

Sakharam Binder: Tendulkar's Human Zoo

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Tendulkar's plays deal with agonies, anxieties, and tensions of the urban, white-collar, middle-class people. They focus on the conflict and confrontation between individual and society. The angry and frustrated protagonists of his plays are actually the victims of harsh circumstances in life in the so-called modern, cultured society. The anger and frustration of these young men and women is expressed in their rejection of the conventional or traditional values and norms. So, the cruelty of some protagonists is a kind of perverted humanity and their desire to inflict miseries on others is a kind of revenge sought against society. They offer the world a set of social attitudes that are anti-establishment, anti-cultural, and even anti-humanitarian in the existential sense as opposed to the established, cultural, and humanitarian values. However, the world fails to recognize their struggle for existence, their bravery, and their sense of humanity.

While projecting the wrath of the young generation, Tendulkar explores human mind and its complexities in all depth and variety. He presents man-woman relationship in terms of sensuality and violence rather than love and affection. An anti-romantic playwright as Tendulkar is, he projects not love but its perversion, not sex but its degradation.

While pursuing his study as a part of Nehru fellowship, he has won, Tendulkar was left feeling a psychological

curiosity about violence— not as something that exists in isolation, but as a part of the human milieu, human behaviour, human mind. It has become an obsession. At a very sensitive level, violence can be described as consciously hurting someone, whether it is physical violence or psychological violence.... Violence is something which has to be accepted as fact. It's no use describing it as good or bad. Projections of it can be good or bad. And violence, when turned into something else, can certainly be defined as vitality, which can be very useful, very constructive. So, it depends on how you utilize it or curb it at times.¹

Treatment of Love, Sex, and Violence

The play *Sakharam Binder* explores complexities of human nature. The play consists of three acts : The first act depicts the relationship of Laxmi-Sakharam, the second one, that of Champa-Sakharam, and the last one, that of Laxmi-Sakharam-Champa. Sakharam, the protagonist, is at the pivot of the situation. Laxmi considers Champa as her rival in Sakharam's love; the one is a foil to the other.

It is with the presentation of *The Vultures* that Tendulkar's name has become associated with sex, violence, and sensationalism. However, these elements were there in his earlier plays too, but have, now come to be noticed in more glaring light. Tendulkar, who has been witnessed as the angry young dramatist of the Marathi theatre, rebels against the established, conventional ideas and values of the society from the presentation of the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* onwards. The play places him among the leading Indian playwrights and sets him apart from the previous generation of the Marathi playwrights. Thus, he is one who at once belongs to the tradition and establishes himself as an individual talent, a pioneering figure of the Contemporary Marathi Theatre. While commenting on the naturalism in the play *Sakharam Binder*, Arundhati Banerjee states:

In the portrayal of this lower strata(stratum) of society, Tendulkar's plays signified a definite departure from the main stream Marathi drama that mostly dealt with the more privileged section of society. One of the reasons why there was such a reaction against *Sakharam Binder* was its burning naturalism. Here was a raw chunk of life with all its ugliness and crudity which was more than a shock to refined and prudish middle-class audiences. Such a direct confrontation with 'vulgar' reality was difficult for them to bear.²

In an interview Sharad Gokhale had with Nilu Phule (the actor who played Sakharam's role), the latter states: "The playwright has suggested to avoid gaudiness in the play's performance and symbolically indicate the presence of the sex scenes. For Tendulkar feels: "If the audience attend the performance for the sheer pleasure of seeing sex on the stage, it will be my defeat as a playwright."³

Through Sakharam's character, Tendulkar exposes the masochism of the lower middle class male. Due to the ill treatment meted out to him by his father, he flees away from home. The bitter experiences he had in his life leave him rough and tough and foul-mouthed.

Sakharam does not believe in the institution of marriage. So, he remains unmarried all through his life. However, he gives shelter to a helpless, deserted woman in the society, not with a view to improving her lot but to exploiting her further by fulfilling his sexual desire. It is a kind of contractual relationship based on mutual convenience. Wine and woman are his chief attractions. He has his own rules of the game, a special moral code, which he expects his temporary mistress to abide by. The play opens, when he brings Laxmi to his house, the seventh one in the series of his women or "temporary wives" if we call them so.

It is with the publication of this play that Tendulkar is accused of imperilling the very existence of marriage as an institution. However, growth, development, and destruction constitute the natural process of any institution in the cultural history of man. No literary discourse, whether it is Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* or Bertrand Russell's *Marriage and Morals*, has the capacity to change the social attitude towards the problem, suddenly and abruptly.⁴

Laxmi is portrayed as an ideal Indian woman like Savitri in the mythological story.”⁵ Her husband has tortured her as she fails to conceive a child by him. Now, for her, Sakharam is her husband. She tries her best to fulfil his every need despite the fact that he even fails to understand her expectations and exploits her physically as well as psychologically.

Sakharam’s association with Laxmi brings about some good changes in his life-style. He becomes devoutly religious, takes a regular bath, and transforms himself into a responsible “family man”. He himself notices these changes occurring in him but fails to attribute the credit to Laxmi. However, the playwright succeeds in convincingly showing, on her departure, the deep impact of Laxmi’s daily religious routine on Sakharam’s mind through his confession : “ There have been many women here, but this one left a mark before she went away.” (153)

The relationship of Sakharam and Laxmi cannot last for a long period, as they are totally in contrast with each other. Laxmi is very sensitive, generous, calm, and tender-hearted. Sakharam is very aggressive, violent, and sensual. Laxmi fails to fulfil his excessive physical lust and Sakharam remains blind to her expectations. Both cannot satisfy each other either physically or psychologically. There is no sharing, no harmony in their relationship; their life is totally disrupted. At last, they part company, saying good-bye to each other in good humour and a very cordial manner.

On Laxmi’s departure, Sakharam brings Champa, the police Fauzdar Shinde’s wife, into his house. A foil to Laxmi, she is younger, slightly plumper, and better built. Her appearance, behaviour, dialogues, and even her name indicate that she is whimsical by nature. All good, desirable changes in Sakharam’s life come to an end with Champa’s arrival. A religious, responsible “household man” transforms himself into a lewd, sensual drunkard.

The difference between Laxmi and Champa is obvious. At the beginning, Laxmi appears embarrassed. Although she has been starving for a week, she remains quiet. When Sakharam lectures to Champa laying down his terms and conditions in his usual vein, she responds indifferently and asks him to prepare tea. Thus, she dispels his false notion: A woman has to attend the household chores. She never seems disturbed by Sakharam’s demands. On the contrary, she shocks him by frankly expressing her opinion about Daud, “He’s nice!” (p.159) Sakharam cannot appreciate this, but remains helpless. His conception about the sanctity of home ends with Champa’s arrival in his house.

Outwardly, Champa appears gross and sensual, but she, too, is touchy and sensitive to some of the issues of life. She denies Sakharam to get into bed with her at the first night saying: “I don’t like it at all that man-woman stuff. I had my honour to save.” (162) However, in all helplessness and for the fulfilment of her bare needs such as food, clothing, and shelter- she has to yield to him and satisfy his physical lust.

Laxmi accepts Sakharam almost as a husband and, therefore, submits herself to him willingly; Champa, on the other hand, accepts him merely as “her man” in sheer helplessness. She has no alternative but to share bed with him, but, for that, she has to reluctantly help herself with an alcoholic drink also. Nevertheless, in one corner of her mind, she feels that all men are equally bad; a man is, in her view, either a “corpse” or a “dog”. Champa is a rebel against the

male-dominated society. She does not accept conventional norms and values regarding man-woman relationship. No doubt, she is naive and sexy, but her mother and husband have been responsible for her being what she is.

Laxmi returns to Sakharam, once again. Champa persuades him to give her shelter. However, the presence of Champa and Laxmi, at the same time and under the same roof, creates a psychological turmoil in Sakharam. He grows impotent. "Laxmi develops an asexual relationship with Fauzdar Shinde while Champa develops a sexual association with Daud", since Sakharam can no longer sexually satisfy her. Though Laxmi finds nothing wrong with her association with Shinde, her moral sense is outraged by Champa's affair with Daud, and she uses this opportunity to malign her rival. This brings out the latent hatred in Laxmi for Champa."⁶ Getting his masculinity doubly hurt, Sakharam kills Champa in his rage. Thus, Laxmi, who outwardly appears to be generous and kind-hearted, turns out inwardly to be vicious or violent. On Champa's murder, she shows more presence of mind than Sakharam. When the latter fails to carry out her instruction to bury Champa in the house, she herself takes up the shovel and does the grave-digging. Here, symbolically it seems to imply, "She buries not only Champa's dead body, but her uncivilized, barbaric, feminine desires also. Her power to fight injustice appears everlasting."⁷

It is observed that Laxmi successfully tones down Sakharam's sensuality, while Champa inflames it. The simultaneous presence of these two women together, who are foils to each other, disturbs him. It creates a psychological storm in his life. The lack of sexual potency on his own part and Champa's sexual association with Daud, his friend hurt Sakharam's ego acutely. As a result, he turns into a cold-blooded murderer. The role-shifting in him transforms the audience's feeling from apathy into antipathy (due to the cruelties he inflicts upon Laxmi) and back from antipathy into sympathy and pathos (due to his helplessness in covering up Champa's murder at his hands). According to the Marathi critic Vasant Palshikar,

Both Sakharam and Laxmi are extremely selfish, lustful, and dominating. In the conflict between Laxmi and Sakharam, the former naturally becomes victorious. The dramatic tension in the conflict grows potent with remarkable effects. Throughout the play, Laxmi is portrayed as pious, patient, and kind-hearted. The ending of the play throws light on her real nature. The success of the play lies in its presentation of Laxmi's actual nature.⁸

All the three characters -- Sakharam, Laxmi, and Champa -- appear to be the victims of circumstances. The deterministic overtones of the play are most perceptible in their respective demeanours.

E. Renuka considers Sakharam the replica of Tendulkar. From the complaint of his wife Meena, it is noticed that he compels her to disregard her talent and restrict her "to tend his needs and raise his children."⁹ Despite his efforts to remove injustice in society, he unconsciously practices it in his own house. In the play *Kamala*, he appears to criticize Jaisingh for treating

Sarita not as a wife but as a sex object or plaything. However, in actual life, he himself appears to perform the same role he projects in Jaisingh or Sakharam.

But there is no point in discussing all these things: it is an example of biographical criticism; it does not lead us anywhere in the critical assessment of Tendulkar as a dramatist. One shouldn't peep in the personal or private life of Tendulkar- Tendulkar, the *man* and Tendulkar, the aesthete are two different entities. Otherwise, it exemplifies what is known in literary criticism as "Intentional Fallacy."¹⁰

Outwardly, Sakharam pretends that he is a saviour of women, but inwardly he is a dumping ground of all that is bad in society, so far as man-woman relationship is concerned. Although he criticizes married life, he develops such a relationship, which is worse for the woman who suffers more with Sakharam than with her husband before. He brings the deserted, miserable woman to his house not to improve her lot but to serve his needs. And he is ready to throw her out when there remains nothing womanly about her. Therefore, E. Renuka is quite right in pointing out that Sakharam's nature is as deceitful as that of a crocodile.¹¹ Although he understands and supports a rebellious woman, he wants his woman to slave for him day and night, to respect his wishes, and to satisfy his lust. He claims to be the saviour of women by offering them a life better than the earlier one, but he is neither a saviour, nor a rebel, but an epicurean, a self-centred pleasure-seeker.

Sakharam, like Osborne's Jimmy Porter, appears to be the spokesman of the angry and frustrated modern generation. He lashes out at his women and the world at large explicitly and implicitly at himself. He does not care for the world but wants the world, particularly his women to care for him. The want of love has generated a kind of fierceness in his temperament. As a result, he turns into a masochist who seeks pleasure in inflicting pains and miseries on others.

Apparently, Sakharam's anger appears incoherent but it can be understood as the symptom of a positive trait of a character in search of his identity. The harsh treatment given by his Brahmin father, and his running away from home to escape from suffering are responsible factors for the sense of instability that he exhibits throughout. Like the protagonist of an avant-garde play, he shows himself cut off from society by rejecting the accepted cultural norms and established moral values.

The ending of the play is not satisfactory. After Champa's murder, Sakharam is projected as bewildered. So, he cannot follow Laxmi's suggestions. The chief tension of the play springs from his violent, rebellious nature. He is nothing, if he is not aggressive. So, the ending of the play appears to be an artificial resolution. It is a technique called *deus-ex-machina*, but is used in the way Dickens and Hardy use it in their novels, *Oliver Twist* and *Tess*, respectively. While commenting on the ending of the play, the Marathi critic Vasant Palshikar says:

Sakharam kills Champa as a revenge for his incapacity to satisfy her sexually. However, due to the incident of Champa's murder, the dramatic action of the play suffers a set-back and becomes rather flawed and cheap.¹²

While commenting on the varied aspects of sex and violence in the play Tendulkar states:

Even in the plays like *Sakharam Binder* and *The Vultures*, the theme is not violence. Violence comes as a way of life—a natural way of life, if you consider the background of the characters. It is there as a part of functioning of a character.¹³

It is observed that violence is an inevitable aspect of the lives, nature, and culture of all the characters in this play. Therefore, Manchi Sarat Babu is quite justified in stating: “The inhuman violence of the human characters in these plays is only the result of the physical deformity.”¹⁴ Violence characterizes the play, because it is inherent to the very life styles of the characters.

Victim- Victimser Relationship

The play exemplifies the power struggle at the family level. The shifting of roles implicit in the Drama Triangle is clearly noticeable here. Sakharam is a foul-mouthed womanizer who pretends to be a saviour of women, but actually, he is just an egoistic epicure. He gives shelter to a woman, deserted by her husband, but she gets from Sakharam treatment worse than that from her husband. He wants his woman to slave day and night for him, and respect him, and satisfy him. He cares a fig for her on a personal level and throws her out, when there is left nothing womanly about her. Tendulkar, in this play, denudes both an individual and society. The play is

Sakharam, leaves the house at the age of eleven due to the barbaric treatment of his father to him. Though he is born in a Brahmin family, he lives like “a Mahar, a dirty scavenger” (127) to show off his arrogance and powerlessness. His exceptional mode of behaviour is a kind of revenge sought on the Brahminical tradition he hates, like Narayanappa’s in Anant Moorthy’s brilliant novella *Samskara*.

Sakharam does not believe in the institution of marriage. He gives shelter to the needy and helpless women. The woman has to provide him physical pleasure and domestic comfort. Laxmi, the seventh one in the series of his women, succeeds in re-Brahminizing Sakharam. However, in his association with Champa later, he is transformed into a sensual drunkard. Laxmi’s arrival for the second time creates a psychological turmoil in Sakharam, which leaves him impotent. Champa gives shelter to Laxmi but there is a streak of contempt in her treatment to the latter. The kindly, tender-hearted Laxmi cannot bear to see Champa as her rival in love. As a result, she uses the policy of “using a thorn to take out a thorn” (63) like Nana does in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. She informs Sakharam of Champa’s illicit relationship with Daud Miyan. Sakharam cannot bear this and strangles Champa to death.

Thus, Sakharam’s role shifts from Victim to Rescuer, from Rescuer to Persecutor and Laxmi’s from Victim to Persecutor. Similarly, Champa’s role shifts from the Victim to the Rescuer and back from the Rescuer to the Victim. Thus, Sakharam shifts from his role---from Laxmi’s master to her slave. Likewise, Laxmi too shifts her role---from that of Sakharam’s slave to his master.

Physical Deformity

Norman O Brown, a psychologist,¹⁵ sees in primitive man a perfect harmony between mind and body. However, in the process of civilization, mind and body are divided and alienated from each other, and the ultimate result is physical deformity.

Gender deformity and social deformity, at times, cause physical deformity. Gender deformity divides human beings into men and women and social deformity, into manual labourers and intellectuals. These divisions indirectly throw light on physical deformity also.

In this naturalistic play Tendulkar projects the crude perversion of individuals, caused by physical deformity. The play moves around the triangular relationship of Laxmi-Sakharam-Champa. Each of them is abnormal in his or her own way. However, they are the victims of circumstances and not of any inherent wickedness.

The world portrayed in the play *Sakharam Binder* is obscene, physical, and sexual. The people in this world reveal their innermost thoughts in the rustic language they speak. It tends to destroy subtle sensibility. This world is not completely alien to the audience. It disturbs them, however, by shocking their moral consciousness.¹⁶

Sakharam's cruelty arises from a greater misery. The violent constant beating of his Brahmin father makes him leave the house at the age of eleven. Born of a Brahmin father and a Mahar mother, Sakharam introduces himself: "I'm a Mahar, a dirty scavenger." (127) It indirectly suggests the kind of family background he has as inheritance. The bitter experiences in his childhood make him grow like a desert cactus. To smoke tobacco, to drink liquor, and to indulge in sheer mechanical sex are the means that he has adopted to overcome his feeling of frustration.

Sakharam remains unmarried throughout his life and he arranges a kind of informal husband-and-wife relationship without marriage in his house by giving shelter to a woman in all helplessness. However, the woman suffers a constant humiliation and severe beating at his instance. Although Sakharam is seen criticizing his father for his brutality, he himself metes out brutal treatment to his women.

Laxmi's relationship with Sakharam brings about some good changes in the latter's stormy life, but the relationship does not last for long. Due to the sharp contrast in their nature, they cannot satisfy each other either physically or mentally. Laxmi's refusal to allow Daud in joining the prayer of Lord Ganesha and Sakharam's violent beating to Laxmi in its aftermath become the cause of their separation.

After Laxmi, Sakharam brings Champa. The younger, attractive, and a lot sensual Champa transforms the religious-minded, responsible householder Sakharam into a sensual drunkard.

Laxmi's separation from Sakharam proves temporary, as she returns to him fascinated within a few months. Champa pities her and gives her shelter against Sakharam's stern objection. However,

the presence of Laxmi and Champa at the same time has a strange effect

on Sakharam. It is as if the two different strands in his character come into direct confrontation, creating a psychological turmoil in him and resulting in his temporary impotence.¹⁷

Champa's illicit relationship with Daud, his friend, turns Sakharam mad with anger. In consequence, he strangles her to death. Towards the end of the play, he gets an emotional support from Laxmi, who helps him cover up the murder and get rid of the feeling of remorse. "Anyway she was a sinner. She'll go to hell. Not you. I've been a virtuous woman. My virtuous deeds will see both of us through." (196)

Comment on the Complexity of Human Nature

The play depicts the life-story of Sakharam, the foul-mouthed womanizer. Bitter and harsh childhood experiences in life renders him ruthless. Hardened as he is by life's experiences, he welcomes life as it comes to him. Sakharam is a complex character that changes with the changing to circumstances. To quote Arundhati Banerjee, "He is a man who is primarily honest and frank. His straightforwardness in dealing with helpless women... demands a certain admiration."¹⁸ Champa, too, like Sakharam, is the victim of circumstance. Ill-treated by her mother and husband, she grows violent and aggressive. The character of Laxmi is totally different from that of Champa. Hers is a round character that changes itself according to the necessity of time and prevails over circumstances.

The playwright successfully maintains a total objectivity in portrayal of the characters. Each character in the play is a combination of good and evil, strength and weakness. At the beginning of the play, Laxmi is portrayed as sensitive, religious, kind, generous, and tender-hearted. She wins the audience's sympathy for bearing Sakharam's inhuman treatment. However, she exhibits her viciousness in her treacherous behaviour towards the end of the play. She frankly develops a friendship with Fauzdar Shinde, Champa's husband and finds nothing wrong about it. But her moral sense is outraged by Champa's sexual relationship with Daud. There is a definite development in her character from a simple, generous, sensitive woman into a cunning, ruthless, determined lady who devises the plan of defeating her rival and carries out her decision successfully. Looking upon Champa as her rival in love, she incites Sakharam to kill her and helps him in covering up the murder. The vicious treatment she metes out to Champa creates the feeling of antipathy towards her in the audience's minds.

Champa is apparently portrayed as gross and violent. Nevertheless, there are the kinder aspects to her nature that we notice when she generously gives shelter to Laxmi who returns in all helplessness. No doubt, she is aggressive, but her violence is not without any reasons. The cruel treatment her mother metes out to her crushes her tender feelings and makes her coarse and violent. Further the sexual exploitation by her husband leaves her a somewhat virago. She appears human throughout the play. So, "she does not suffer from powerlessness as Sakharam and Laxmi do."¹⁹ Hence, her ruthless murder by Sakharam evokes sympathy for her in the audience.

Tendulkar: A Mute Feminist

The play also explores the plight of women in all helplessness along with the depiction of complexity of human nature. Although Sakharam is the protagonist of the play, the action of the play revolves round the character of Laxmi. Vasant Palshikar is quite justified in pointing out:

Actually, the play *Sakharam Binder* is not about Sakharam. Initially, the playwright may have intended to make Sakharam the protagonist. But the play slips from his hand; it becomes the play that focuses on the character of Laxmi, and at this point, she becomes the protagonist of the play.²⁰

Appearance is totally deceptive so far as Laxmi's character is concerned. Throughout the play, she appears meek and polite, but at its end, she incites wrath in Sakharam, which goads him on to killing Champa.

After Champa's murder, Sakharam is portrayed as a feeble character, for he becomes totally helpless. It is a golden opportunity for Laxmi, who takes a full advantage of the situation. Once she gets Sakharam completely into her grip, she begins to cow him down.²¹

So, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Laxmi has an ambition to exert power and influence over others right from the beginning. The ambition is there but in a latent form, until she gets an opportunity to realize it. Her success in getting entry into Sakharam's house fans the flames of her inherent ambition till it reaches a fever pitch.

Champa's character exhibits woman's torture at different levels. She suffers at the hands of her mother, her husband, her male-companion, and, at the end, her female-companion also. Both Champa and Laxmi, have their share of suffering sexual, physical, and psychological at the instance of Sakharam, for he gives them shelter and they just receive it in their helplessness.

The characters in this play are types, changing in the course of action according to the necessity of circumstance. Some of them are sensitive, submissive, and tender-hearted. They rouse sympathy in the minds of the audience from the beginning to the end. But even the characters that are wicked, violent, and aggressive win their sympathy. Their fall creates the scene of pathos that evokes the feelings of pity, sympathy, and tenderness. However, in most of his plays, Tendulkar is "able to achieve an almost total objectivity."²²

It is observed that *Sakharam Binder* best illustrates the philosophy of determinism. The character's actions and other events in the plays are determined by forces, which are inevitable and over which human beings have no control. Heredity and environment are the determining forces that shape their nature, character, and behaviour. Sakharam inherits barbaric tendencies or inclinations directly from his father. The bitter circumstances in life leave Champa aggressive and violent. Laxmi becomes the victim of circumstances. Suffering is their lot; they are predestined to suffer. Thus, the plays reflect the precariousness of the balance between human free will and predestination. They further throw light on the grim accounts of doings and misdoings of the characters trapped in the grip of their animal nature and sordid environment.

One can easily notice that Tendulkar, in this play, rejects idealized portrayal of life and attains complete accuracy in realistically presenting “details of the details”. He displays disinterested objectivity and frankness in depicting life as a brutal struggle for survival. He neither praises nor blames the characters for the actions within or outside their control. All the characters in this play are typically lower-middle-class people we come across in our day-to-day life. They are motivated by such animalistic drives as sex, hunger, and fear and play their predetermined roles in an atmosphere clouded by depravity, sordidness, and violence.

To put it in a nutshell, Tendulkar’s plays best illustrate the philosophy of determinism that was evolved/ transformed into naturalism years ago and practiced by the French novelist Emile Zola in his novels. They bear evidence to naturalistic philosophy enunciated by Darwin in his *Origin of the Species*. To substantiate the point, we see again, in the play *Kanyadan*, Jyoti’s brother Jaiprakash arguing: “How can the same atmosphere always prevail? Everything changes. Those who are able to adjust to the changing conditions survive. This is the law of life.” (530)

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