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## Exploring Masculinity of Sakharam in *Sakharam Binder*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper attempts to critically evaluate masculinity in the play *Sakharam Binder*, focusing on the character of Sakharam and his treatment of women. Sakharam's practice of providing shelter to discarded women for his benefit is central to understanding masculinity within the play. Through a detailed analysis of Sakharam's interactions with female characters, this article aims to understand the complexities in his character and articulate how masculinity is associated with power and dominance. Themes such as patriarchy, male entitlement, and the objectification of women are explored within the narrative. Furthermore, the examination of emotional repression, selective display of emotions, and the theme of impotence in the play sheds light on male vulnerability and anxiety. These refrains thus emphasize the necessity for men to express emotions. Through depicting the characters grappling with these issues, the article prompts a deeper understanding of societal pressures on men's emotional expression. By showcasing the consequences of suppressing vulnerability and anxiety, the paper thus attempts on the importance of creating space for men to express their emotions.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Gender Roles, Emotional Repression, Impotence and Patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

Although many regard the 1960s and 1970s as the golden era of Marathi theatre, previous generations contend that the actual golden period occurred in the early twentieth

century. With that being said, it is essential to acknowledge, as noted by Shanta Gokhale: “the 1960s and 1970s were decades of extremely significant work not only in Marathi theatre but across the country – in Kannada, Bengali and Hindi theatre too.” (83) In this context, the plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, and Girish Karnad are highly regarded in Indian literature; for their distinctive contributions, as Arundhati Banerjee makes a similar observation:

In the 1960s four dramatists from different regions of India writing in their regional languages were said to have ushered modernity into the sphere of Indian drama and theatre. They were Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Badal Sircar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi and Girish Karnad in Kannada. Rakesh’s untimely death left his life’s work incomplete, and Karnad has written only intermittently. Sircar, of course, has been almost as active as Tendulkar, though his plays can be divided into three distinct periods. Tendulkar, however, has not only been the most productive but has also introduced the greatest variations in his dramatic creations. (7)

However, the emergence of playwrights and directors was not sudden; rather, their artistic endeavours were influenced by sociopolitical factors. To quote Vishwas R Kanadey: “The year was marked by considerable excitement among the writers and alert readers over two major issues: the ‘Dalit Sahitya’ the literature of/for/by the down-trodden) and obscenity in literature and the writer’s freedom.” (74) Tendulkar thus finds inspiration in the society around him, particularly as a keen observer of human relationships, especially within the lower- and middle-class communities. In one of his interviews, he articulates:

“I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle-class family, and I have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My work has come from within me as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live. If they want to entertain and make merry, fine go ahead, but I cannot do it, I have to speak the truth.” (Saxena 2006)

In works such as *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *Vultures* (1970), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1972), *Kamala* (1981), and *Kanyadaan* (1983), Tendulkar raise inquiries into societal norms surrounding love, sex, marriage, and moral values. They highlight the normalization of violence within middle-class societies. During a discussion with Shukla Chatterjee about the element of violence in his works, Tendulkar expressed his views,

stating: “An element of violence is there in the human mind. And their different expressions come through my plays. It has been happening even before I was born and it is happening now”. (16) Often being restaged, his work from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was influential and remains relevant today. Each of his works addressed themes like violence against women, aggressive masculinity, power dynamics, and societal struggles. Most of Tendulkar’s plays were controversial, earning him both national awards and criticism, including death threats and even objects thrown at him by the audience. To put it in his words: “I as its creator respect both the verdicts.” (Tendulkar 37) Thus analysing *Sakharam Binder* in today’s context allows for a contemporary exploration of its themes, providing new perspectives on ongoing dialogues concerning masculinity, gender dynamics, and power structures. Reassessing of the play further leads to understanding of how its portrayal of masculinity aligns with contemporary viewpoints on gender identity and societal expectations.

### **Context, Controversy and Censorship**

India’s independence brought a mix of hope, despair, and political anxiety. To nurture the young Indian democracy, key initiatives like education, printing press, healthcare, railways, and exposure to Western ideas were crucial, but achieving them required patience. During this period, Maharashtra saw changes that had an impact on Marathi theatre:

The violence that followed the partition in Punjab and other regions, including Maharashtra, spread fear and anxiety. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Brahmin from Maharashtra intensified anti-Brahmin sentiments, leading to revenge against Brahmins, especially in rural areas and small towns. Organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, which were mainly Maharashtrian and Brahmin, faced backlash. This tension persisted in Maharashtra for decades, influencing its social and political dynamics. (Nalini Natarajan and Emmanuel S Nelson)

The political anxiety mentioned above gave way for ‘protest theatre’ in Maharashtra to emerge as a powerful medium for expressing opposition and critiquing societal norms. Thus, post-independent India, as a new liberal democratic space, provided writers with the freedom to express themselves in the public sphere. Consequently, the intellectual sphere became an integral part of this public sphere, where the critique of texts, informed by societal realities, was a continuous process. However, in the late 1970s “the modern women’s movement emerged, and particularly in metropolitan cities, it began to use the street theatre in public

places to bring women's issues to the fore.” (Sundar 135) This is how Tendulkar became a part of protest theatre within Marathi theatre, which has always been at the forefront of social protest, particularly against middle-class morality and conventional outlooks.

Censorship of plays thus began, targeting specific performances “deemed scandalous, defamatory, seditious, obscene, or otherwise detrimental to the public interest.” (Gokhale Shanta) Staged in 1972 and later banned in 1974 continuously controversial thereafter, *Sakharam Binder* is regarded Tendulkar's “most intensely naturalistic play.” (Banerjee xiii) which deeply upset the conservative Maratha community. It shook the audience with its perceived obscenity, as it confronted the institution of marriage and shattered conventional ideals of wedded devotion. “The villain of the piece, according to the defenders of *Sakharam Binder*, is the Stage Performance Scrutiny Board, which banned the play on the ground that parts of it were obscene and that it desecrates the sanctity of the institution of marriage.” (Kanadey 74)

To quote Ashok H Desai: “There was also some adverse reaction by critics who proclaimed that the play dealt with baser human instincts. (One peculiar objection was that a Hindu wife as shown assaulting her husband in spite of his divine rights).” (14) However, “the Board decided to grant a suitability certificate with thirty-two conditions. Later, it was found in the writ petition that many board members had imposed these conditions without seeing the play.” (ibid) Some cuts directed by the censor board included:

For instance, a common word for impotent in Marathi is ‘pauneath’<sup>1</sup> (literally “seven and three fourth’, metaphorically incomplete). The Board deleted the word and suggested that ‘namard’<sup>2</sup> (unmanly) should be used instead. The word ‘pauneath’ has no obscene overtones and it would be absurd for Sakharam who is a book binder to use the heavier word ‘namard’ unless, of course, he had been reading the book he was binding. Another statement by Sakharam that ‘my appetite is not simple’ was also eliminated, presumably because ‘appetite’ did not refer only to food. (Desai 15-16)

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<sup>1</sup> In Marathi, ‘pauneath’ is colloquially used to describe impotence, translating literally to ‘seven and three fourth.’ Metaphorically, it implies incompleteness or inadequacy, suggesting a nuanced cultural understanding of impotence within the language.

<sup>2</sup> In Marathi, ‘namard’ is a word often used to refer to ‘impotence’. It directly translates to ‘lacking virility,’ reflecting societal views on masculinity and potency.

This quote thus shows how censorship decisions can create misunderstandings and overlook cultural nuances. It examines the board's choice to replace a word with stronger connotations, prompting reflection on the impact of censorship on artistic expression and language. *Sakharam* thus is a remarkable creation, inspired by someone Tendulkar once heard about:

I never met a man like him (*Sakharam*). But I was once told about a man who worked as a binder in a printing press in a small town and lived a strange kind of life. He did not marry but was on the lookout for a woman who was thrown out by her husband whom he brought home and stayed with her till one of the two got fed up of the other. The contract ended by mutual consent. This was all I was told. (11)

*Sakharam's* character thus acts as a catalyst for dismantling the conventional norms surrounding marriage. Through the central character of *Sakharam*, Tendulkar delves into the expression of lust and violence within the human psyche. Additionally, he exposes the emotions of characters like Laxmi, Champa, and Dawood without passing judgment, showcasing the complex shades of human nature, which are neither entirely good nor bad but exist in shades of grey. In *Sakharam Binder*, the central issue revolves around sexual power. When this power is challenged, the protagonist becomes disoriented and reacts cruelly, resorting to taking a life.

*Sakharam*, lives in a "old red-tiled home, the kind of one sees in the alleyways of small district towns." (Tendulkar 125) He asserts: "I carry two things in my mouth-either a beedi or an expletive." (Tendulkar 137) He also warns: "You think us dancing naked round here? Move on; get the hell out of here! I'll shine your bottoms for you. I am warning you, the whole lot of you! Now, get out!" (Tendulkar 125) That is what he is. His language cannot be cleaned and such language defines him. Thus, it is posited that, the moment his language is cleaned then he stops being *Sakharam*. Dressed simply, he has a salt and pepper beard on his chin, "a dhoti, a granny shirt, a jacket... and chappals." (Tendulkar 125) All these characteristics regarding his upbringing, appearance, and temperament suggest that he cannot possibly belong to the highest caste. This conflict over his caste is further intensified by his outspoken declaration: "I've been like this right from birth. Born naked, I was. My mother used to say, the brat's shameless. He is a Mahar born in Brahmin home. And if I was, who is blame? It was not my doing . . ." (Tendulkar 127) To put it in the words of Shailaja Wadikar: "Through *Sakharam's* character, Tendulkar exposes the masochism of the lower middle-class male. Due to the ill-treatment

meted out to him by his father, he flees away from home. The bitter experiences he had in his life leave him rough and tough and foul-mouthed.” (2)

Sakharam thus stands out as a distinct character, challenging norms through his friendship with Dawood, a Muslim, by rejecting the traditional role of a husband and exposing the flaws embedded within the institution of marriage. In recounting the demise of the sixth woman under his care, he highlights the societal pressure on Indian women to idealize their husbands, even in the face of cruelty that results in abandonment. Of her, Sakharam remarks: “She used to worship her husband’s shirt. The man was out to kill her, but as far as she was concerned, he was God! The fellow who’s out to kill them--- he’s a God! The man who saves them---he’s just a man!” (Tendulkar 127-128) Nevertheless, paradoxically, the same man who criticizes all husbands treats the women he shelters even worse, appearing unconscious to his behavior. He deems providing food, clothing, and shelter suffices for women abandoned by society. “Outwardly, Sakharam pretends that he is a saviour of women, but inwardly he is a dumping ground of all that is bad in society, so far as man-woman relationship is concerned. Although he criticizes married life, he develops such a relationship, which is worse for the woman who suffers more with Sakharam than with her husband before.” (Wadikar 5)

Although he opposes the marriage system but replicates its norms. Instead of conforming to traditional roles, he shelters women rejected by others, assigning them household duties and serving his needs. His system operates strictly, with women constantly coming and going. Those who disobey face consequences, often being kicked out. In a patriarchal society, men dominate women and can harm them. This is how, Sakharam asserts his masculine authority, positioning himself as the master of his household and expecting women to obey him.

Come in. Have a good look around. You’re going to live here now. This house is like me. I won’t have you complaining later on. Yes, look carefully around the place. If you think it’s all right. Put down your bundle get two square meals. Two saries to start with and then one every year. And not a fancy one at that. I won’t hear any complains later. I like everything in order here. Won’t put up with slipshod ways. If you’re careless, I’ll show you the door. Don’t ask for any pity then. And don’t blame me either. I’m the master here. (Tendulkar 125-126)

Even if Sakharam appears strict in his interactions with the women he shelters, each woman is informed that she is free to leave whenever she desires, and he assures them of any assistance they may need in the future. He tells them they can take anything- “clothes, chappals, bangles etc.” (Tendulkar 135) – that he has provided them in his house. Sakharam expects everything to be proper and decent, as he emphasizes that he is not a husband who would forget common decency. He disregards societal norms and does not anticipate the moral and emotional complexities of this arrangement. He says:

It’s good thing I’m not a husband. Things are fine the way they are. You get everything you want and yet you’re not tied down. If you’ve had enough, if she’s had enough, you can always part. The game is over. Nothing to bother you after that. While it lasts, she has a roof over her head, and you get home-cooked food. That’s a cheap way of fixing all your appetites. No need for you to go begging to another’s house! (Tendulkar 129)

Sakharam embodies the patriarchal social construct, where power dynamics are supreme. “You’ll have to make food yourself. That’s a woman’s job, and women must do their own jobs. That is the rule around here.” (Tendulkar 161) Through this portrayal, Tendulkar discloses the male ideology and hegemony prevalent in society. While Laxmi and other women in his care experience these conditions, their lives are not solely defined by such constraints. Sakharam persists: “Maybe I’m a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper. Why maybe? I am all that. And I drink. But I must be respected in my own house. ... In this house what I say goes. Understand? The others must obey, that’s all.” (Tendulkar 126) And he ends with one final requirement: “You’ll have to be a wife to me, and anyone with a little sense will know what to make of that.” (Tendulkar 126)

Thus, he adheres to his own philosophy of life, as noted by Ashok Desai, who observes, “He tries to work out independent philosophy of life, with no sense of false obligation.” (7) His philosophy however serves for his pleasure and fulfilment; anything beyond that holds no significance, as his existence revolves around pleasure-seeking. Sakharam embodies stereotypical hegemonic masculinity, demanding respect and submission from others, displaying commitment to his principles. The decision to bring Laxmi into home after the departure of six other women is driven by the desire for physical pleasure, as he seeks a compliant and submissive maid who will cater to his impulse. Thus, E. Renuka observes the complexities of Sakharam’s character and highlights his impact on those around him. She emphasizes:



Sakharam's temperament is as misleading as that of a crocodile. Although he comprehends and bolsters a defiant lady, he needs his woman to slave for him day and night, to regard his wishes, and to fulfil his desire. He professes to be the rescuer of ladies by offering them an actual existence superior to the prior one, however he is neither a friend in need, nor a radical, but a licentious, a conceited pleasure seeker. (33)

### **Gendered Anxieties**

Surprisingly, despite being aware of Sakharam's reputation as a womanizer, Laxmi never opposes the lustful advances made towards her. Sakharam is enslaved by desires, desires that Laxmi cannot fully satisfy due to her meek and submissive nature, which has prevented her from engaging in sexual activities. With the arrival of Champa, Sakharam's sexual thirst can finally be gratified. Champa, having left behind her immoral yet futile husband, emerges as a sexual challenge for Sakharam. While discussing household rules, he finds himself drawn to her physique;

Sakharam: In this house, the woman must behave properly. She must treat me due respect.  
Champa: Yes. Go and see if there's anything to eat. There's been nothing in this belly since yesterday. ... Sakharam: While you're staying with me, you don't need to be scared of anybody. ... Champa: Scared? Who, me? And scared of whom? My husband? What can he do to me? (Tendulkar 157)

With each conversation initiated by Champa, it becomes clear that Sakharam is increasingly preoccupied by her. Unlike the previous women he has encountered, Champa exerts an influence over him from the moment she speaks. As a result, Sakharam's stature as a tough man diminishes, and he finds himself surrendering to Champa's authority.

Initially, Sakharam becomes entirely absorbed by Champa's seductive attraction, finding himself unable to focus on his tasks and often arriving home ahead of time. He offers her drinks, which weaken her and lead her to surrender to Sakharam. He even neglects his duties at the press, but Dawood convinces him to fulfil his responsibilities regularly. Nevertheless, Sakharam maintains: "I grew up like a cactus - out in the open. I don't scare easy. From now on it is going to be Champa, Champa nothing more.... nobody can match her little finger. you don't know what fun Champa is." (Tendulkar 172-173)

On the contrary, Champa, however, serves as a constant reminder to Sakharam of his impotence because of Laxmi's presence, often insulting him: "Stop that Champa -Champa'- you're not a man – not since she came. She's made an impotent ninny of you. Don't have the guts to take me before her. You turn into a corpse- a worm." (Tendulkar 193) Upon this realization, he bursts out of his room with a scream, addressing Laxmi directly, saying- "leave this house. This very minute. She says you have made a ninny out of me. You beggar." (Tendulkar 194) Sakharam's harsh attitude instils terror in Laxmi, prompting her to resort to desperation as she plays her card, revealing Champa's recent encounter with Dawood. "It's true- it's the truth- these lips have never spoken a lie yet- she's unfaithful to you -yes- with Dawood. She goes to him -every afternoon – when you're at the press. I've seen them -with my own eyes." (Tendulkar 196) Champa's involvement with Dawood and the impotence remark have significantly weakened Sakharam's masculinity, leaving him unable to confront the situation. His male self refuses to forgive her, leading to murdering her in a fit of rage. Thus, the persistent focus on masculinity and sexual competence among men, alongside underlying anxieties about impotence or sexual neurosis, continues to be a prominent issue, impacting both mental health and societal norms surrounding masculinity.

As Berke, Reidy, & Zeichner point out: "In our society males are often under pressure to adhere to masculinity norms." (106-116) and often, when males diverge from conventional masculinity norms, "they experience negative social consequences." (Schwab et al. 289-311) The anxiety associated with male gender roles implies that masculinity may be compromised when facing threats, potentially portraying men as inadequately masculine. In our culture, there is a persistent belief that men are generally less verbally and emotionally expressive than women. Men's emotional conduct "is not a stable property but a multidimension construct." (Wong and Rochlen 62) Thus, Men's emotional behavior is shaped by various external factors.

Therefore, it is suggested that emotions are viewed as 'less masculine' with Connell's notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' being a central focus in masculinity studies. This concept has had a substantial impact on research and theoretical advancements in the field since the 1980s. While Connell stresses that "a vast majority of men will never live up to hegemonic masculinity in their own lives, their complicity in sustaining it as an ideal provides them with a 'patriarchal dividend' bringing honour, prestige and the right to command." (Connell 82) Thus, men's tendency to exhibit fewer emotions than women are attributed to the association between emotional expression and hierarchy. Within this framework, maintaining emotional

control is regarded as a marker of superiority, essential for embodying masculinity convincingly and affirming involvement in the privileged gender group.

All the characters in the play, including Sakharam, his friend Dawood, Laxmi, Champa and the woman preceding Laxmi in Sakharam's house, exhibit contradictions within their characters. This internal conflict serves as a central theme in the play, revealing the complexities of human nature and societal dynamics. For instance, Laxmi, initially portrayed as meek and submissive, emerges as a strong character by the play's conclusion. Conversely, Sakharam, who initially exerts dominance and control, finds himself surrendering power to Laxmi, as the narrative explains, highlighting the fluidity of power dynamics. Furthermore, Champa's involvement with Dawood, driven by her perception of Sakharam's impotence, raises questions about traditional notions of masculinity and challenges societal expectations placed upon men.

## **Conclusion**

*Sakharam Binder* examines sexual neurosis and emotional repression, disrupting conventional gender roles and power dynamics. Champa's accusation triggers Sakharam's violent reaction, exposing the fragility of male identity within patriarchal structures and emphasizing the toxic nature of patriarchy. Despite his predominant aggression, Sakharam also reveals moments of vulnerability. Thus, the play prompts readers to ponder the consequences of rigid gender norms and contemplate alternative endings.

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