

Oppression of the Oppressed: A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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Abstract

India named for Unity in diversity has not only diversified culture, but also disparate caste and class united together as the different beads in a string. The word 'caste' originates from the Portuguese – *casta* meaning 'race' or 'descent'. In India the hierarchal order of the castes differs and changes from place to place and from one region to another. The social group to which an individual belongs by birth decides his caste and the order in which the castes are arranged decides the oppressed and the oppressor.

Vijay Tendulkar, the social critic of traditional India, penned his *Kanyadaan* with special focus on socialism dedicated to the cause of the upliftment of the untouchables or Dalits. Though belonging to the upper class Marathi family, Tendulkar revolts through his writing for the social justice and political equality of the lower classes. Although his *Kanyadaan* centralises the mismatch marriage of Arun Athavale (a Shudra by birth) and Jyoti (a Brahman by birth) and several other issues, Tendulkar appears to be highly focused on the inner Psyche of the 'marginalised'.

Keywords: Vijay Tendulkar, *Kanyadaan*, Tradition, Caste, Dalit, Marginalised, Psyche

Class and Caste are so intricately intertwined in our country that it is solemnised as the "part of the individual's mind and contents of his conscience". Though we have stepped in the 72nd year of Independence, the suppression of the upper castes and the sufferings of the Dalit and the marginalised is still a case under eradication. For decades, the socialists and the politicians instead of downgrading the issue of inequality seem to have a cold snap under the issue. Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* (Giving away of bride or Gift of a daughter) (1983), is a play at him when it was staged in Marathi. Recalling the event, Tendulkar says, "You are honouring me with the Saraswati Samman today for the play for which I once had a slipper hurled at me. Perhaps it is the fate of the play to have earned both this honour and that insult. As its creator, I respect both verdicts."

Casting seven main characters, *Kanyadaan* is a two act drama containing five scenes in all, each placed in the locale of Puna. Nath Devalikar (MLA) and Seva are an old socialist

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couple actively involved in their political work. The activist couple have a twenty year old daughter Jyoti and a twenty three year old son Jayaprakash. Jyoti falls in love with the highly talented and educated Dalit boy, Arun Athavale. Jyoti announces that she has agreed to marry a Dalit boy and thereby showing acceptance to her father's idealism who preached her Gandhian philosophy, ideals and morals. Nath is overjoyed when he hears the brave decision of his daughter in marrying the underprivileged Arun, whereas Seva revolts and Jayaprakash also stands by his mother's side. In support to her views, Seva points to the class difference and puts forward the opinion that Jyoti should be careful in marrying because it is the women who suffer in any relationship. She says "My anxiety is not over his being a dalit. You know very well that Nath and I have been fighting untouchability tooth and nail... You have been brought up in a specific culture. To erase or to change all this overnight is just not possible. He is different in every way. You may not be able to handle it." (13)

Nath bothers least about Seva's viewpoints and takes pride of the view that his generation has broken the shackles of tradition and has established grounds for both caste and gender equity. The only idea that baffles him is when Jyoti frankly admits that she isn't marrying Arun because of love but to prove that she doesn't look down on him as an untouchable. When Jyoti brings Arun home, he is seen feeling uncomfortable in the big house of Jyoti. He asks Jyoti not to leave him as if he has entered the lion's den. His discomfort reveals the marginality that he has undergone throughout his life which makes him feel suffocated and nervous. He emotionally takes us to his background when he says, "I feel uncomfortable in big houses... if you see my father's hut you'll understand. Ten of us big and small, lived in that eight feet by ten feet. The heat of our bodies to warm us in winter. No clothes on our back, no food in our stomach, but we felt very safe." (16).

Arun is now an educated individual who knows the nooks and corners, and the ups and downs of the society where he lives. He has created a self for himself, but the inner "Self" is still maligned and suppressed with the thoughts of marginalised which makes him utter Jyoti that her romantic world is entirely different from the real world. She cannot mix up in the scavenger's world which evokes only disgust to the civilised men. Whereas Jyoti regards her marriage to him as a challenge, a forward thought and a progressive act, Arun keeps on degrading her challenges with his difference. He shoots foul language and makes excuses with a moving speech on Dalit- "Our grandfathers and great grandfathers used to roam, barefoot, miles and miles, in the heat, in the rain, day and night...till the rags on their butt fell apart...used to wander shouting 'Johaar, Maayi-baap! Sir-Madam, sweeper!' and their calls polluted the brahmins' ears" (17). Throughout their conversation Arun keeps on distinguishing the lifestyle and attitudes of both the classes (the shravana and the shudras). He says, "How can there be any give and take between our ways and your fragrant, ghee spread, wheat bread culture?"(17) He adds further that reflects the psyche of the downtrodden thus, "Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt dal in my father's hut? Without vomiting? Can you shit every day in our slum's village toilet like my mother?" (17).

Arun takes advantage of Jyoti's determination to marry him in spite of his foul behaviour. He sets his rights on Jyoti as a double domineering agent-(1) as a husband or a male (2) as a human who was oppressed due to the so-called caste conflicts. The gender violence and class/caste violence instinct in Arun finds these as his right to abuse and torment his wife physically and emotionally and hence he beats and twists Jyoti's arm as a potential wife-beater. The sadism in him reflects when he sings, "*Hasli re hasli, ek baamaneen fasli*- It's a jolly game, caught a Brahmin dame." (18) This attitude of Arun, Prasad says, "is as much an expression of attitudes of the character as a provocative taunt directed at the conservative caste bound audiences" (Prasad 14). Hence Tendulkar shifts the focus from class-caste divide and problems to that of attitudes of gender and oppressive behaviour.

Seva makes it very clear to Jyoti that marital (personal) life cannot gel up with social reformation and in rescuing the victim we ourselves will turn victims to their age old oppression. But Jyoti dismisses her mother's anxiety by adding cheer through her self confidence in handling Arun. Finally, Seva and Jeyaprakash are made to go with Jyoti's decision of marrying Arun. Nath and Jyoti wish to put an end to the caste based society whereas the illusion cracks their wishes and makes them wake up to the reality of life that "Apples are apples and oranges are oranges" (Rao 651). The marriage of Arun and Jyoti is seen as a *challenge* by everyone. Seva and Jeyaprakash see it as a challenge that must be dropped but Nath and Jyoti see it as a challenge which must not be declined as they are on the verge of promoting reformation in the traditional society and the failure to which "would go against their principles and be one more treacherous nail in the coffin of caste-equality." (Prasad14) Arun keeps on insisting Jyoti about the consequences of their marriage. There would be no loss to him, he says, "It's your marriage which will fizzle out" (18). He sees Jyoti representing the brahmin community whom he has to subdue and conquer with his Dalit masculinity.

We see Jyoti married in the beginning of Act II and her family dipped in turmoil and worried about the life of Jyoti. Arun comes home every night taking alcohol and beats his wife heartlessly as an illiterate would do to his wife. Not having a house of his own and unable to stay in his in-laws' house, Arun takes refuge in his friends' house one after the other with Jyoti. The unsatisfactory marital relationship and the stormy and violent behaviour of her husband makes Jyoti arrive at a decision of separating from Arun. The seemingly drunkard Arun arrives at the door of his in-laws and tries to pacify Jyoti by blaming his generation and the suppression thus-

When have I claimed that I am civilized and cultured like your people? From childhood I have seen my father come drunk every day, 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... What am I but the son of scavenger. We don't know the non-violent ways of Brahmins like you. (43-44)

Jyoti surrenders to these emotional words and Arun reclaims his wife. Even Arun's lamentation moves Nath who understands that he (Arun) is regretting and so when they leave, Nath feels happy about his daughter who has made the marriage go without any obstruction. He says, "Jyoti, I feel so proud of you, the training I gave you has not been in vain" (45).

Arun's autobiography gets published and receives exceptional reviews but he who writes a beautiful autobiography, describes the humiliation he has undergone with extraordinary sensitivity, continues to torment his pregnant wife mercilessly. Jyoti's family is made to take all this harshness quietly and Nath is even blackmailed to chair a meeting to praise the book which he has to admit is brilliant. At the end, Nath whimpers his faith in Gandhian principle, idealism and humanity. He feels defeated as his experiment has failed in spite of offering his daughter in the cruel game of matrimony. But Jyoti commits herself to be the wife of Dalit since she chose the path and there can't be any return to which she is fully devoted. She subsumes herself to her suffering, to her husband's foiling over the class conflict and wife – beating wrath. She justifies to her father that casteism is not a barrier between two souls as love governs the world.

Kanyadaan fairly represents the view that cleansing of society and dusting the rage and oppression of people is not possible. Through the protagonist, Tendulkar asserts that like Jews who have created a minimalistic state, formerly victimised people tend to become victimisers in turn. "The oppressed are overjoyed when they get a chance to oppress others" (51) and hence yesterday's victims turn today's victimizer.

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