

Beyond Modernism: *Kanyadaan*

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Arundhati Banerjee's opinion, expressed twenty years ago, "Vijay Tendulkar has been in the vanguard of not just Marathi but Indian theatre for almost forty years" (p vii), even today seems a pertinent and sincere statement on the dramatist, Vijay Tendulkar, who has achieved this colossal significance in the annals of Indian theatre by virtue of his contributions to the form and content of modern drama. He wrote a number of plays on issues ranging from man-woman relationship (*Kamala, SCS and Sakharum Binder*) and political conflicts (*Encounter in Umbugland and Ghasiram Kotwal*) to lesbian relationship (*A Friend's Story*). The posthumous period has set critics on him to comprehend the nature of his mind and art by observing them through different prisms offered by the 'era of theory'. For example, his famous play, *Kanyadaan*, besides the study of the issues of marriage, family and human relationships, has been subjected to Post-colonial and feminist analyses, given the apparent conflict between the Brahmins and the dalits, and patriarchy and woman in the play. But the critics' tendency to get swayed by the apparent issues renders the more subtle and complicated aspects of the play unexplored and unappreciated. One such aspect has been undertaken in this paper, i.e. to ascertain whether *Kanyadaan* buttresses the modernist perspective or the avant-garde perspective. Besides the illuminating insights drawn from various readers on contemporary criticism, the present paper draws upon the argument presented by Geoffrey Kantaris in his seminar, "Avant-garde / Modernism / Postmodernism."

Both the movements – modernism and avant-garde – emerged in the western Europe in the early twentieth century, a period that witnessed radical shifts in the values of life and attitudes towards culture and tradition. Indian society witnessed a similar whirlwind of change – though much less rewarding artistically and intellectually than its European counterpart – in the post- Independence era. A spate of radical outlooks introduced by such factors as modernization, industrialization, western and scientific education, women's movements, and electronic media has expunged the traditionally acquired responses towards conventions and institutions. Inasmuch as Tendulkar is a very sensitive dramatist, it becomes all the more pertinent to trace the manner in which he responded to this phenomenon through his art. For example, in *Kanyadaan*, whether he endeavours to resurrect and revive the old traditional beliefs and attitudes towards marriage like a modernist writer or embraces the "productive acceptance of the energies of popular culture and even mass culture" (Kantaris 2) as essential and transformatory becomes of paramount importance. Further, the attempt also entails to analyse whether like a modernist writer, he upholds the significance of traditional "meta-narratives"/ "grand-narratives" of casteism with an implied support for the elite, or like an avant-garde writer, he festishizes the agents and elements of change as revolutionary and necessary. Primary themes of the play being the institution of marriage, casteism and

political ideology, the paper would trace and determine the stance of the playwright in terms of his responses and attitudes towards these issues.

Both the movements shared certain pre-occupations which included “a commitment to paradox and ambiguity, a tendency towards aesthetic self-consciousness, an interest in techniques of montage and juxtaposition” (Mullin 136). But these artistic pre-occupations were incessantly informed and shaped by the ideological values and social commitments of their practitioners. The modernist writers like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot featured this fragmentation “in such a way as to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact” (Barry 83). Thus, modernists long for the lost authority and tradition and register an urge to re-establish the lost “meta-narratives” of social values and beliefs. This urge emanates from the observation that the new trends, and mental and intellectual apparatuses ushered in by the agents of radical change tend to extirpate the traditional values and beliefs. Unable to cope with the disorientation unleashed in the wake of such changes, modernists ooze nostalgia. The inexorable consciousness that “a tawdry cheapness / shall outlast our days” keeps them restless. In *Kanyadaan*, Nath Devlalikar manifests certain tendencies that remind us of Eliot and Pound. As is apparent, the play, though written in the 80s, is set in the 70s – an era that witnessed rapid and radical changes in its attitude and outlook on various institutions and issues. Nath’s mental make-up has been shaped and structured by the pre-Independence Indian values. Nath has imbibed the values, developed during the freedom struggle, in the form of philosophical and ideological leanings to such a great extent that any deviation from them even in day to day affairs agitates him and makes him restless. On the issue of the controller’s failure to give him proper information about the bus service, he voices his disenchantment: “... But you two are still young, you won’t be able to understand. The visions we had of the future of this nation before Independence! And what we are forced to see today! Disgusting. It hurts”(Tendulkar 2).

Nath, as an activist, who grew up with the values of discipline, honesty and sincerity, finds everything around him out of order and a chaos threatens to engulf the very fabric of the universe they dreamt of in the pre-Independence India. To alleviate his anxieties, he often conjures the names of his idols like Vinobaji, Acharya Javdekar and Khandekar: “Some damn thing or the other is always missing. In this connection the example of Vinobaji is worth following” (2).

But there is a very subtle dichotomy between the disenchantment of the modernists and that of Nath Devlalikar. European modernists craved for the tradition and “meta-narratives” that had been ruling and governing the world for nearly three hundred years and were being eradicated in the first quarter of the 20th century. Their responses and attitudes were a product of their times and as the time passed, the nature of revolt and attitude towards the lost tradition changed. Whereas Nath’s cry is an echo of an exacerbated dream that could not keep pace with the changing values of the time. This realization of the failure of the dream of an egalitarian society, which pre-Independence thinkers and politicians had, persistently coaxes him. He endeavours to revive that dying project. And in his crusade, he is devoured by his idealism so intensely that he puts the life of his beloved daughter, Jyoti, at stake. He thrusts his daughter zealously into an inter-caste marriage that heads towards a failure.

Nath Devlalikar, an MLA, and his wife, Seva, an organizer of women's rallies and an activist of some sort, have been championing the cause of eradication of casteism from society. Their nuclear household is established on their philosophical and ideological leanings to such an extent that their children, Jayaprakash and Jyoti, hardly evince any deviations and individuality, and appear, by and large, extensions of their parents' personalities. The ambience of the household is very democratic, though, the term appears later merely a euphemistic ploy. Yet mutual understanding and liberty of expression percolate the Devlalikar menage: "We have a democracy in this house and we are proud of it" (Tendulkar 4).

In such a household, Jyoti assimilates the ideals and philosophies of her parents. She has been witnessing her parents consistently engaged in crusades to uplift the downtrodden and marginalized sections of society. Her exposure to her parents' ideals has developed a sympathetic impulse in her for the marginal sections of society. And this sympathetic impulse leads her to marry a dalit – Arun Athavale. Her preference of Arun can be ascertained as a natural corollary of her socialization in a politically charged nuclear household. She asserts her decision to get married which renders Nath buoyed and bolstered whereas Seva appears guarded and surprised:

Jyoti. [*Hesitating Again*] I don't even know if it is a matter of such importance or not. I am still unable to make up my mind ... that is ... I have decided to get married.

Nath. [*Excited*] Congratulations!

Seva. [*Surprised*] Decided! (Tendulkar 7-8)

At this stage, both, Nath and Seva, give opinions on the prospective match as per their outlooks. Seva's engagement with women's movement has schooled her considerably. Her exposure to different strata of society and the cognizance of the significance of marriage in a girl's life has instilled in her the belief that economic stability is the over-riding concern in married life and a girl should ensure that before getting married: "When a girl thinks of marriage, she has to look for some kind of stability. For some compatibility in lifestyles. After all, it is a matter of life long relationship" (Tendulkar 12). On learning that her daughter has decided to get married, she ushers in a deluge of questions about Arun's family, background, education, economic position and personality. She believes that before embarking upon a life long voyage, one should always ensure the levels of compatibility, economic stability and future aspirations.

On learning that Jyoti's decision arises more out of haste and immaturity, she forewarns Jyoti about the problems she perceives in her match. She categorically states that once one marries a wrong person, there is no retreat for a girl. She further elaborates:

Seva. My anxiety is not over his being a dalit. You know very well that Nath and I have been fighting untouchability tooth and nail, God knows since when. So that's not the issue. But your life has been patterned in a certain manner. 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. (Tendulkar 13)

The issue of inter-caste marriage and power politics of caste hierarchy is not peculiar to Tendulkar alone. Girish Karnad also weaved these aspects in his plays. In fact, engagement of these dramatists with the issues of caste hierarchy immediately manifests the problems that Indian society was facing. Seva's views on the problem of cultural differences in an inter-caste marriage remind the reader of Lalita's ideas on the same issue in Girish Karnad's *Tale-Danda*. Madhuvara, her husband, wants to marry off their daughter to Sheelavanta, the son of a tanner, in the name of his newly adopted religious and spiritual beliefs. But Lalita, as a mother, understands her daughter and avers: "Till the other day our daughter ran around barefoot. She was told it was unclean to touch any leather except deerskin. How can she start skinning dead buffalos tomorrow? or tan leather?" (48). But at the same time, Seva's concerns about her daughter don't align with her social and political commitments. Cultural dichotomy is the first point that anyone averse to an inter-caste marriage would spotlight. Here, the crevices in her theoretical paradigms and personal life become very obvious.

To her calculated and utilitarian approach, a contrast is being offered by Nath Devlalikar whose idealism encroaches upon his concept of marriage also. Nutan Gosavi asserts in her article: "When Jyoti declares her intention to marry a Dalit boy, the parents are rattled but they are too seasoned as politicians to show their inner unease... the parents' reaction is guarded and cagey" (155). This statement has some validity in the case of Seva, but in Nath's case, it does not appear to land on a safe ground. In fact, he is very enthused and effervescent over the fact that Jyoti selected a dalit boy as her life partner: "I know it [caste] doesn't make a difference. But if my daughter had decided to marry into high caste, it wouldn't have pleased me as much..." (Tendulkar 8). He, as a staunch idealist, seems to have lost touch with reality. His eulogizing of the boy even before meeting him proves the fact that he has his own notions and designs over the issue on the occasion. When a storm of tensions is brewing up in the house due to Arun's effrontery and obstinacy, he rushes in and starts talking in his usual enthusiastic tone. Unmindful of the tension in the air, he elaborates on the prospective marriage: "Seva, until today, 'Break the caste system' was a mere slogan for us. I've attended many inter-caste marriages and made speeches. But today I have broken the caste barrier in the real sense. My home has become Indian in the real sense of the term" (Tendulkar 23). After Arun has left in an abrupt and unexpected manner, Jayaprakash and Seva relate to him the events that had happened before Nath came in. But Nath ascribes the rough edges in Arun's behaviour and manners to his poverty, culture and down and out existence. His idealism renders him apathetic towards the concrete evidences produced by Seva and Jayaprakash. But in the Act 1 scene II, it becomes clear that Jyoti's marriage is an experiment for him:

Nath. Look, Seva, society cannot be transformed through words alone we have to act as catalysts in this transformation. The old social reformers did not stop with making speeches and writing articles on widow remarriage. Many of them actually married widows. Why did they do it...? That was also an experiment, a difficult experiment. But they dared to risk it. (Tendulkar 28)

Nath's attitude is very much progressive and ahead of his times inasmuch as he dares touch the most sensitive nerve of Indian society, i.e. casteism. At this stage, it also becomes evident that Nath possesses a strong avant-garde streak which manifests itself in his readiness to embrace the lower strata of society in order to erode the caste hierarchy from the society. Modernists like T.S. Eliot believed that "culture was the creation of elites nourished by their membership of 'the higher social classes,' and that the existence of such classes, in a graded hierarchy of classes, was essential for the continued health of a culture as a whole" (Kumar 45). They strived hard to maintain the traditional hierarchy: "The elimination of an upper class at a more developed stage [of society] can be a disaster for a country... complete equality means universal irresponsibility" (45). But in a society for whom "developed stage" still remains chimerical, the elite's recourse to the slogan, "complete equality means universal irresponsibility," sounds euphemistic and complicitous with the status quoist ideology. Such slogans become the apparatus to suppress the "heterogenous chips", i.e. marginalized sections. It further reiterates the idea that modernism was a "self protective gesture". Avant-garde endeavours for "the transformation of the whole of the social sphere, and not of a privileged minority" (Kantaris 2). It undertakes to highlight the oppressive nature of the modernist crusade and incite the society to subvert the repressive system. Nath is one such subversive agent in *Kanyadaan* and it is apparent from his speeches and decisions. He is equally aware of the role of his own high caste people in rendering the dalits in abject poverty. When Seva and Jayaprakash offer strong opposition to Arun's claim, he enthusiastically asserts:

Nath. It is perfectly natural that the boy should have rough edges; they are the product of the circumstances he has endured.... You cannot imagine at what cost these people have made the little progress that they have.... Remember, it is we who are responsible for the age old sufferings of these people. We have betrayed them for generations. (Tendulkar 30-31)

But the problem with Nath's endorsement of this inter-caste marriage is that, in his attempt to uproot casteism, he fails to plumb the nuances at the personal level in Arun's personality and demeanour. As compared to Nath's idealistic and avant-garde stance, Seva's counsel appears to be more realistic and practical. But her stance also unveils the fact that her political rhetoric has an internal ambiguity — she preaches other women to rise and revolt against the oppression of the traditional regimen, but at home, she herself, being rattled at the risks involved in Jyoti's decision, tries to avoid the situation. There is a wide gap between her political rhetoric and real life. However, her concerns, seen from her ideological perspective, appear well grounded when one notices the way Jyoti has decided to marry Arun Athavale.

She meets Arun at a socialists' study group and develops a liking for him. She gets fascinated by his autobiography and poems. But the manner they decide the issue of marriage appears naive and shallow, more so on the part of Jyoti:

Jyoti.Arun asked me, isn't the very idea of marrying me dreadful to you? I said, 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. (Tendulkar 11)

When Jyoti brings Arun to her home to introduce him to her parents, the incompatibility in their lifestyles and outlooks appears more apparent and glaring. In contrast to her “unwrinkled Tinopal world” and “fragrant, ghee spread, wheat bread culture” (17), Arun belongs to a family of scavengers who has been bred and brought up in a slum-like atmosphere. Sensing the unease that Jyoti evinces at his description of his manners and culture, he brings home to her the idea of existing incompatibility between them.

Being a dalit, Arun harbours a grudge against “high caste society”. He feels an urge to wreak havoc upon the cruel world. Even at Jyoti’s home, he engages in deriving a morbid pleasure by shaking the senses of Seva and Jayaprakash. His manners and posture appear completely uncouth. At this stage, one comes to know that Arun is pursuing his B.A., but does not have any definite future plans; nor does he have any residence to house his married life. In no respect does he appear to be a desirable match for Jyoti. But Jyoti appears a concrete embodiment of Nath’s ideals and values. She has imbibed his philosophies and ideals to the hilt and fails to view the practical implications of such an enforced yoking together of the two completely incompatible individuals. Seva and Jayaprakash try their best to prevent this marriage from being solemnized, but Nath further motivates Jyoti. It also becomes clear that he is aware of the potent disastrous consequences of this experiment: “I am with you, Jyoti. What you are doing could be both wise and foolish. But one thing is certain. It upholds the norms of civilized humanity, and therefore, I stand by you” (Tendulkar 31).

But towards the beginning of Act II, it becomes evident that the experiment of Arun-Jyoti bond has started taking a heavy toll upon Jyoti. She appears weak, exhausted and shattered in her marital role. Arun fails to secure a residence, and they have to stay at friends’ houses. Jyoti stays mostly at her own parental home. The shift that marriage marks in Jyoti’s duties and relations is that she herself turns into an outsider at her own home as Seva says, “After your marriage the atmosphere of this house has changed. And do you think you have remained the same, Jyoti? You live here like a stranger taking shelter in this house out of sheer necessity...” (Tendulkar 33).

The causes of her predicament can be traced to Arun’s behaviour. In this marriage, the creation of a mutual identity is persistently thwarted by Arun’s unwillingness. From the very start, he seldom shows any interest in his marriage with Jyoti. And after marriage, he starts perpetrating inhuman atrocities upon her. He seems to be suffering from persecution complex. He shows ample evidences of it in his agony and anxiety towards upper caste society. He can’t transcend his caste complexes and fails to treat Jyoti as his wife and life partner. About his inhuman treatment of Jyoti, Seva avers: “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” (Tendulkar 49).

To Arun, Jyoti appears merely a hostage from the upper caste and he seems to have commenced a mission against her class and community. He is a dalit, and Jyoti’s presence reminds him of his traumatized existence for which dalits hold upper castes responsible. Her being a high caste girl who has enjoyed all amenities at her home makes him all the more restless as a dalit and down-and-out husband who can’t perform the duties of the provider, producer and protector of the household. His subjugated position

further enhances his agony. And his pent-up emotions and frustrations find an easy prey in Jyoti, and make her life a hell.

Arun's characterization as a dalit who fails to adjust with his high caste Brahmin wife has led many critics to conclude that Tendulkar has written a casteist play. They assert that through the depiction of Arun's failure as a husband and Jyoti's ill-treatment at the hands of Arun, Tendulkar legitimizes the prevailing ideology of caste hierarchy. Nath's disillusionment with his ideals further supports such notions. Hence, Tendulkar appears to be a modernist. But such interpretations need to be studied more closely. There is no denying the fact that Nath repents towards the end for inculcating those values in his children which have rendered them crippled intellectually and emotionally. But one must remember that the play is set in the 70s and by this time, society had not widened its mental and philosophical horizons so as to incorporate deviations from the traditional values. Even today, in the 21st century, exogamous marriages are not free from the threat of ostracisation of the couple and their parents. So Nath's decision is groundbreaking and at this stage, it is bound to produce unexpected results. And both Nath and Jyoti are aware of such consequences. Moreover, as far as Arun's recourse to ill-treatment of Jyoti is concerned, Tendulkar has imputed it to Arun's culture and background. Arun accepts that wife beating is a usual thing in his community and his own father used to beat his mother. Having grown up in such culture, and under the stress of casteist ideology and family responsibilities, he crumbles and starts beating Jyoti. He is a split personality. He loves Jyoti immensely but he gives in under the stress of various ideological and day-to-day forces. In fact, through his depiction of Arun as a split personality, Tendulkar presents a realistic picture of our society. He neither idealizes nor dehumanizes the real life; it has been presented very realistically.

Besides this, Tendulkar has also been criticized for depicting women as submissive and mute sufferers. This again throws a challenge to those who regard him an avant-garde and revolutionary writer. One critic who holds that Tendulkar is a modernist writer is R. Balachandran who alleges: "Tendulkar is a traditional artist with extraordinary talents, and his plays reveal modernist qualities" (qtd. in Wadikar 38). Besides the issue of caste, treatment of women in his plays is another factor which fosters such interpretations. As we know that modernism as a "self-protective gesture" tried to re-establish the lost authority and one such authority which was under consistent threat from feminist movement was patriarchy. Bonnie Kim Scott claims, "Modernism as we were taught it at mid-century was ... unconsciously gendered Masculine" (qtd. in Mullin 138). She further asserts: "... in settling for a small set of white male Modernists ... we may have paused upon a conservative, anxious, male strain of Modernism" (148). But as far as Tendulkar's treatment of women in *Kanyadaan* is concerned, R. Balachandran's statement does not seem to be well-grounded. In this play, both Seva and Jyoti are modern educated women. Seva has been depicted as a social activist who takes part in social and political movements, marries a man of her own choice and, even in her married life, enjoys the liberty to pursue her political and social commitments. With Nath, she runs her household smoothly and, in the hour of need, works with her husband for the good of her family. She is free from any stereotypical characteristics like passive, docile, submissive, tender, mute and emotional. In fact, in contrast to Nath, she appears to be a successful wife and a good mother who tries her best to save her child. Jyoti is also a very strong woman. Though she marries under the influence of her father's idealism,

towards the end, she appears a tough and confident woman who has learnt a lot from her experiences. However, she seems disillusioned with what she has imbibed, and blames Nath for injecting wrong values and beliefs in her. Nath's offer of support is rejected by her. At this stage, she seems to carry the message of Tendulkar that crusades like inter-caste marriage need a firm commitment and people may have to sacrifice a lot to make such enterprises a success. Her words with Nath reflect her commitment:

Nath. Your delivery ...

Jyoti. [*Harshly*] I have my husband. I am not a widow. Even if I become one I shan't knock at your door. I am not Jyoti Yadunath Devlalikar now, I am Jyoti Arun Athavale, a scavenger. I don't say harijan. I despise the term. I am an untouchable, a scavenger. I am one of them.... (Tendulkar 70)

Again, one can perceive that Tendulkar is a revolutionary writer. His depiction of the issues of caste, class and gender is so realistic, naked and authentic that it appears real. Though women remain largely dominated by men, he manages to impart to them an urge and commitment to challenge the authority of men as Jyoti does in this play. Seva and Jyoti cannot be considered as submissive women and silent sufferers. In fact, Jyoti becomes a potent change agent in the attempt to subvert the traditional authorities like Brhamins and men. She joins the long list of such powerful women characters as Leela Benare, Sarita and Vijaya in Tendulkar's other plays. Further, his characters embody human virtues and weaknesses and thus he has created complex life-like characters. For example, he portrays Arun, as a dalit, Jyoti and Seva, as women, very sympathetically and imparts good qualities to them. But he does not emancipate them from the cultural attributes typical to their caste and gender. And critics' failure to comprehend this dimension of Tendulkar's art of characterization leads them to certain misconceptions like calling him a modernist writer. A close scrutiny of *Kanyadaan* reveals that Tendulkar is an avowed avant-garde who incorporates in his art of theatre those values which are necessary to emancipate the society from the tyranny of tradition. He sublates art into life with a "desire to erase the boundaries between culture and society" (Eagleton, qtd. in Kantaris 3). For him, a work is not merely an aesthetic object; rather, it rises above this and actively participates in the power struggle to bring a positive social change. And it is this uncompromising zeal and attitude to effect change in society that makes him one of the most revolutionary dramatists of contemporary Indian theatre.

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