space for understanding the anxiety within this class, a product of its proximity to social changes. The changing circumstances seem to leave a lasting impact on the family at multiple functional levels. The members try to develop adaptabilities to the new condition of globalisation-liberalisation and thus come under its influence. It further augments a sense of insecurity, a sense of loss in terms of their tradition and custom. As part of their adaptability strategy, they are urban, educated and largely employed, but they also feel

like distanced from their 'authentic' identity and culture, owing to their eagerness to adapt. As a sort of compensation for this loss, they exhibit a pro-active allegiance to some religiosity. This is why marriage becomes such an important preoccupation in the Nadkarni family. It offers them a scope to come close to their root. Other visible customs and norms in the family are also exercises in the same direction. But this pro-tradition stance does not fully ensure the end to anxiety. Problem arises from different corners, and the play tries to look into each of them to understand the class at this crucial juncture of social history.

Among the sixteen characters in this play, the following five can be taken up for a closer reading – Hema, Rohit, the mother, Ashwin, and Vidula. They seem to hold the main thread of the narrative that negotiates the middle class household. Through their functions they represent different avenues of domesticity and also hint at further subterrains for a wide-ranging probe. The eldest daughter of the Nadkarni family, Hema, has flown all the way from Sydney, leaving behind her husband and two kids, to join the marriage of her sister, Vidula. Fifteen years ago she was married to a successful NRI (Non-Resident Indian) and settled in Australia – a lucrative career for many Indian women like her. But now her presence at home opens up different critical junctures of her life, safely hidden behind the gloss of her NRI tag. Hema seems to be always unhappy over the hurried arrangement of her marriage, which now appears more ordinary and lacklustre than before when she witnesses the thorough arrangement of Vidula's marriage. The same parents, who eagerly believed in her husband's anti-dowry words and married her off without even some token jewellery, now jump upon this marriage with all vigour and resources. She becomes extremely upset over this disparity and maintains an aloofness from the material arrangement of the programme. Apart from this, there is a more serious aspect of her grief. Hema shows signs of a disturbed wifehood. Her spatial shift from India to Australia hardly ensures a qualitative change in her life as dreamt about by many. From the supposedly traditional, outdated and oppressive Indian domesticity she is thought to have landed on the free world of a chief commercial officer of a multinational bank located in a highly developed country. But this relocation betrays some of her heart-breaks as she exclaims at the misery of being the wife of a successful Indian expatriate. The traditional "Sati Savitri" (17) role of the Indian wives does not change at all but works on through different expressions in a different context. As wife,

she stands parallel to her kitchen-sink mother – “. . . I am in no better position than Ma” (17).

Hema also discloses some issues related to sexuality, which are non-discussable and even unthinkable in a traditional middle class family like the Nadkarnis. She, along with her younger sister Vidula, has undergone a traumatic phase in childhood. They both were helpless victims of the sexual fantasies of their paedophilic servant, Nagappa. Nagappa, who was known for never raising his voice, did never miss any chance to raise the skirts of these two girls (23). No wonder the girls have never done the blasphemy of revealing it to all and, instead, borne the scar deep in their mind. Hema shows the sign of it as she feels horrified by her father-in-law's look at her body during her wedding ceremony. Most probably, this childhood scar might have affected Hema's normal relation with her husband as well. Her mental distance from her husband is indicated by her occasional outbursts against the mythic glow around marrying abroad and total lack of reference to him during her regular telephone conversation with her son in Australia. But it can be inferred that this distance from her husband has left Hema with lot of desires unaddressed and unresolved. This frustration finds expression in her entertaining, with mild rebuke, the outrageous approaches of the young boy Vivan, who is of her son's age. Far away from Australia, she seems to be elated at Vivan's sensual admiration of her body and more so at the sense of being still powerful enough to draw the attention of such a young male. This partly compensates for her domestic loss in Australia. Hema, in this play, has a unique position of being both an insider and outsider to the family. She is still a Nadkarni by blood and also an outsider by marriage. And this gives some of her exposures an extra edge. Among all the Nadkarnies, she seems to be the only one who can think over the emerging criticalities with unmatched detachment.

The other character, working as a point of reference to the inner complexities of the family, is Rohit Nadkarni, Hema's younger brother. He writes stories and scripts for teleplays. Beside his thematic relevance, Rohit has a technical standing in the theatrical pattern of the play, unlike any other member of his family. Karnad has divided the play into nine scenes, out of which Scenes One and Five take place about three years after the rest of the scenes. The entire incident of Vidula's wedding, including all that happened in connection with it, is presented in the scenes other than these two. And in these two scenes, after three years' gap, the past is being remembered through a televised mode of

reproduction. Rohit, under the tele-serial producer Pratibha Khan, is seen as reviewing the past materials of his family in order to make a super-hit serial. He is keen to work on the life of his sister Vidula. But his ideas are dismissed by Pratibha Khan as unattractive and non-saleable to the T.V. audience. The drab and dull story of Vidula, agreeing to marry a man whom she never met except through SMS, telephone, or video-tape exchange and leading an ordinary life of a child-bearing house-wife, lacks in the necessary spice and is commercially unfeasible. Nobody would buy the idea that such a thing could ever happen to an educated middle class woman of today. 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. Rohit agrees to this point and modifies his non-commercial attitude to life. Pratibha Khan's attitude represents the traditionalist approach of a pragmatic producer, who does not want to lose her buck on any enterprise of reality-probe. This marketing strategy, on the other hand, ironically emphasises the validity of the main plot (i.e. the scenes except One and Five), which centres on the so-called non-saleable story of Vidula. Through its elaboration of Vidula's story, the main plot justifies the need to explore reality, instead of melodrama, and also the presence of a multi-shaded existence, beneath the middle class stereotypes, that remains hidden to the common viewers. Rohit, thus, assumes significance as somebody who facilitates this validity of the main plot by arranging for a different mode of look-back on his family.

As part of the main event of Vidula's wedding, Rohit has a very significant role – not only as a brother who helps in the video-tape correspondence between the prospective couple, but also as an individual whose life exposes further the institution of marriage. The presence of casteism and religious untouchability comes to the fore when the issue of Rohit's marriage suddenly crops up amidst the preparations for Vidula's. Rohit has an affair with a Christian girl, Isabel – a sacrilege that has no taker in his family. The middle class pride over modernity is hardly able to dispense with casteist preoccupation. The most shocking is Hema's objection. Her relocation in a different country perhaps fails to bring any substantive change in her outlook. She still seems to belong to the rigid and circumscribed world which is unwilling to accommodate any aberration on caste-religion line. One psychological explanation could be that she wanted others to follow the norms she herself was subjected to. Otherwise, her opposition denotes an unusual obsession with religion or religious manifestations on the part of an urbane, educated middle class. It is as if she tries to overcome her 'distance' from her 'home' by associating herself with a set

of symbols, derived from a pristine cultural code. This may be the motive of the other opposing members of the family as well.

Coming back to Rohit, the unsurmountable pressure on him from both inside and outside the family to marry a girl within the same caste serves to expose a variety of aspects of the highly valued institution of marriage. Like many other communities in India, marriage holds immense significance among the Saraswat Brahmins. It is a social obligation to be honoured by all in conformity to their rich ancestry and tradition. The Nadkarni family inherits this tradition of the Saraswat Brahmins, along with other acquired qualifications of modern life, i.e. education, affluence and urban lifestyle. Marriage is sanctimonious to them, a custom not to be devalued on any gross fundamental and commercial considerations. Their education is supposed to make them considerate to the humanistic aspect of all these traditions. They are to be conscious of their tradition, and at the same time not to confuse blind faith with rational belief. But this seems to be missing in their opposition to marrying a caste-outsider. They would even choose a lesser-merited girl for Rohit only if she had the caste qualification. A similar approach is shown by the other middle class families, who come up with alternative proposals of suitable match. Gopal Sirur, who is the nephew of Rohit's father from his mother's side because she was originally a Nadkarni, comes to propose his daughter Tapasya for Rohit. The match is said to be perfect because it will ensure the caste-purity. Tapasya is related to the Nadkarni blood through a wide and complex network of caste-kinship – a virtuous precondition among the majority South Indian Brahmins, who espouse cross-cousin marriage to keep their blood 'clean'. What comes out from the melodrama is a set of awkward implications. First, the hysteric pro-activeness of the bride's parents undermines all sorts of modern attributes of a middle class family. Gopal Sirur does not even hesitate to kneel down before the unwilling Rohit and pray for his consent. His histrionics brings forth the misery of a bride's parents, which exists even among the educated people. Secondly, the technique of persuasion is bizarre as it involves all possible types of allurements and promise. From the girl's reported love, prospect of property, astrological assurance to emotional blackmail – everything is employed as part of the collective strategy to extract a promise from the boy. Thirdly, it also shows an absence of individuality within a family, an unusual feature for a standard middle class household. Beside these points, Rohit, on the other hand, does appear to be clever to handle the situation. He remains always silent, enjoys the "grandstand" (42) and finally,

as we find three years later, has been leading a married life with Tapasya, whose father financed his Germany-trip. He seems to be the most pragmatic guy in the family to be able to see what to grasp and what to dump. For all these reasons, Rohit's character proves a useful tool for exposure.

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 more. 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, the proposed groom for Vidula, is the other important character to peep at different shaded zones. He is an extremely successful Indian in the United States of America and proud to have done justice with the enterprising image of the Saraswat Brahmins. The man is shown as a high-flying corporate executive with hardly any time for the useless "tamasha" (25) involved in a traditional Indian wedding. Due to the family pressure, he manages somehow to extract time from his busy schedule to physically meet Vidula before the marriage. In his long-stretched monologue during the meeting, he seems to be self-deluding in his approach to life. He discovers a 'holy mission' (82) in the marriage to save Western materialism by Eastern spirituality and thus reveals a mind

which is orthodox in the matters of sexuality and caste and also submerged in a diasporic crisis of identity.

Ashwin seems to be the hyphenated Indian-American who leads an insular existence in his adopted land. A highly sought after executive in the US, he feels proud to be a part of the great Indian success story over there. He wants to be successful in America and also become an integral part of its life through the ways he thinks appropriate for it. Beside his professional success, he thinks that girl friends, affairs, mistresses, one-night stands along with glamour, social connections are the other ways of becoming an 'American'. But the man, who comes off a traditional Saraswat Brahmin family, seems to be clueless as to the ways of overcoming his hyphenated existence. All his efforts of merger fail, and he continues to be an insular immigrant. This failure seems to create a sense of discontent – dissatisfaction with the very life keenly sought after but unattained. He therefore looks back to his original land and culture as a repository to provide him with a linkage to his lost root. To cover up the refusal of his dream-land and his discontent, he seems to philosophise his retreat in order to give it a dignified look. He resorts to the clichéd binary of the material West and the spiritual East. Fed up with materialism, he adopts a look-East policy and discovers his native land as an epicentre of spirituality that can bail him out from his identity-crisis. For this purpose, 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 holy image of Indian womanhood, as he espouses, will be his rescuer. Woman as mother, wife, or daughter is the pivot of a family. A traditional Indian wife is, therefore, a perfect choice for this jet-set corporate man as she will embody all the pure essence of culture and remain complicit in his effort of creating 'Indianness' in the US. A holy mission indeed!

Ashwin's approach to marriage as a mission can be called self-satisfying in a cultural and racial insularity. What seems important is that it heavily relies on gender stereotypes as the only way out for this man in crisis. Despite his exposure to the vast world outside, a crude obsession with gender and caste seems to be unavoidable. The look-out for an orthodox Indian wife, visibly to have a docile embodiment of culture, is the easy way of having the authentic private world, a home-away, without self-sacrificing much. This world, most importantly, can be kept, without much resistance, on the indigenous guidelines of sexual norms. It services the male ego and, simultaneously, is

thought to make the insular existence meaningful. The Nadkarnis already have an NRI husband for their eldest daughter, and the text implies that Hema's life bears signs of conjugal disturbances owing to such 'purposeful marriage'. Ashwin, on the other hand, makes clear the purpose behind such marriage even before it happens. Another exposure is about the unusual obsession with caste. In tandem with their elders, these expatriate young men meticulously follow its callings in the matter of wedding. The purpose remains to get something Indian, as 'authentic' as possible. These uncomfortable findings about the immensely successful middle class like Ashwin make them look awkward.

Vidula is the final character in this discussion. This commonplace, ready-to-giggle girl stands unprofitable and less-sensational to the commercial gaze of the TV producer. She looks like the girl-next-door incapable of critical thinking or even drawing any serious attention at all. Her visible ordinariness, however, seems to be a deliberate construct in the play. The easy-to-ignore girlish look has lot to reveal that eludes the easy and profit-making gaze of a Tele-serial maker but not a probing playwright. Behind her ordinariness lies some shocking or uncomfortable side that unsettles her apparent image. Her marriage is the central event which provides entry into the inner landscape of the other people, and she also self-betrays a lot through her special position in it.

Karnad has made the play look like a placid tale of the joyous moment of a family assembling around a wedding. But the simplicity is deceptive because there is implicit sexuality at many unexpected nooks of the tale. The insidious mention of uncle Ramdas' name on Vidula's birth certificate, Hema's glee at her son-like Vivan's infatuation for her are some of the disturbing factors that never become loudly visible but remain strongly felt beneath the smooth plane. Vidula is also shown as a part of this world that conceals more than reveals. The innocent giggler, once as a child, had to live with their paedophilic servant Nallapa. But the most important disclosure of Vidula's inner world comes in Scene Six. In the dark cubicle of an internet café Vidula, under the secret name of Kuchla the Jezebel, sex-chats with her digital lover, Ananga the Bodyless. This becomes a world of virtual reality, a digital interface of several real-life events to give suppressed desires a free run. 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. In her chat, she impersonates Radhabai's daughter, who was a kept woman of an aged trader

and lost in the crowd after his death. She seems to equate her circumscribed life in the family with the daughter of the cook. But when her present master (here, her parental family) wants to throw her out, she sounds resourceful enough to find a new master (read: Ashwin Panje) with a good fortune. Realities overlap in Vidula's digital impersonation to create an identity of the virtual reality, which is free from the social constraints. This virtual freedom reveals Vidula. First, it exposes her secret life. The girl, who appears unappealing to most, makes regular escapade to a world of forbidden fantasy and converses in the most raw-sensual idiom possible. Her verbal self-stripping during the sex-chat violates all middle class standards and puts forth a suppressed subjectivity ready to unpack itself under favourable circumstances. Karnad's language also draws attention here for its unprecedented frankness. Secondly, the scene uncovers another unusual side of her character. She has to be intimidated by the two self-styled religious commissars for desecrating the Hindu cultures in the internet café. But she proves ingenious enough at counter-alleging sexual harassment against them and getting out of the mess. This is a totally unknown Vidula who dares not only to venture into the forbidden world of sex but also use it for self-interest. Finally, this scene 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, therefore, considers the marriage-option with a rich NRI a better deal, which would, at least, take her out from the present situation. Although she continues to be a kept woman with the new master, it promises her something new – a young master, life in the US, and money. Like her elder sister Hema, she also looks to the prospect of this relocation, which may bring, as she aspires, some positive change to her condition. As it happened in Hema's case, the chances of this wish-fulfilment are very minimal in her case as well, and she knows it quite well. But she thinks it better to give luck a try and dispassionately marry a man, 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.

In Karnad's dramatic canon, *Wedding Album* stands out for its bold analysis of the contemporary urban middle class. It examines the hidden intricacies in this class, and as a result the popular notion of a standard middle class household, along with its individual members, comes to be contested with many unnerving revelations. The dark-and-deep desires and suppressed sexuality find expressions and destabilise the placid set-up. Specially, the women, young and aged alike, suffer from suppression as their space is

visibly limited. The social callings weigh heavy even on the males that curtail their individual space. The younger generation can be found as trying to break off this collective social pressure in manners suitable to their situation. Hema's excitement over a young boy's infatuation, Rohit's inter-caste affair and Vidula's internet café adventures seem to denote the suppressed existence and the desires for escape. They, however, come to settle with the socially accepted ways, such as marrying the NRI grooms or a propertied bride selected by their family. They seem to justify their choices as the most suitable means for escaping their present condition. What becomes clear is that the younger people have a higher degree of discomfort with rigid norms than their elders and are more eager to lead a free life. But none of them looks bold enough to visibly challenge what is given and bring a change. All stick to normal ways to avoid public discomfort.

Another important aspect is the members' attitude to religious traditions. Among the elders, a rigid caste-obsession is visible that harps on maintaining the purity of blood through proper articulation of the institution of marriage. A sense of cultural insecurity in a time of change seems to augment such obsession among them. They want to inculcate their inherited view of caste in the younger generation through collective pressure and create a situation where the younger people come to conform to it. They seem to be successful as the caste-codes are strictly maintained in all the three marriages. Here one notable point is that the elders' strict caste-allegiance is always informed by a pragmatic choice of bride or groom. The essential qualification of a Saraswat Brahmin comes to be compulsorily accompanied by the need for a propertied, high-salaried, and, preferably, NRI groom; in the selection of a bride, her docility is prime concern along with her parental property. All these pre-conditions have a strong presence beside the meta-criterion of caste. The elders can, therefore, be called practical-traditionalist. The younger people, on the other hand, represent the upcoming discomfort with any religious-cultural allegiance. This educated, new-generation people can even think of the un-thinkable, such as marrying outside the caste and community, or woman enjoying on-line sex-chatting. They draw flak for their disobedience. Rohit's affair with a Christian girl faces collective opposition, and Vidula is threatened by some cultural zealots. But they cannot fully defy the enforced norms and prefer to compromise, which they find appropriate to their context. This 'appropriateness' might often spring from pragmatic concern as it is the case with Rohit. Their falling in line never means any adherence to the norms. They

remain less committed to any tradition at all, though they never totally sever link with them for their own interest. They detest blind faith in astrology and horoscope but accord with convenient caste-association. They dare to have an affair with a caste-outsider but marry within the caste. Although the global Sydney is within their reach, a local caste prejudice always persists. The US green card holder Ashwin Panje also falls within this category. He might look like a rigid traditionalist, but his association with religion or caste is as political as, say, Rohit's. He looks back to his religious root only to make his life in the US easier, an act that also satisfies the caste sentiments of the elders. As a result, none of the crises come out in the open, and the familiar image of the class is maintained. In the final assessment, none of the characters can be seen as a rebel or a nonconformist. Nor could they be called religious or traditionalist in the proper sense of the term. The visible fixation with caste, particularly in marriage, is an exercise that springs more from a practical awareness of social/personal necessity than from any religious commitment or ideology.

Both Tendulkar and Karnad successfully make the contemporary middle class wide open to critical gaze. They basically take on the middle class households and then extend their focus to critiquing the individuals in terms of their relation with the society. The probe shows a striking gap between the 'reality' and the 'ideality' of the middle class individuals. Their acknowledged image stands at odds with their hidden side. Their traditional class character with attributes such as progressive, moral, secular, casteless and culturally refined is vigorously reviewed. In their critique, Tendulkar and Karnad never try to produce any messianic character from this class to overcome the crises of this reality-ideality gap. They attempt to show the options available before the individuals located in the contemporary society and how they deal with them. The question of the middle class dream comes up – for example, that of Ramakant, Rama, Jaisingh, or the members of the Nadkarni family. The subjective interests in the dreams and their execution by the respective characters are all that explain the individuals' dealing with the varied situation. During this process, the narrative uncovers different cracks and fragile joints in the standard notion of the middle class condition, leading to a fresh outlook on it. As the middle class individuals' vulnerability to a rapidly growing commercial culture becomes visible as a major concern, so also gender, caste, too much of individualism or total lack of it come up as crucial issues that unsettle the comfortable stereotypes.

While critically assessing the class, Tendulkar appears to be as outspoken as ever. His desire to dump the so-called middle class inhibitions in order to reach out to the lowest pit of the shaded zones is phenomenal, and this is exemplified in his characters such as Sakharam and Ramakant. Through a character like Sakharam with his violence and abnormal ways, Tendulkar breaks his own “middle class barrier” (*An Interview* 10) and delves into life to interrogate the ‘narrative of normality’ on different levels. He does not hesitate to show a respectable man bringing home an auctioned woman, brothers aborting sister, extra-marital relation within a family, hardly leaving anything to speculation. This explicit manner proves effective to bring out the most dreadful realities. The end is achieved as the individuals stand naked to the demystifying gaze of the probing playwright. Karnad, on the other hand, relies on a slow-but-subtle-and-persistent narrative to expose the grey areas in his so-far-sole middle class play. A large spectrum of characters and situations is examined in a highly restrained yet penetrative manner. He is not always as outspoken as Tendulkar, though he can be so when required. A technique, which artfully presents the events, implies their significances and purposefully speculates on different probabilities, seems to suit his design. And all this is done through a narrative which gets persistently close to the heart of the household and becomes familiar with several untold stories by virtue of its easily-grown intimacy. Another thing to note, in both the writers, is the theatricality of these plays that greatly compliment the thematic purposes. The image of an elaborate middle class living room prevails over the stage as the entire dramaturgy focuses on creating an ambience of tension and volatility. The urban angst of the middle class is effectively communicated by this realist, proscenium, and modern theatre-idiom. This is not altogether new in Tendulkar, for he follows his favourite realist style. For Karnad, it is a departure from his premodern, anti-realist, folk style. The outcome is, however, worth the shift as his penetration of one of contemporary India’s most talked about social categories proves really productive.