

TENDULKAR'S *KANYADAAN*: AN EXPOSÉ OF MARITAL MAZE

Gyaneshwar Pratap Singh
Lecturer English
Govt. Polytechnic College,
Basti-272002 (U.P.)

Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar has created a space of his own in the Indian dramatic tradition with his iconoclastic and socially aware plays. He prefers to concentrate on the grey aspects of human personality and considers violence as an inseparable part of it. In *Kanyadaan* he opens the Pandora-box of relations which corrode and entangle the identity and life of an innocent girl, Jyoti. She marries a Dalit poet Arun in her zeal to put into practice the socialist ideology of her father but situations force her to reconsider her ideas and ideals. This article is a modest attempt to throw some light on the situation of Jyoti and the way marriage brings unexpected changes in her.

Keywords:- dramatic tradition, iconoclastic, socially, ideology.

The post-independence India has witnessed significant changes in marital life. Wives are breaking the shackles of domesticity to participate in the development of their family and their country at large. With Indian constitution at the back of them, they are demanding as well as securing their dignity and freedom. But the fact remains, this development is limited to a few. Majority still don't have access to the packed power chambers of masculinity as they continue writhing in pain and succumb to the familial obligations and pressure of the supporters of scriptures like *Manu Smriti*. Despite numerous laws to protect wives, they are still subjugated, harassed, and domesticated as the society we live in is still to come in terms with the modern face of the Indian New Woman. Majority of husbands on the other hand are still patriarchal and are harassing their wives in overt or covert manner as the society we live in is governed by man-made laws. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* opines: "...the situation of woman is that she-a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (27).

A woman's individual identity has not been positively, properly and open-mindedly realized in Indian society. She has never been accepted as a complete human being. Her existence is taken for granted. She struggles to secure a sense of identity in the kind of society which compels her to fit into their stereotyped framework. This social role expects a woman to attend to the emotional and physical demands, needs and desires of others, effacing her own self.

Marriage invariably takes you back to the world of women, of trying to please, of the fear of not pleasing, of surrender, self-abnegation. To love another and to retain yourself intact, is that possible? To assert yourself and not to be aggressive, to escape domination and not to dominate? (qtd. in Guttal 170)

Vijay Tendulkar's plays are primarily concerned with the operation of power. While presenting to us 'slice of life' through his plays, Tendulkar penetrates through the veneer of goodness and wellness to delve deep into the dynamics of conjugal relations. How the pseudo-benevolent masculinity corrodes the existence and subjectivity of a wife gets ample attention in his plays. His plays depict woman not only as a commodity of male gaze and as a victim subjected to violence whether physically or emotionally but also as growing, evolving, and dynamic beings. His husbands share the common patriarchal attitude though in different degrees while his wives are exploited lots. But the pairs defy any categorization as his characters develop as independent individuals with their own specific situations and background.

His plays are not simply aimed at providing entertainment and tailored solutions to the audience or readers. Through his plays he explores different cases and invites the audience/readers to seek their own solutions to ameliorate the condition. Tendulkar's penetrative understanding unmask the political character of family which interpolates men and women in different subject positions. By disclosing the patriarchal setup of family, he debunks the prevalent myths about family as a place of security, comfort and protection.

Kanyadaan is one of Tendulkar's most appreciated and abused plays for which he got Saraswati Samman as well as a chuppel hurled at him. The reactions must not have a surprise for him as he has consciously dared to deal with the politically and socially sensitive issues of inter-caste marriage and the relation between the so called Caste Hindus and untouchables during the tumultuous period around Emergency (1975). The play veers round the relationship of Arun and Jyoti.

Kanyadaan is about the agony of a young girl Jyoti who marries a dalit writer and poet Arun Athavale only to receive blows and abuses from him in her married life. Born of idealist parents who priorities their social life above their personal and familial life, Jyoti is sandwiched between the male chauvinism and idealism of her farther Nath and the revengeful casteist male ego of her husband Arun. Being considered as an anti Dalit play, it raised a lot of dust. Dalit activists like Nitin Samant and Vijay Tapas severely criticized Tendulkar for flogging the Dalits.

But Samant and Tapas as well as many of the caustic critics of *Kanyadaan* seem to take Arun for granted as the representative of the Dalits who have been exploited for ages by the Caste Hindus. But Tendulkar does not seem to represent him in the same way. Of course, his behaviour is one of the possibles from Dalits but not the only one and Tendulkar, through this play, makes us conscious of this dangerous possibility. Shilpi Rishi Srivastava opines, "Tendulkar explores the texture of modernity and social change in India through the forces this marriage unleashes" (103).

The play deals with the exploitation of a naive, innocent girl Jyoti; as a result of the dry, impractical socialist enthusiasm of his father Nath and a series of well-planned tactics of a cunning and sadist Dalit poet, Arun. It illustrates the suffering and exploitation endured by Dalits and looks at what it means to be treated as a lesser human being on account of one's so-called lower caste in Indian society. The play also reveals how caste violence gets metamorphosed into fresh gusts of violence against other innocuous as well as impeccable victims. Through various relations the play also looks at the disenchantment of those reformers who try to bridge the distance between the castes. Jyoti, the daughter of exceptionally busy socialist parents, accepts Arun's proposal of marriage without giving it a deep thought in the natural enthusiasm of an adolescent, combined with the sense of adventure. This relationship passes through three stages only on Jyoti's side. Arun remains the same person from the beginning to the end. For Jyoti, the first stage is that of innocence and ignorance, second is resistance and struggle to cope up with

the situation and third is that of acceptance, resignation, surrender and prostration before the situations. The play de-romanticises Dalit subjectivity as an object of pity and compassion. According to Sudha Rai, “Tendulkar also relates the violent oppositional clash of Brahmin and Dalit to the less visible fabric of gendered attitudes, constructions and stereotypes.”(107)

Jyoti feels attracted to Arun, a Dalit, after reading his powerful poetry and hearing his politically charged speeches. Hers is a middle-class Brahmin family with idealistic humanitarian values. Nath is ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of his values and tries to inculcate those values in his children, Jyoti and Jayaprakash. Jyoti stands in awe of her idealistic father and tries to follow him in letter and spirit. Motivated more by the ideals of a caste-free society and Dalit upliftment than by passionate love, she wishes to marry Arun and so announces her decision to her family. Nath gets over excited to listen that his daughter has decided to get married to a dalit boy. As soon as Nath comes to know about Arun’s caste, for him Arun ceases to exist as a person. Nath willfully turns him into the representative of dalits because in this marriage he finds an opportunity to successfully implement the socialist ideologies about which he has blabbered much in public. Jyoti turns into a pawn for Nath as he dreams of being part of a great “experiment”. She, however, also fails to see the secret interlocking of caste and gender. The most significant thing, whatsoever, is that Jyoti is not aware of the realities of life. She has lived in the lectures of her father who is her ideal. She defines marriage in terms of help, consolation and challenge. She herself accepts that she is not in love with Arun. She is not well informed about the person, she is going to marry. Jyoti floats above the real world taking it as good as his parents’ lectures show but when she lands on the real earth she lands, in fact, in a quagmire. When Nath asks her whether she is in love or not, her reply shows her pathetically poor understanding of the relations and the world:

JYOTI: I don’t know. Arun asked me, isn’t the very idea of marrying me dreadful to you? What is dreadful about that? Arun said, you don’t think that I am an absolutely worthless fellow? I said no! He said, this is incredible, and added, in that case let us get married. And I nodded. (507)

The proposal of marriage is in the form of challenge. She accepts it without knowing who is on the other side as denial would be against the values and ideas inculcated in her by Nath. The challenge is not to Jyoti, it’s a challenge to the socialist ideology and hence, to her father who is her source of inspiration and progenitor of her mental set-up. She is an intellectual slave who does not have the capacity to think freely on her own.

Act I Sc II discloses to us Arun’s nature. He is a firsthand politician whose each and every step is measured and well thought. He knows how to take privilege of his position. He is a pervert and sadomasochist. Arun knows that Jyoti has drunk deeply in the fountain of her father’s ideology. So he traps her by arousing her sympathy for him in a way that she begins to think the nuptial knot as a duty of her to save poor, socially bashed and alienated Arun. While depicting his life to Jyoti and his fear of being engulfed by big houses, Arun is too melodramatic to be considered honest. When Arun asks Jyoti, “Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt daal ...” (*Collected Plays* 513) he, in fact, is not simply asking her. He is tactfully and tacitly challenging Jyoti’s ideology. He, a clever manipulator as he is, doesn’t provide her an opportunity to think about the practical aspects of marriage. He uses the condition of Dalits as a tool to achieve his selfish ends. Arun’s description scares Jyoti, but his challenge strengthens her resolve to experience with him this kind of life, as her eyes are blinded by her father’s idealism. He gives a jolt to her socialist ideology as he knows that it will blow back in the form of nuptial knot. Arun’s fabricated emotional quagmire sinks Jyoti until she becomes an emotional slave of

Arun. He creates a situation in which marriage becomes the need of Jyoti. Arun presents himself as an indifferent party, but Jyoti has been so indoctrinated that her denial is impossible. His confidence in the success of his plot is shown when he tells Jyoti that if somebody sees her weeping, he will not lose anything. “No loss to me...” (*Collected Plays* 514). The very next statement displays the devil within him, “Hasli re hasli, ek baamaneen fasli- ‘It’s a jolly game, Caught a Brahmin dame’” (*Collected Plays* 514).

Arun’s brilliance in tackling this issue can be observed in his conversation with different members of his would be bride’s family. He appears to be confident that Seva and Jayaprakash are not going to support this marriage. After listening Seva with patience and getting sure of her attitude regarding this marriage, he attacks her with full might. Seva tries to change the topic on the excuse of Jayaprakash’s arrival but obstinate Arun continues with the liquor selling topic to hurt both of them and to derive devilish pleasure. When Nath enters, the change of mood is evident. Arun knows that Nath is supportive, so he doesn’t take the risk of annoying him as it could cost him the marriage. He, unexpectedly, becomes silent and leaves the scene creating clouds of suspicion in Nath’s mind regarding the manner of his reception by the other family members.

The conversation of Jyoti, Seva and Nath after Arun’s departure indicates Nath’s diffident outlook towards Arun, Jyoti’s ignorance and Seva’s concern. Seva and Jayaprakash try to assure him that Arun is not the right person for Jyoti by giving reason after reason, but Nath is not ready to listen anything against the Dalit Arun. But there is one occasion when he asks Jyoti: “Does it occur to you Jyoti, that you have perhaps made a mistake in saying ‘yes’” (*Collected Plays* 525)? The answer is note worthy as it helps us understand the mental condition of Jyoti who herself is not sure about the judiciousness of her decision.

“Once in a while, but right or wrong what does it matter any way? I made a commitment and now I can’t run away” (*Collected Plays* 525). Finally, genuine concerns of Seva and Jayaprakash are put aside and Jyoti is all ready to be sacrificed on the altar of her father’s ideology. Nath’s closing speech at the end of the scene, tells us that he was never ready to cancel the marriage as he has connected this marriage to his ego, to his ideology. He knows that it’s too risky a game to play-“what you are doing could be both wise and foolish” (*Collected Plays* 527). But his ego, his ideology is greater than his daughter.

Act II Sc I dramatizes the deplorable condition of the married life of Jyoti & Arun. Jyoti is living with her parents but often stays with Arun at his friends’, as he has not been able to get accommodation for himself. He has become a parasite who wants to live on the earnings of his wife. Quarrels seem to be regular affairs and Jyoti in turn gets good thrashing. Seva is too frustrated to endure this situation. Very soon we get disillusioned. Jyoti declares to Nath that she is not going back to Arun.

This comes as a shock to Nath. He is not worried because Jyoti is his daughter and her marital life is in danger. He is gloomy because his experiment is going to fail. Nath is so blinded by his dream of an ideal, casteless society, that he fails to see the suffering and emotional stress Jyoti is going through. He is ready to sacrifice his daughter’s happiness at the altar of his idealism. Arun comes to her to apologise and expresses his helplessness. Arun’s theatrical lament reminds us as Fauzdar Shinde’s wailing in *Sakharam Binder*. His behaviour shows that he can go to any extent to achieve his goal. First, he beats his wife for being a member of the so called class of exploiters and later he pleads to bring her back so that he can continue with his torture as it would balance the exploitations they have been victims of. Seva’s estimate of his nature in Act II Sc II further clarifies it, “In this way he is returning all the kicks aimed at

generations of his ancestors by men of high caste. It appears that this is the monumental mission he has set out to fulfill” (*Collected Plays* 544).

Arun shows his helplessness to behave like civilised people and blames it on his upbringing:

ARUN: When have I claimed that I am civilised and cultured like your people? From childhood I have seen my father come home drunk everyday, and beat my mother half dead, seen her cry her heart out. Even now I hear the echoes of her broken sobs. No one was there to wipe her tears. My poor mother! She didn’t have a father like Bhai, nor a mother like you. . . . (*Collected Plays* 539-540)

He tries to explain away his personal misconduct with the help of the suffering endured by his caste, but does not have the strength to change his behavior. He declares that he is powerless, forgetting that if as a Dalit he wants to be free, he must believe that the given circumstances can be overcome. He thus enunciates the central irony of the discourse of Dalit empowerment: Dalits should struggle for freedom and change but they have also to accept the responsibility that attends freedom: “What am I but the son of scavengers? We don’t know the non-violent ways of Brahmins like you. We drink and beat our wives” (*Collected Plays* 540).

He thus transmutes the humiliation received at the hands of society into violence against his wife. And it does not seem to him to be wrong, since he has seen his father do the same against his mother so many times. Arun claims to love Jyoti unconditionally, and wants others to perceive his violence against her as an expression of love. Tendulkar, in this way, divulges here the common irony of Indian homes- supposed to be united by bonds of love but concealing widespread violence. At another level, Arun represents the politically successful Dalit leaders who exploit the discourse of freedom and self-pity to promote their own interests and to harm others.

Arun is shown as a victim of the discourse of hatred towards upper classes often circulating among the victim castes. He hates Jyoti for being a Brahmin and avenges the violence of generations on her. He hates everything that is upper caste, including the idealism of Nath, which seems to him superficial and false. Arun’s resentful behavior can be understood with the help of Nietzsche’s theorisations. Nietzsche names it as *ressentiment*, the expression of “slave morality”, which surfaces when natural impulses are denied expression. In this regard, Kim Atkins opines, “In the case of slaves, whose bondage effectively denies their will to power free expression, the suffering of bondage produces hatred and fear, but also *ressentiment* because slaves cannot act on their feelings” (73). Arun is also the victim of a similar oppression and hence he labels his oppressors, the upper castes, as bad and as a result himself as good. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche looks back on the origins of the words “good” and “bad”, and concludes in a satiric tone: “the enemy” as the man of *ressentiment* conceives him – and here precisely is his deed, his creation: he has conceived “the evil enemy”, “the evil one”, and this in fact is his basic concept, from which he then evolves as an afterthought and pendant, a “good one” himself (39)! The weak uphold their weakness by claiming that whatever the strong did was evil, and attribute everything to Divine Providence and resign themselves to their fate as if it were a voluntary achievement and a meritorious act. They hate the strong for their power and strength. Arun too cannot bring himself to respect Jyoti or at least treat her as an equal human being. Jyoti is influenced by the discourse of reformist idealism and social equality fed to her by Nath since her childhood. She reveres her father and craves his approval in all the decisions she takes. Her actions are guided by the discourse in which her father believes and which he wants her to subscribe to. So she once again submits to Arun’s requests and goes with him. And she is once again subjected to intense violence and economic exploitation.

Act II Sc II further draws to fore the treacherous and vile nature of Arun. He kicks Jyoti even when she is pregnant and blames her father-mother falsely only to torment her. He is a sheer incarnation of vengeance. Jayaprakash's theory regarding Arun's behavior ... yesterday's victim is today's victimizer" (*Collected Plays* 547) appears to be the correct logic behind Arun's dirty behaviour.

Arun again appears in Nath's home with a mephistophelian smile as he needs Nath to preside over a discussion on his autobiography. His autobiography becomes an instant hit with the critics. The gap between moral posturing and personal behavior of a pseudo- Dalit writer or leader is enunciated here. Seva's remark depicts the duality of Arun's self:

SEVA: I will say that in this excellent book whatever the author has said about injustice and exploitation is hypocrisy of the first order. Because this man himself exploits my daughter. Like a shameless parasite, he lives on my daughter's blood and on top of that he gets drunk and bashes her up. Constantly he taunts her about her caste and about her parents, heaping foul abuse on them for being highborn. (*Collected Plays* 545)

Arun blackmails Nath into appearing for a public discussion on the book. Nath agrees to speak appreciatively of the book to prevent further misery for Jyoti.

The concluding scene of the play presents a disillusioned Jyoti who has ridden free from the bondages of Nath's ideology and joined the fold of Arun. Nath finally realizes that he is responsible for the sufferings of Jyoti. But it's too late. His lament seems to be a dirge on the funeral of Jyoti's life. Jyoti comes to him to puncture the beliefs he has paraded with throughout his life. She has been tolerating the atrocities because she believed that her godlike father cannot falter. But his "lousy" and "hireling's speech" has shattered her beliefs. If he can deviate from his path on his own will what right he had to throw her into a mundane married life and close the roots of escape by building up the high boundaries of his socialism and humanism. Jyoti rejects the long held theorem: "All human beings are essentially noble". She seems to establish an empirical experience based theory that "man and his inherent nature are never really two different things" (*Collected Plays* 563).

Her disillusionment is complete after staying under Arun's influence for some time. Arun is the champion of a kind of Dalit discourse which looks down upon everything that is high-caste, and he looks for the hints of exploitation in each of their moves. Jyoti is at first shocked by Arun's changing behaviour towards her and fails to understand him:

JYOTI: There is a savage beast in his eyes, his lips, his face . . . in every single limb. And bestiality is something which cannot be separated from him . . . Arun is both the beast and the lover. Arun is the demon, and also the poet. Both are bound together, one within the other, they are one. (*Collected Plays* 564)

But she realises later that his multifariousness is where she can begin to know him. It is one Arun but made of all the contradictory things bound together. The play thus hints at the fragmentary nature of subjectivity and its lack of coherence, as against conventional assumptions of an essential, coherent and unified self. It brings home the insight that individual identity is not a free and self-transparent consciousness, or a stable essence. Her father's final betrayal pushes her further towards Arun, and so she leaves her family for good. She tells her father:

JYOTI: You made me waste twenty years of my life before I could discover this. I had to learn it on the strength of my own experience. I had to meet a man named Arun Athavale. Arun gave me what you had

withheld from me. I must acknowledge my debt to him. (*Collected Plays* 563)

It is Arun speaking through her when she says: “I am an untouchable, a scavenger. I am one of them. Don’t touch me. Fly from my shadow, otherwise my fire will scorch your comfortable values” (*Collected Plays* 566). These are very distinctly Arun’s words. Arun is successful in exerting so deep an influence on Jyoti that she begins to believe that all upper-caste values are anti-dalit and that her parents could hate her for being a Dalit. At another level Jyoti’s is a vulnerable existence which first succumbs under the patriarchal male ego of her father and then under the casteist macho persona of Arun, her husband. After her marriage she becomes a site for the battle between two different ideologies and has to bear with the filth of the remains of this conflict. The impasse Jyoti has reached at the end of the play derives the concerns of Maya Pandit also:

In *Kanyadan*, Jyoti becomes a site, a battleground on which the clash between the upper caste and the Dalit casts takes place... The complete submission of the girl’s gendered self to the violence perpetrated on her by the caste politics leaves no scope for even an ideological alternative....(70)

Works Cited

- Atkins, Kim. *Self and Subjectivity*. New York: Wiley, John & Sons, 2008. Print.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956. Print.
- Guttal, Vijaya. “Shashi Deshpande’s *The Binding Vine and A Matter of Time*: A Reading in the Postcolonial Context.” *Writing Difference: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande*. Ed. Chanchala K. Naik. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005. Print.
- Pandit, Maya. “Representation of Family in Modern Marathi Plays: Tendulkar, Dalvi and Elkunchwar.” *Vijay Tendulkar’s Plays: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Ed. V. M. Madge. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. Print.
- Rai, Sudha. “Gendered Crossings: Vijay Tendulkar’s Deconstructive Axis in *Sakharam Binder*, *Kamala* and *Kanyadaan*.” *Contemporary Indian Drama: astride two traditions*. Ed. Urmila Talwar and Bandana Chakarbarty. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005. Print.
- Srivastava, Shilpi Rishi. “*Kanyadaan*: The Admission of Defeat and Intellectual Confusion.” *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar: Critical Explorations*. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad and Satish Barbudhe. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2008. Print.
- Tendulkar, Vijay. *Collected Plays in Translation*. New Delhi: OUP, 2007. Print.