

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

August 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-4

5th Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

Marriage and Social Change: A Study of Three Plays

Nakul Berwal

Assistant Professor,
CRA College, Sonapat.

Marriage is one of the most fundamental institutions of society. The continuity of existence of society and its development as also the realization of the values of life in human society have all been possible as a result of the institution of marriage. It facilitates the gratification of economic, physical and psychological needs of an individual. Thus, as a social institution, marriage can be viewed as a negotiating agency between social roles and responsibilities, and individual's urges and inclinations. But marriage does not have any independent existence; rather, it is firmly located within the totality of institutions, values and beliefs of a society. Thus, marriage can be reckoned, by modifying what M. H. Abrams inks about a literary text in New Historicism, as "an entity 'situated' within the totality of institutions, social practices, and discourse that constitute the culture of a particular time and place... a product and producer of cultural energies and codes"(191). Given that society as a dynamic organism is bound to change, the institutions located within the entirety of this matrix follow the same course.

In the post-independence era, and more particularly in the last four decades, Indian society has undergone through a radical change. Modernization, urbanization, industrialization, scientific and western education, law and legislature, media, cinema, internet and globalization have expunged the assumptions and beliefs held by people towards marriage. Consequently, marriage no longer remains a sacrosanct and sacred institution and its values, functions, beliefs and authority have been persistently questioned and even subverted. The present paper is a modest attempt to trace the elements of social change and their ramifications as depicted by Vijay Tendulkar in *Kanyadaan*, Mahesh Dattani in *Do the Needful* and Girish Karnd in *Wedding Album* with a special emphasis on the structure and form of the institution of marriage and people's attitude towards it. The action of these plays cover the period of half a century and the canvas chosen to tread upon by all the three playwrights is urban, middle class nuclear ménage. Further, in the present scrutiny, marriage has also been studied as a structural device in the plots of these plays; it seems to have been employed as a situation by responding to which different characters reveal their intentions and personalities as they have been shaped by the ideology and their circumstances.

Kanyadaan (1983), by Vijay Tendulkar, is set against the backdrop of the Emergency. The play explores the reciprocity between such determinants as political idealism and casteism and the individual and the institution of marriage. As Shilpi Rishi Srivastava alleges, "Tendulkar explores the texture of modernity and the social change in India through the forces this marriage unleashes. The tense, gripping play, charged with an undercurrent of violence, uncertainties and anger, concerns itself with questions those are crucial to all societies grappling with change and social barriers"(103). Though, the dramatic conflict primarily hinges upon the marriage of Arun and Jyoti, it also unveils the nature of the marriage of Nath and Seva. It is during the socialist activity campaigning that Nath and Seva meet and develop a liking for each other. Though they prefer each other, their criteria of it are different. Nath, having imbibed Khandekar and Byron, is a romantic man who believes in the concept of ideal love, whereas Seva, who has schooled herself through her exposure to different strata of women, accentuates the economic stability and

compatibility in matrimonial matters, as she asserts, “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). However, they have a love marriage, but they do not challenge the social norms and traditions in that theirs is an intra-caste alliance. In the 40s, one can’t expect them to transcend the caste and class barriers, given that the Indian society of the times held its traditions of caste and community so fondly and strictly.

Nath and Seva’s marital life offers a contrast to Arun and Jyoti’s marriage that takes place in the 1970s. The play seems to be about the blind adherence to and application of established “meta-narratives” of political and social ideals and beliefs, completely excluding the “mini-narratives” or local entities vis-a-vis marriage. Every society is dynamic and so are its beliefs and traditions. It is essential for people to accommodate social changes in their lives in order to survive. But Nath Devlalikar remains glued to his political and social ideals of pre-independence India and unthinkingly thrusts his only daughter, Jyoti, into an inter-caste marriage without realizing the human element and complexities. Thus, marriage, as a central structural device, has been employed as a social institution which is bound to change in a dynamic social system. And the playwright intends to explore the repercussions of the conflict between ossified political and social beliefs, failure to slough off cultural and caste complexions, and the phenomena of social change through peoples’ attitude towards the institution of marriage.

Jyoti, having imbibed her father’s ideals and philosophy, falls in love with Arun Athavale, a lower-caste boy and marries him. Her criteria seem quite naive and shallow, but her preference has been extolled and advocated by Nath Devlalikar who is so effervescent and excited to test the validity of his own ideals that he turns blind to discernible rough edges in Arun’s behaviour. How he views his daughter’s marriage is apparent in his statement:

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)

But he should not be inveighed at in a sweeping manner. He, as an educated man and social activist, gives full freedom to his daughter in matters of mate selection as compared to traditional Hindu society. Thus, the impacts of democracy, legislation, education and urbanization on Hindu marriage become very perceptible. But Arun-Jyoti marriage heads towards a fiasco because of Arun’s failure to slough his caste complexions off. Imbued with a grudge against the upper-caste people, Jyoti appears to him merely a hostage from that culture and he inflicts inhuman atrocities upon her. Jayaprakash precisely voices the nature of this behaviour: “The oppressed are overjoyed when they get a chance to oppress others” (Tendulkar 51). He fails in the task of the dissolution of his self that is the pre-requisite of a harmonious ménage. Further, this inter-caste marriage also introduces some riveting role-reversals. As a dalit, and ‘untouchable,’ Arun is a ‘subaltern,’ and Jyoti, being a Brahmin, is superior to him. But, after his marriage with Jyoti, Arun assumes the superior position in their household as per the norms of patriarchy. As a result of role-reversal, Jyoti turns an outsider in her own parental home.

On sensing that he has thrust Jyoti into a labyrinth, Nath offers support, an implied proposal of divorce to which Jyoti objects. Jyoti feels crippled and chained by the ideals and values of her own father and returns to her husband with the resolution that she does not want any support and help from her parents and asserts her identity as a dalit spouse.

Being an experiment and set at the nub of a whirlwind, Arun-Jyoti marriage produces expected results since such alliances always entail a plenty of uncertainty and indeterminacy. It remains more a marriage of two ideological abstractions than coming together of two human beings in flesh and blood. One should cogitate, at this stage, on the idea that though government has passed the bill and sanctioned the permission of inter-caste marriage, unless it is conjoined by society and people's agreement, such marriages cannot be considered a success. Nath and Jyoti fail to realize this aspect and turn a blind eye towards the differences of culture, family and society.

Thus, it can be perceived that as one moves from Nath-Seva marriage to Arun-Jyoti marriage, a change in society as also in individual's attitude directly influences the paradigms of marriage. The element of individual choice in mate-selection, and the incipient traces of a liberal outlook towards the issue of divorce and inter-caste marriage also surfaces. The state of Arun-Jyoti bond, which is based upon the ideals of Nath, also manifest that the values, mores and conventions are exclusive to every time and they grow outdated with the passage of time.

As compared to Tendulkar who delineates the repercussions of blind adherence to one ideology that tends to grow obsolescent with the passage of time, without realizing the plurality of human nature and behaviour vis-a-vis marriage, Mahesh Dattani's *Do the Needful* (1997) unveils the conflict between the social imperative to get married and an individual's physical and psychological inclinations that render him/her uncouth for heterosexual marriage. Procreation being one of the primary functions, marriage, as a social institution, accepts heterosexuality as the only norm and outlaws the same sex relations. Under the threat of heterosexual society, homosexuals have to suppress their sexual inclinations. They have to get married as per social norms in order to get acknowledgment and acceptability as normal human beings. But Dattani believes that "Human psyche sustains its own autonomy of perceptions and reactions and subsequently the matrix of them cannot be calculated in terms of pre-organised and pre-calculated mechanism of human behaviour" (Agarwal 46). And he embodies this hypothesis in *Do the Needful*. Alpesh Patel is a homosexual and that he is uncouth for a heterosexual marriage is apparent from his status of being a divorcee. But in a heterosexual society, he cannot voice his sexual preferences. Lata Gowda has been engaged with a Muslim boy, Salim and consequently becomes notorious in her community, thereby, expunged the possibility of finding a boy in her own community. The elder generation intends to get their children married whereas children, impotent to rebel openly, manoeuvre to manipulate what their parents suggest. Thus through the individual's approach towards marriage, a latent generation gap has also been explored.

The fact that Alpesh is a divorcee makes it clear that divorce is no longer viewed as an impossibility and people accommodate it as a part of marriage as compared to *Kanyadaan* wherein Seva deems it almost an impossibility and Nath is quite reluctant over this issue. However, in *Do the Needful* also, it is considered a stigma and it is to evade it that Alpesh's parents coax him to get married. Further, dogged by the impossibility of finding suitable partners for their children within their communities, both, the Gowdas and the Patels, take recourse to the medium of advertisement. Advertisement seems to be a very significant medium for nuclear, middle class families who have few qualms concerning endogamy and exogamy in matters of marriage. In *Kanyadaan*, the inter-caste status of Arun-Jyoti marriage becomes the prominent stumbling block; whereas in *Do the Needful*, the very inter-caste issue tends to attain a welcome status in the schemes of both the parties. However, it is also apparent that Devraj Gowda feels agitated over this, but Lata's notorious profile spares him few options. In fact, both, the Patels being Gujrati and the Gowdas being Kannad, transcend not only casteism, they exert their

metropolitan outlook by settling an inter-marriage. Besides, Lata's sexual affair with Salim and her intention to marry him also allege that the younger generation strives to sever itself from traditional and conventional norms concerning marriage.

Moreover, the play also ventilates the fact that in the 90s, under the influence of modern technology, science, social mobility, nuclear household and exposure, the younger generation has a little or no qualms in indulging in sexual affair before marriage. Lata is engaged with Salim and exerts her intention to find new sexual partners when Salim intends to leave her. Her indulgence in frequent sexual activities renders the very idea of marriage a dull and routine enterprise for her because in traditional societies, a distance from the sexual discourse and activities created an aura of curiosity and fascination around the marital life. Her attitude towards her relationship with Salim conjures in the mind of the reader T. S. Eliot's typist girl:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.' (69)

Furthermore, her parents assigning Lata's state to their nuclear household and their inability to pay attention to their daughter manifest the ramifications of the shift in family structures and lifestyles. As Prema Gowda asserts, "It is my fault. I shouldn't have helped you with the nursing home. I should have been a proper housewife" (Dattani 121).

In *Do the Needful*, one finds that the social necessity to get married is carried by the elder generation to the younger one. Both the sets of the parents consider marriage a necessity and try to impose their own likes and dislikes upon their children. Commenting on the quandary of the older generation struck in a stalemate, Vijay Nagaswami asserts: "Post-midnight children generally seem to have a bit of hard time, for, they cannot pay complete allegiance to traditional beliefs as their parents could, nor can they wholeheartedly subscribe to contemporary liberal thought as their children do" (3). What Dattani suggests at this stage is that in human relations pressure and force don't always work. Under the strain of their parents' authority, Alpesh and Lata manoeuvre to circumscribe the institution of marriage to their own advantage. They agree to get married with a commitment that Lata would continue her earlier sexual liaison with Salim and she would bring Mali as dowry with whom Alpesh seeks to establish a homosexual bond. Thus, their decision to get married is merely a negotiating strategy in order to maintain their social identity. Dattani, through this play, challenges the grand-narrative of heterosexual marriage by positing one of the many mini-narratives that remain suppressed and undefined.

What is certain by now is that both, Tendulkar and Dattani, zero in on some tangential aspect of Hindu marriage— inter-caste in *Kanyadaan*, and a bizarre, undefined alliance of a homosexual boy and a promiscuous girl in *Do the Needful*— to expose the ideological conflict and homosexuality and generation gap, respectively. But Girish Karnad, in *Wedding Album*, through the middle class South Indian Brahmin marriage- a correct, heterosexual, endogamous and intra-caste alliance, exposes the sexual, conjugal, caste, class related behaviours and attitudes of chastity and commerce, obedience and authority, sibling rivalry, parent-child relationship in a globalized and tech-simulated world of the 21st century. Through their approach towards matrimonial issues and aspects, his characters evince their propensities and priorities.

Hema, their eldest daughter, got married in the 90s. Like her parents, she had an intra-cast marriage. Hema had the opportunity of meeting her fiance, notwithstanding, it has not been made clear whether she had a love marriage or an arranged one. Her grouses towards her parents' inability in arranging a good marriage for her, and her mother's objection to Ashwin's proposal

that he wants a simple wedding make it explicit that the tradition of dowry and big wedding has been internalized by people and this very fact disarms the constitutional prohibition of dowry. Dowry and big wedding have become status symbols. Karnad reveals another significant factor. Though she has been married to an expatriate and lives in Australia, she has been unable to liberate herself from the clutches of patriarchy. She has to confine herself to household chores and looking after children and her husband:

HEMA. And do you know why? Because they are all transferable jobs and the white wife refuses to go trailing after her husband. We Indian women, on the other hand, are obedient Sati Savitris, ever willing to follow in our husband's footsteps... Our men may get all top jobs. But I am in no better position than Ma. (Karnad 17)

Both, Tendulkar and Dattani, seek and offer the possibility of change and subversion of the "grand-narratives" of caste and sexuality through the institution of marriage; whereas Karnad, through instances as these, deems all such possibilities of change and subversion as the illusions produced by the dominant class. Such illusions, being parts of what Stephen Greenblatt reckons "subversion-containment structures" by offering the possibility of change and subversion secure the consent of the marginal entities to maintain the status quo.

Vidula's marriage takes place in the 2000s and the play hinges, primarily, upon the issues and incidents of this wedding. In fact, a close analysis of the incidents and natures of Hema and Vidula's marriage reveal that they both (marriages) have a conspicuous reciprocity. What is missing in the play about Hema's marriage can be easily guessed and inferred from Vidula's marriage. And Vidula seems to be approaching the same status that Hema has acquired in her life. Like Hema's husband, her finance too works abroad and is an expatriate. But this wedding bears the influences of globalization, information technology, education, exposure and internet. Ashwin Panje, unable to come to see Vidula and meet her parents, decides to initiate communication through videotapes and sms. As compared to *Do the Needful* where the parents take recourse to the medium of advertisement, Vidula's marriage overshoots that stage. Parents, in the 21st century, appear to have been given secondary significance in matters of mate-selection. Moreover, they intend to use e-mail to inform their relatives about Vidula's marriage. The passport, birth certificate, visa etc. become the issues of concern in their preparations of marriage.

Through Ashwin Panje and Chanderkant, Hema's husband, Karnad extends his scenario to expatriates who live abroad. Both of them prefer Indian girls to marry. Their mate selection has been deemed by Ahuja as 'consciousness of kind'. They prefer a girl from their own caste, class, religion and culture to make the post-marital adjustment easy. Besides this, as a Saraswat boy, who has been brought up with the image of a wife as a subservient person whose primary jobs are household chores and looking after children and husband, Ashwin may find a western girl repulsive. He expects, like an Indian patriarch, his wife to be a sacred ideal of womanhood: "Woman as Mother, Wife, Daughter. Womanhood as the most sacred ideal" (81). Thus through 'choice within tradition' method, he tries to have best of both possible worlds. Here, as compared to traditional marriage system, individual preferences, likes and dislikes become central in matrimonial matters. Further, that he tries to have the best of both possible worlds is apparent from his preference of a traditional-ideal-of-womanhood girl and his aversion to conventions of the Hindu institution of marriage. By marrying a person from one's own community and culture, people like Ashwin and Chandrakant, create a micro world, a private sphere which has its own distinct values and beliefs as compared to society at large and this micro world inculcates in them a feeling of authority and relatedness which becomes very crucial in alleviating their

feelings of homelessness and alienation. About this aspect of marriage, Peter L. Berger and Hansfried Kellner opine:

At the same time, the narrow enclave of the nuclear family serves as a macrosocially innocuous 'play area,' in which the individual can safely exercise his world-building proclivities without upsetting any of the important social, economic and political appercarts. Barred from expanding himself into the area occupied by these major institutions, he is given plenty of leeway to 'discover himself' in his marriage and family, and, in view of the difficulty of this undertaking, is provided with a number of auxiliary agencies that stand ready to assist him (such as counseling, psychotherapeutic and religious agencies). (317)

Karnad's endeavours tend to be directed towards delineating some essential human responses towards marriage in different situations and circumstances. Vidula's marriage takes place after fifteen years of Hema's marriage, but she still feels the same nervousness and anxiety that Hema underwent at Vidula's age. Karnad's literary oeuvre admits, like Dattani's, the existence of a relentless conflict between one's personal and instinctual self and one's social identity / self vis-a-vis marriage. Owing to this, extra-marital affairs have been dexterously dovetailed in the matrimonial existence of his characters. Rani in *Naga-Mandala*, the queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Padmini in *Hayavadana*, Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain* all take recourse to extra-marital affair, succumbing to exigencies of instinctual self and violate the laws of marriage, family and society. In *Wedding Album*, Karnad underlines this issue in a very subtle manner. Hema receives and entertains love letters from a neighboring boy, Vivan, who is two years younger to her own son, Ketan. Vidula visits a cyber cafe to seek virtual sexual pleasure by listening to, however not obeying, the voice from the computer equipment. Rohit, her brother, in the absence of Tapasya, his wife, invites Isabel Pinto for dinner, apparently to indulge in sexual intercourse with her. However, in Vidula, Hema and Rohit's case, the instinctual drive does not violate the social norms in practical terms, but Karnad highlights, in their case, not the physical chastity, but the mental one. The unconscious, instinctual and essential drives find ways in an oppressive world that tends to extinguish them. Further, like Hema, Vidula heads towards subjugating herself to her husband, an extension of her role in the cyber cafe. However, through Ashwin's conversation with Vidula, it also becomes certain that chastity, as a patriarchal ideological tool, assigns and seeks altogether different patterns of conformity from males.

Another development surfaces in the form of response towards divorce. Traditional Hindu marriage does not admit of it. In *Kanyadaan*, Nath and Seva are singularly reluctant over divorce and Jyoti even negates it. In *Do the Needful*, though Alpesh is a divorcee, the society does not seem to be receptive about it and his parents feel shame on it. But as one enters in the 21st century, Rohit and Hema assure their sister that divorce has become a normal part of existence. Rohit asserts: "We live in a modern world. A divorce is okay. It's no shame" (Karnad 86).

As one moves from *Kanyadaan* to *Do the Needful*, the inter-caste barriers ease to a great extent. And in *Wedding Album* inter-marriages have become almost a reality. Pratibha, a Hindu, marries a Muslim, who is ten years senior to her. Rohit's involvement with Isabel is quite acceptable to all but Hema. In today's world, where different cultural identities constantly negotiate and interact with each other, cultural exclusivity cannot be claimed and adhered to. Vidula's family learns it in India itself whereas expatriates like Ashwin and Hema still seek this exclusivity. Further, the pursuit to make life "Harmonious and Comfortable," a euphemistic phrase for dowry, outwits the ethics of personal love and emotions as Rohit, by marrying

Tapasya, is promised the cost of trip to Germany. Though his marriage upholds the values of tradition and convention, the unsavoury act of dowry cannot be glossed over.

Drama is basically about conflict. In all the three plays, marriage becomes a site where the dichotomous forces of social values and traditions and individuals' urges to emancipate themselves persistently strive to dislodge each other. In *Kanyadaan*, it is the conflict between the social tradition of 'Varnasharmadharma' and Nath's commitment to eliminate this ideological demarcation. In *Do the Needful*, it hinges upon the conflict between the grandnarratives of heterosexuality and parental authority and the mini-narrative of homosexuality and the younger generation's drive to pursue its priorities and proclivities on its own. In *Wedding Album*, the dichotomous forces disseminate themselves in a plurality where social values like traditional marriage, caste and cultural exclusivity, pre-marital chastity and post-marital commitment, dowry and patriarchy vie for space with a reinforced energy unleashed, in the wake of globalization, by modern marriages, inter-marriages, cultural inclusivity and amalgamation, instinctual drives, personal pursuits and feminism. The study also demonstrates that with the passage of time, the individual gains more and more freedom and liberty and social conventions become just a thin veneer. In *Kanyadaan*, the grand-narrative of 'Varnasharmadharma' seems to be victorious and outwits the individual; in *Do the Needful*, the individual takes recourse to a negotiating strategy by circumventing the situations to his advantage, and in *Wedding Album*, the plurality stands head and shoulders above the ossified traditional and social values. However, none of the playwrights make any direct final statement about the ascendancy of social determinants over individual or vice-versa. The open-ended nature of these three plays is in conformity with the writers' belief in relentless reciprocity between society and the individual. This 'relentless reciprocity' produces a state, termed as Bakhtinian "unfinalizability," which is the impossibility to know or establish the monolithic essence of anything since everything is in a constant process of change, becoming what it has not been.

Works Cited:

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 8th ed. Australia: Thomson – Wadsworth, 2007. Print.
- Agarwal, Beena. *Mahesh Dattani's Play: A New Horizon in Indian Theatre*. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2008. Print.
- Berger, Peter L., and Hansfried Kellner. "Marriage and the Construction of Reality." *Social Interaction: Introductory Readings in Sociology*. Ed. Howard Robby, Sidney L. Greenblatt and Candace Clark. New York: St. Martin's, 1979. 308-322. Print.
- Dattani, Mahesh. *Do the Needful. Collected Plays*. Vol. 1. Comp. Dattani. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000. 115-58. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land. The Complete Poems and Plays: T. S. Eliot*. Comp. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 2004. 59-80. Print.
- Karnad, Girish. *Wedding Album*. New Delhi: OUP, 2009. Print.
- Nagaswami, Vijay. "The Shrinking Universe: Marriageable Parents." *Hindu* 10 July 2011, Magazine sec.: 3. 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. 103-111. Print.
- Tendulkar, Vijay. *Kanyadaan*. Trans. Gowri Ramnarayan. New Delhi: OUP, 2009. Print.