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Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*: A Journey from Ignorance to Experience

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Vijay Tendulkar's seminal play 'Kanyadaan' is a ruthless criticism of this caste-ridden Indian society. But what is interesting is that Tendulkar highlights here caste system, rather he pinpoints how all attempts of social amelioration prove fruitless in our progressive post independent society. This article shows the predicament of Nath Devalikar, the protagonist of this drama when he confronts hazards in real life in his effort to abolish caste system. Side by side with this 'dalit' and 'elite' issue, this play also shows foolishness of a theorist who keeps his daughter's life at stake to prove the supremacy of his theory. The play also obliquely hints at the pathetic condition of women in a patriarchal society.

Vijay Tendulkar belongs to those avant-garde group of dramatists who can represent reality as it is. His plays become sharp criticism of Indian society and the condition of women in such patriarchal society. They also deal with the complexity of human relationships. Each of his plays contains a subtle critique of modern Indian society, and a distinct character and message. 'Kanyadaan' explores the texture of modernity and social change in India through marriage between two people of different castes and backgrounds. It shows that what we assume as social and cultural progress in modern India, is nothing but a big hoax the play entitled 'Kanyadaan' alludes to the traditional hindu custom of marriage in our society-to give a marriageable daughter by one's guardian to an eligible young man who will give her safety and security in life. It is also desired that the young man will prove himself a constant companion of this woman. Naturally it concerns much to the bride's father about her daughter's post-marriage life. The play 'Kanyadaan' is also about marriage, marriage between two persons belonging to different cultures. The dramatist shows that to obliterate caste system, to uplift dalit community, such an inter-caste marriage can never be a solution.

The play opens in Nath Devalikar's house where we meet Nath, an idealist Gandhi supporter and an active social worker as well as an MLA is rebuking the irregular transport system of post-independent India. From the beginning, it becomes clear that Nath is very much idealistic. He is the father of Jyoti and Jayaprakash-who are also nurtured by Nath's idealistic philosophy. His philosophy is also based on democracy-both in thought and deeds. This progressive person hates casteism and he takes an active part to eradicate this social evil and to cause dalit upliftment. Nath's wife Seva is also an active social worker who works for the upliftment of women's causes in society.

Nurtured in this situation, when Jyoti expresses her desire to marry Arun Athavale, a dalit boy whom she has known for three months, Nath's happy family gets a sudden jolt. The family becomes divided in two opposite groups-one comprising Nath

Devalikar the idealist-reformist who dreams of changing this caste-ridden society with his daughter Jyoti as a soldier. Nath is naturally very elated as he declares in act I scene II, "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.... Today I have changed.'" Nath's fervent zeal gets a jolt from his wife Seva and son Jayaprakash who feel apprehended of Jyoti's disastrous future after her marriage with that dalit boy. Actually Nath, in the halo of romantic illusion overlooks his concern and responsibility as a father. To quote the critic, "By encouraging his daughter to be an experimental guinea-pig in the dalit uplift experiment" Nath betrays his monumental ego and sense of superiority as an intervener in the fate of the dalits as represented by Arun and women as represented by his daughter.

Almost all the speeches concerning Jyoti's marriage made by Nath Devalikar in act I is steeped in irony, which reveals that he is a dreamer to whom his daughter becomes a scapegoat. Seva as an active worker engaged in women upliftment, is very realistic and for this she strongly opposes Jyoti's marriage outside the territory of her cultural periphery. She bursts out, "I will oppose this marriage. In your words I shall break party discipline and revolt. Does Jyoti's revolt seem sensible to you. Tell me as a father, hand on heart." In spite of repeated warnings from his family 'Nath describes Arun 'as a human being he has potential. He has intelligence, drive and creativity..... He is like unrefined gold, he needs to be melted and moulded. This is the need of the hour. Who can perform this task if not girls like Jyoti=

"He gives courage and support," "I stand by you. Go ahead my child, let us see what happens." Nath's lack of fore-sightedness ultimately recoils back him. From here also begins his journey from ignorance to experience.

Arun Athavale, as projected from the beginning is a strong fellow both in body and mind. As a dalit boy having a poor financial and so-called backward 'cultural' background, he is supra sensuously conscious about his existence, about his being a . He is a stubborn fellow who refuses culture and nurture. He is direct as he has no cultural pretensions.

His poetic self is also the product of his spontaneity. When his proposed wife's mother asks him about his financial condition in their very first meeting, he quickly understands her pricks and retorts her by talking about their traditional livelihood of illicit liquor –selling only to hurt Seva's culture. His manners and conversation with Seva, Jayaprakash and Nath prove his deep-rooted abhorrence for elite society and their culture. At the end of act I, virtually it becomes a confrontation of two cultures, one elite and dignified, another dalit and neglected.

The dramatist neatly divides the drama in two acts. If the act I is the representation of Nath Devalikar's deep-rooted idealism, his dream of social upliftment and his ignorance, act II shows the disastrous result of his ignorance. It depicts his excruciating pain and it becomes a saga of his failure. In act II, scene I, we see Jyoti no longer a joyous, happy married girl; but an experienced, 'older' woman who bears the burden of his marriage submissively. Seva, as a mother is totally despaired of his consequence and tries to move his daughter against this unhappy marriage. She repeatedly bursts out against Jyoti's submissiveness to Arun, but Jyoti refuses to give in to her mother. Nath, Jyoti's father is also worried about Jyoti's present situation, but the dreamer in him cannot cast off his long-cherished idealism. Nath, the father cannot

separate himself from Nath the progressive party-worker, from Nath the democrat who believes in equality as he says, "The values I uphold in my public I live by in my personal life." Like a responsible father, he offers Jyoti to stay in his home with Arun, only to prevent abuses and physical tortures done to his darling daughter. But Jyoti refuses to stay and in spite of her decision to leave Arun forever, when Arun comes to her house and shows love theatrically before her parents, Jyoti leaves her father's house with Arun. It is not for Arun's love, but to give riddance to her family of this uncouth, dalit Arun. Jyoti takes this decision. Here also Nath fails to understand his own daughter ignorantly shows her happiness because he thinks that his social experiment of breaking cultural barriers is not going to be failed. This is the reason why elated Nath cries out in joy, "I feel so proud of you. The training I gave you has not been in vain."

In scene II of act II we see Nath reading and praising the autobiographical work written by Arun Athavale. To Nath it is a good specimen of dalit literature written in living language. Nath's enthusiastic praise stands out almost as an indecency against his wife's anxiety and anger at Arun's growing crime against pregnant Jyoti. In the previous act it has been made obvious how Jyoti is being physically and mentally harassed by a sadistic dalit husband. Already Nath's high idealistic notions about social upliftment have begun to get crumbled. Jyoti's pain and suffering makes Nath annoyed and distressed as a father. Meanwhile Jayaprakash, Nath's son informs his father about the Palestinian guerillas and attack continued on them by Israeli forces. These Israelists who were once beaten down is now launching fresh attacks on others. This is an eye opening incident because even the tortured people do not discard evil and violence. Rather they want to take revenge done to them by attacking others. If Arun- Jyoti incident and their unhappy marriage, Arun's violence and torture is microcosmic; attack of Israeli forces against the Palestinian guerillas are macrocosmic. Actually, there is no progress and cultural upliftment in our civilization.

Very soon, Arun Athavale comes to invite his father-in-law in his book-launching ceremony. The way he invites his father-in-law in boastful manners is highly indicative of Arun's selfishness, his bestiality, who wants to aggrandize on elite sympathy to cater his personal needs. His language is that of a first-rate blackmailer with potential threatening. Arun's arrival makes Nath 'tense' and in disgust, he avoids eye contact with him. After Arun's departure, Nath becomes enraged and he bursts out against Arun's hypocrisy. What seemed to him true in act I, turned false before his own eyes. His hysterical cry "I was nauseated by his overweening arrogance. And he's the same man who wrote that autobiography....his visit has polluted this drawing room, this house, and this day...It stinks....This furniture, this floor...all this ...he has made them filthy, dirty, polluted! Why did I have to come into contact with a man like this?" Arun, far from being a representative character of dalit community 'emerges as a 'Machiavellian character eager to capitalize on the high tide of Dalit sympathy both in personal and intellectual fronts.'

Jyoti's mother, Seva Devalikar though never supports Jyoti for marrying Arun and bearing all pains silently still requests Nath to preside Arun's book-publishing ceremony. Her desire as a mother to see Jyoti as a happily wedded girl drives her here, because she is more practical. Her active participation in women's causes has made her mature. Following her advice, Nath attends the inaugural ceremony of Arun's autobiography and delivers speech which is nothing but hollow, rhetorical outburst. Nath

confesses before her wife and son that what he has done, done only to save her daughter's life. He knows well '...this kind of hypocrisy marks a rank opportunist. That book is no autobiography; it is pulp fiction based on half truths.[Taking a deep breath.] No. Not all dalits can be like that. Nath goes through tremendous mental anxiety and a hopeless ,disillusioned father ,makes his son cautious not to follow his father's idealism' Jayaprakash, do me a favour. Reject your father. Learn to see through his naivete and idiocy. Don't ever rely on his wisdom.'

Tendulkar identifies the character of Nath Devalikar with himself. 'Nath Devalikar 'the protagonist of 'Kanyadaan' is me and many other liberals of my generation whom I understand completely. The pain of these people today ,the defeat they have suffered ,the fundamental mental confusion and naivete that had led to their pain and defeat, these form the theme of 'Kanyadaan', and I wrote about it because it came so close to me.'(VT104).

But it is not only Nath's mental confusion, his ignorance about dalit mentality and his naivete which are responsible for his tragedy; rather he has some inherent drawbacks also. Nath is an enthusiast ,a detached reformist who feels and boasts of his superiority of being a Brahmin and takes it as a social duty to uplift dalit community. His social experimentation as a reformist brings ruin to his family. Even his daughter who has hero-worshipped him turns against her father and finally denounces his naïve, impractical wisdom.

Jyoti demands straight answer from his father for delivering such a hypocritical speech. Nath tries to patch up the matter by saying, "You are making a mistake .I don't hate Arun, I hate only those tendencies.. ." Angry Jyoti retorts "Tendencies! I grew up listening to such talk day in and day out. All false, vicious claptrap."

She makes his father face to face with open reality. She further accuses her father of making them crippled from childhood by his ineffective theory. Raw experiences with reality make her acutely conscious of the fact that divinity and bestiality are inseparable. Putting man's beastliness to sleep and awakening the godhead within is an absurd notion. You make me waste twenty years of my life before I could discover it." Jyoti accuses her father also as a hypocrite and brings him in the same line as Arun Athavale, her hyposrite dalit husband. Jyoti's final breakdown reminds us of Louisa in Dickens' 'Hard Times' ,because in both cases ,their father's wrong philosophical attitude to life have destroyed their lives.

'Kanyadaan' is thus a deeply pessimistic play about the wrong philosophy of an ineffectual dreamer. Being puffed up by false romantic notions and by 'unworldly Gandhian viewpoints on the Harijan', he destroys his daughter's life. Jyoti arrives her true womanhood rejecting her father's wrong philosophy and accepting life as it is. Tendulkar has been awarded Saraswati Samman for this play, because this play extols reality and nothing but reality, however crude it is.

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