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Domestic Violence, Caste Discrimination and Gender Concerns: Some Reflections on Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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Abstract:

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) was one of the most important dramatists in contemporary Marathi theatre, who made remarkable contributions to modern Indian drama. Much in the manner of Mohan Rakesh, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Mahesh Dattani; Vijay Tendulkar's urban-realist plays intended to portray the social, cultural, economic and familial conditions of India in the Postcolonial era. Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* (1983) is a controversial social commentary on the identity of Dalits in the caste-based social structure of India. This paper attempts to study Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* and explore the issues of caste differentiation, gender discrimination, domestic violence and the failure of idealistic Gandhian philosophy to bring about improvements in the conditions of Dalit community in contemporary India.

Keywords: Caste Differentiation, Gender Discrimination, Domestic Violence, Gandhian Philosophy.

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women in society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent to that institution. (Beauvoir 405)

– Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

'Kanyadaan' refers to the traditional Hindu custom of marriage in India which seems to be an integral part of the sociocultural progress of Indian society. 'Kanyadaan' which is the father's gift of the daughter in marriage to a suitable groom, is the central ritual of orthodox Hindu marriage ceremony. 'As codified in the *Manusmriti*, the ritual appears as one important link in men's lifelong guardianship of women, in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers' (Dharwadker 286). Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan* (1983) explores the texture of modernity and social change in India through the depiction of the marital relationship of two people of different classes and castes. Eventually, it leads to the bitter realization that inter-caste marriages can never be a solution to the burning issues of class

conflict, caste discrimination and gender inequality in modern Indian society. These interconnected issues are artistically handled by Tendulkar in *Kanyadaan*. He represents Mr. Nath Devalikar's 'home' as a symbol of a domestic space to juxtapose two worlds, the public and the private, on a line of correspondence with each other which symmetrically result in a negotiation of caste and gender. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker in her book, *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory and Urban Performance in India since 1947* (2005) has rightly stated in this connection that:

The peculiarity of *Kanyadaan* as a 'political play' is that every major character regards home as the touchstone of ideology as well as experience. For Nath, 'home' is the microcosm of the political world – indeed, of the nation – whereby, restoring parodically to the language of parliamentary process, legal rights, resolutions and rules of order, he can claim to 'uphold democracy vigorously in our home. Democracy in the world, but tyranny at home – we don't deal in double standards like that.' (Dharwadker 292)

Kanyadaan is centered in Maharashtra, an Indian state that had early on pronounced the cause of the Dalits. In the book, *Indian Dalits: Voices, Visions and Politics* (2004), K.C. Das has noted that 'Maharashtra has been the site of the most radical Dalit assertions. From the turn of the present century, Dalits here have shown signs of awakening and protest' (Das xviii). Significantly, *Kanyadaan* does not portray the social conditions of the Dalits but exposes the futility of idealist Gandhian principles within the contemporary Indian social structure. In the play, Nath Devalikar is shown to be a socialist who practiced Gandhian principles in his home and motivated his two children with his idealism. He is a political visionary and wants to create a utopian world based on the Gandhian philosophy. However, the play traces the journey of Mr. Nath from being the embodiment of pride in the idealist Gandhian philosophy to a state of bitter disillusionment about the social reality. In the end, Nath's idealism crumbles as he has to accept the reality that social change in India is impossible to achieve through his idealist perspectives.

In *Kanyadaan*, the family tension begins in the First Act, when Jyoti conveys her decision of marrying Arun, a Dalit man, to her family members. Jyoti's father, Nath Devalikar is a Brahmin, a lifelong socialist and a senior member of the State's Legislative Assembly, who had long cherished the dream of the social upliftment of the lower sections of people. The moment Nath hears Jyoti's plan, he becomes delighted because his dream of social equality, as he thinks, is going to become a reality. His home, he is convinced, will be the stepping stone to a classless and casteless society. But this synthesis of social obligation and personal relationship creates a unique dramatic situation. Lata Murugkar in her book, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* (1991) has stated:

In Maharashtra, the sixties saw the emergence of such youth culture with the rapid expansion of higher education without an

equal number of employment opportunities for educated youngster. This new culture rejected the middle class values of decency, respectability, responsibility, hard work etc...The emergence of the youth culture coincided with the period when, for the first time in the history of India, a sizeable number of Dalit youths began going to college. They were naturally drawn towards this culture, which was in revolt against the traditional middle-class Hindu way of life. This culture had acquired respectability and a role, which was to fight against the hypocrisy of the higher castes which tolerated and even sanctioned inequality and social oppression. (Murugkar 51)

Arun Athavale, the Dalit young man whom Jyoti wants to marry in *Kanyadaan* seems to be the representative of the young, angry, rebellious, educated group of Dalits of the 1960s that Murugkar speaks of. Arun 'is doing his B.A. He works part-time in *Samrik Samachar*' (505) says Jyoti, and she adds that 'His poems and his autobiography have inspired me with complete faith in him' (506). However, in *Kanyadaan*, Nath's humanistic enterprise for the upliftment of the 'Harijans', and Arun's reactionary and often strident Dalit politics seems to be the representations of two contrasting ideals. Aparna Dharwadker has indicated that Tendulkar's depiction of Nath and Arun is not only imaginative and fictional but also typical of the time the play was being written:

The presence of Arun in *Kanyadaan* (1983) connects the play to this history of the Dalit movement, just as the presence of Nath, the Brahmin socialist, recalls upper caste progressive reformers, such as Jyotirao Phule and Sane Guruji (whose photographs hang in Nath's living room). Tendulkar's choice of subject also appears to be deliberate and strategic, because any fictional representation of Dalits necessarily intersects with the community's highly visible profile in the social and political life of Maharashtra. (Dharwadker 290)

Nath Devalikar is an idealist-reformist who dreams of changing India's caste-ridden society. He is a political-social activist who supports democracy and is actively involved in improving the condition of the downtrodden and socially neglected people. He is naturally elated at Jyoti's decision to marry Arun, and he declares, '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' (519). Nath does not show any divergence between his political ideals and his personal deeds. The initial scenes of the play indeed emphasize the reformative and progressive bent of his mind. However, Nath's fervent zeal gets a jolt from his wife Seva and son Jayaprakash, as they feel apprehensive about Jyoti's life after her marriage with a man from another social level. Seva, therefore, tells Jyoti:

My anxiety is not over his being a Dalit. You know very well that Nath and I have been fighting untouchability tooth and nail....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. (509)

By herself, Seva is a socialist and a champion of women's rights. Yet, she is not comfortable with her daughter's decision to marry a man from a socially and economically backward community. She asserts, 'If you like, I'm ready to attend your study circle on this. But I will never accept him as my Jyoti's husband. Never' (523). Seva, the mother of Jyoti differentiates between the culture of her daughter and that of her would-be son-in-law. Through her perception about Arun, Tendulkar gives us a critical insight into the hegemonic power mechanism exercised by the upper classes which effectively marginalize the Dalit community as vulgar, violent and lacking in culture. Seva, in fact, approaches Arun not as a mother but as a distant observer whose only mission is to estimate and evaluate the position of Arun as a sweeper's son. Through her behavior, Tendulkar reveals the persistence of class consciousness and caste discrimination amongst the upper-class sections of Indian society. The Dalits are merely objects of study for her, not individuals worthy enough to be her son-in-law.

According to Michel Foucault, 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault 93). From the Foucauldian perspective, it may be considered that power is like a complex 'web' where power relationships are neither fixed, nor unidirectional. The vulnerability of a Dalit when confronted with the institutionalized body of power networks is depicted by Tendulkar through the characterization of Arun Athavale in *Kanyadaan*. In the beginning of the play, Arun is somewhat hesitant and uncomfortable in the big houses of the city. He thinks: 'These large buildings are just like crocodiles and sharks, whenever they want, they can gulp you down' (512). The audience understands that the upbringing of Arun and Jyoti has made them imbibe divergent cultures and ideologies. Jyoti 'feels safer indoors' (512) whereas Arun feels 'safe on the street' (512). The scene also throws light on the pitiable conditions of the untouchables, who 'used to roam, barefoot, miles and miles, in the heat, in the rain, day and night...till the rags on their butt fell apart...used to wander shouting "Johar, Maayi-baap! Sir – Madam, sweeper!" and their calls polluted the Brahmins' ears' (513). The world of Dalits is a world of labour and hard work for just making both ends meet on the pity of the higher caste people and hence they do not fit into the 'unwrinkled Tinopal world' (513) which is that of a 'fragrant, ghee spread, wheat bread culture' (513). Dalits have to 'eat stinking bread with spoilt dal' (513) and use the 'slum's village toilet' (513). Their life is, as Arun says, '...hell, and I mean hell. A hell named life' (514). The lived experience of Arun made him rebellious against the higher sections of Indian society. His violence is born out of his vulnerability, and he reminds one of Michel Foucault's observation in *Power/Knowledge* (1980) that 'The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces' (Foucault 74).

In the Second Act of *Kanyaadan*, it becomes evident that the experiment of Arun and Jyoti's marriage has started leaving a heavy impact on Jyoti. She appears weak, exhausted and shattered in her marital role. The causes of her predicament can be traced to Arun's violent behaviour. In their marriage, the creation of a mutual identity is persistently thwarted by Arun's unwillingness. In the initial days of their relationship, Arun had seldom shown any interest in marriage. After their marriage, he starts perpetuating inhumane atrocities upon her. In Arun's mind, Jyoti's middle-class home is the alienating opposite of his family's one-room hut and shared village-toilet. The exquisiteness of Brahmin cuisine is only a reminder that his tongue is accustomed to rotting handouts and the flesh of dead animals. To Arun, Jyoti thus appears merely as a hostage from the upper caste and he seems to have commenced a mission against her class and community. As he is a Dalit, Jyoti's presence perpetually reminds him of his traumatized existence for which the Dalits hold the upper castes responsible. In Arun's mind, the resentment is not for Jyoti but for the whole class she comes from. Social discontent becomes a part of his mental antagonism through which he wants to abolish the whole social structure. The cumulative wrath and resentment of Arun is the result of his deprivation-marked social and familial upbringing. Arun's recourse to violence is an unconscious mechanism to defend his own loss of ego which is born out of the bitterness of his past. The expression of violence implicit in his confession is the objective manifestation of contempt rooted in his mind: 'I want to set fire to the whole world, strangle throats, rape and kill. Drink up the blood of beasts, your high caste society' (514). Thus, Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* offers a dramatic presentation of the perils of caste discrimination that destroys the possibility of familial happiness and social harmony in modern Indian society.

Jyoti is an emissary from the world of upper-class Brahmins. She had enjoyed all amenities at her paternal home, and this makes Arun all the more restless as a Dalit. As a husband, he realizes that he cannot perform the duties of a provider, producer, and protector of the household. His subjugated position enhances his agony. His basic insecurity echoes throughout his confession:

When have I claimed that I am civilized and cultured like your people? From childhood I have seen my father come home drunk every day, and beat my mother half dead, seen her cry her heart out. Even now I hear the echoes of her broken sobs. No one was there to wipe her tears. My poor mother! She didn't have a father like Bhai; nor a mother like you. (539-540)

Tendulkar here also seems to portray a painful picture of the suffering of Dalit women through Arun's recollection of his troubled past. Arun's pent-up emotions and frustrations find an easy prey in Jyoti and this makes her life a hell. R.E. Dobash and R. Dobash in their book, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy* (1979) provide a critical insight into the issue of violence against women, 'Men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in society – aggressiveness, male dominance, and female subordination – and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance' (Dobash and Dobash 24). Nath's wife, Seva points out that wife

beating is a barbaric act. But the more arrogant Seva is, the more aggressive and assertive Arun becomes to establish himself. He asserts, 'What am I but the son of scavengers. We don't know the non-violent ways of Brahmins like you. We drink and beat our wives...we make love to them...but the beating is what gets publicized' (540).

Arun is Tendulkar's representation of the voice of the Dalits who remain obsessed with their own class consciousness, raging a war against the 'white collar culture' (540). The Second Act of *Kanyadaan*, therefore, establishes a confrontation between the worlds of the elitists and that of the Dalits. As a victim of this confrontation between the Devalikars and Arun, Jyoti seems to be the worst sufferer. Caught in between Nath's social reformative idealism and Arun's violent caste-assertion, Jyoti suffers from a double marginalization. The victimization of Jyoti also reminds one of Kate Millett's observations in *Sexual Politics* (1970) that even after marriage a woman's legal existence remains suspended. Millett writes:

By marriage husband and wife are person in law, that is, the very being or legal existence of woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated into that of husband...But though our law in general considers man and wife as one person, yet there are some instances in which she is separately considered as inferior to him, and has to act by man's whims and fancies. (Millett 68)

The press release of Arun's autobiography is a climactic moment in *Kanyadaan*. Nath Devalikar comes to know about the dual selves of Arun, as an amalgamation of the sensitive self of a young, Dalit author and the insensitive self of a sadistic husband. Seva gives an account of the abuses that she had come to know from Jyoti's neighbours. As Seva reveals, Arun calls Jyoti, 'a procuress who supplies girls from the Seva Dal to the socialist leaders' (545) and Seva also tells Nath that Arun calls him 'an eunuch' (546) and that he even says that Nath is not Jyoti's real father. In addition to all this verbal abuse, Arun also physically and mentally tortures Jyoti. The domestic violence inflicted by Arun is meant by him to be an act of revenge against his ancestors' suffering at the hands of the high caste people. The adverse consequences of Nath's obsession with the idealist Gandhian philosophy and Arun's obsession with caste consciousness turn Jyoti into the most pathetic victim in the play. Jyoti's pain and suffering disturb and distress Nath as a father. His idealistic notions about social upliftment begin to get crumbled. At this juncture in the plot, Jyoti's brother, Jayaprakash points out how the 'Jews have become the murderers of Palestinian women and children' (547) to take revenge for the inhuman treatment meted out to them by Hitler's Nazi troops. He indicates that Arun is now taking the revenge on them for the inhuman treatment given to the Dalits for generations by high caste men, and he says that 'those who were being massacred are now indulging in massacres' (547) as a reactionary strategy. Jayaprakash further points out that perhaps the Dalits get a peculiar enjoyment out of this:

Perhaps those who are hunted derive great pleasure in hunting others when they get an opportunity to do so. The oppressed are

overjoyed when they get a chance to oppress others...the moment one gets the chance one becomes a greater tyrant...one persecutes others with a vengeance, because one exults in doing that. (547)

In *Kanyadaan*, Jayaprakash shows a rational insight into the whole matrix of violence adopted by Arun. According to him, violence displayed by Arun is not a method of self-defense only but a mode of revenge that implies emotional contentment. Jayaprakash thus tries to generalize the whole phenomenon and concludes, 'Yesterday's victim is today's victimizer' (547). As he says, 'The very victims of violence may go on to perpetuate the same brutal violence upon others' (547). Examining the nature of the psychological violence and physical torture displayed by Arun and endured by Jyoti, Maya Pandit in her essay, "Family in Tendulkar and Others" observes:

In *Kanyadaan*, Jyoti becomes a site, a battle ground on which the clash between the upper caste and the Dalit castes takes shape. She becomes a vessel in which the conflicting caste ideologies pour their aspirations for power. The complete submission of a girl's gendered self to the violence perpetrated on her by the caste politics leaves no scope for even an ideological alternative. That she deliberately chooses to become the model, ideal, Hindu, Brahmin housewife to him, that she will call her husband's people and home her own, sacrifice her career for him and mutely suffer all the physical, sexual and psychological violence and humiliation inflicted upon her by him is the problematic of the play. (Pandit 70)

Later in the second scene of the play, Arun Athavale comes to invite Nath Devalikar to his book launching ceremony. The boastful manner in which Arun invites his father-in-law reveals his aggressive and insensitive mentality. As a matter of fact, he desires to utilize the elitist's sympathy to cater to his intellectual success. As his language is that of a blackmailer, Nath intentionally avoids eye contact with him. After Arun's departure, Nath bursts out against Arun's hypocrisy, all his preconceived, idealist notions about the oppressed Dalits having turned out to be products of his false consciousness or ideology. Yet, it is important to note that in Tendulkar's representation, Arun, far from being a representative of the Dalit community, seems to be a man eager to utilize the high tide of public sympathy for the Dalits in order to secure intellectual renown. Nath's wife, Seva Devalikar had never supported Jyoti's decision of marrying Arun. Now she has to bear all her pains silently. She requests Nath to preside over Arun's book launching ceremony. Her desire as a mother to see Jyoti as a happily wedded girl drives her to this decision. Following her advice, Nath attends the inaugural ceremony of Arun's autobiography and delivers a speech which is nothing but a hollow, rhetorical outburst. Nath confesses before Seva and Jayaprakash that whatever he had done was done only to save her daughter's life. In reality, however, this divided responsibility as a father and his role as a social reformist leads to the generation of a mental confusion in

him. He encourages Arun but he also realizes his mistake in making a hell out of the life of his own daughter. Tendulkar later identified himself with the character of Nath Devalikar:

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 naiveté 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. (Gokhale 50)

In the play, Nath is a detached reformist who feels superior as a Brahmin, even as he takes it as a social duty to uplift the Dalit community. But his social experimentation as a reformist ruins his family, and as his paternal self-conflicts with his social idealism, Nath Devalikar's ideology, personal convictions and professional responsibilities stand at crossroads at the end of the play.

The implied functioning of patriarchy can be felt even in the title of the play, *Kanyadaan* which bears a strong reference to the process of giving away, gift or sacrifice. 'Kanyadaan' in fact signifies the sacrificial aspect of the traditional Hindu marriage system which explicates the act of giving away of one's own daughter forever. This indicates the pain involved in the shift of a female body from one position of familiarity to a different one, from where she can never come back. In *Kanyadaan*, the Devalikar household represents the patriarchal ideology, which remains hidden under the sophisticated culture of their middle-class home. Through Jyoti, Nath wants to execute his revolutionary idealism to achieve his dream of a casteless society. In this experiment, Nath prioritizes the self of the socialist over the self of the father. After Jyoti's marriage, however, what follows is a sequence of violence, misery and disillusionment, as Jyoti becomes the outlet through which Arun vents out all his accumulated angst and agony against caste discrimination. And they cannot be separated, nor can he be cleansed of those vices, for these vices are the result of the sufferings that Arun's ancestors had gone through the ages under the hegemony of the caste Hindus and hence, there is a strange malice in him against Hindus and especially for Brahmins. He has ferocious hatred towards Jyoti, even as he loves her from the core of his heart, and Jyoti, in turn, gets used to the vices of Arun as she gets a glimpse of the essential self of Arun behind his anger and savagery.

Jyoti realizes too that her marriage with Arun will not work until she is able to reform herself in his image. Hence Jyoti loses her own identity and reaffirms her position as the wife of a scavenger. With her patience, Jyoti provides him with an opportunity to pour out the worst of his violent and beastly behaviour. Arun's suppressed unconscious comes to the surface and it brings in an almost cathartic relief to his life. In the end, Jyoti, therefore, rejects all help from her father's family and exiles herself. In Tendulkar's play, as a consequence of marriage, a father loses his daughter but as a consequence of Nath's 'kanyadaan', a father conducts 'a sacrifice of his daughter on the altar of his socio-political ideology' (Gosavi 167). In the end, Jyoti renounces the source of her older identity. In her declaration, 'I don't belong

to this family. I don't belong to anyone in this house' (562), she seems to abandon the possibility of her ever returning to a peaceful and prosperous life in Nath's domesticity in favour of embracing a life of eternal struggle as the wife of the Dalit, Arun. Analyzing the situation of Jyoti in *Kanyadaan*, Aparna Dharwadker observes:

But if Jyoti makes a 'heroic' departure, the real place of victimage is the home she is going to, not the home she has left. Among the few protagonists in contemporary Indian theatre, male or female, who assert their will in order to alter their condition, Jyoti stands apart because she chooses a worse life, not a better one. In Tendulkar's view, the 'unaccommodated' quality of this life is also a mark of the disjunction between progressive politics and the actuality of oppression, which measures the failure of even the most committed resistance and reform to affect real social change. (Dharwadker 295)

In *Kanyadaan*, Jyoti's position shifts from being a woman of the upper-caste, to that of a wife of a Dalit. On account of caste differentiation and gender discrimination, she occupies a further lower rank in the society and her husband is now ranked higher than her. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) suggested that 'the women in the Third World countries are doubly oppressed by colonialism and patriarchy' (Das 143). In *Kanyadaan*, Jyoti reminds the readers of Spivak's notion of the gendered subaltern whose identity is ultimately erased in the discourse of the text, making one recall Spivak's observations:

Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third World Woman.' (Spivak 306)

In the end, Tendulkar shows Jyoti as accepting her identity as a Dalit woman, as ready to conform to the Dalit community through her marriage, and willing to seek social accommodation and self-liberation within that community by detaching herself from her parental home, ideology and authority. In the words of Aparna Dharwadker, 'Jyoti...embodies a female will that breaks free of parental constraints, and becomes fully autonomous in the course of the play, capable of challenging and dissolving family bonds. This unqualified superiority makes her a radical modern figure' (Dharwadker 308). Analyzing the social relevance of *Kanyadaan*, Samik Bandyopadhyay concludes that in this play, 'Tendulkar has focused on a problem that there is no bridge between the various sections of society, and that the attempt to overcome a taboo often leads to greater pitfalls than one can handle' (Bandyopadhyay 597). To put the conclusion of this paper in perspective, it needs to be said that *Kanyadaan* is a social problem play which deals with the delicate issues of caste and gender on the micro level of personal relations within the family. A close scrutiny of the play reveals that Tendulkar is truly an avowed 'avant-garde' who

incorporated in his art of theatre those values which are necessary to emancipate the society from the tyranny of orthodox beliefs. For Tendulkar, a work of art is not merely an aesthetic object, but rather a creation that rises above this and actively participates in a social responsibility to bring about a positive change. It is this uncompromising zeal and desire to transform the society that makes Tendulkar one of the most revolutionary theatre personalities in modern Indian drama.

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