



From Dilemma to Disillusionment : A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to unknot the layers of patriarchy, caste, gender and liberal reformism bundled in Vijay Tendulkar's controversial play *Kanyadaan*. As the play has caused uproar among both the caste Hindus and the *dalit* communities, it certainly can't be read as a document favouring any of these. Neither can it be cheered as an argument in favour of inter-caste marriages and vice-versa. Several critics have studied it as an indictment against 'hate the sin not the sinner' kind Gandhian philosophy as the protagonist Jyoti puts it:

.....man and his inherent nature are never really two different things. Both are one, and inseparable. (*Kanyadaan*) Nath's liberal reformism and his passion for shouldering social responsibility against casteism thrust Jyoti into a greater pitfall. In the light of this observation the play can also be read in terms of father-child relationship. Like Chris in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, Jyoti also suffers because of her father's hypocrisy, his unpractical 'march on soldiers' sort idealism. The notions of caste, violence in marital life and patriarchy are all intricately interwoven into the texture of the play.

KEYWORDS : Reformism, Hypocrisy, Violence, Reconstruction, Masculinity.

Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan*, though woven around the marriage of a Brahmin girl, Jyoti Yadunath Devlalikar and a Dalit boy, Arun Athavale can hardly be studied as a play focusing exclusively on the theme of inter-caste marriages. It has unquestionably raised furies among different sections of society and the causes of the uproar range from presenting a stereotyped image of a dalit boy to the portrayal of Gandhian liberalism in unfavourable colours. The play dealing with several social issues like inter-caste marriage, physical violence after marriage, the negligence of parents to their children, the unfavourable consequences of patriarchy, parents' imposition of their idealism on their children, alcoholism etc. needs to be studied in the context of father- child relationship also. Like Arjun's complex personality, the play is also an enigma to the critics.

The scholars have studied the play in the context of inter-caste marriage exploring the Hindu *Shatras* where the marriage of a girl to a man of upper caste is allowed but not to that of the lower caste. In her article on Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* Ania Loomba discusses that the

lawgiver Manu in *Manusmriti* allowed the possibility of a higher- caste man taking a wife of the lower caste as long as she is not his first wife while he disallowed the union of a high caste woman with a man of lower caste. The first one called the *anuloma* was acceptable while the *pratiloma* was not acceptable to the natural order of things according to *Manusmriti*. (Loomba) The marriage of Jyoti and Arun belongs to the second category yet Nath is enthusiastic about the marriage of the two on the ground of Nationalist social reform which is another cause of vehement criticism directed against the play. The critics find Nath a mouthpiece of Gandhian ideology which is embedded into the tradition of social reform through inter-caste marriages between the higher and the lower castes. These scholars plead that only the abolition of caste will be an effective measure for social reorganisation and reconstruction. Gaurav D. Somwanshi, in his article *Play and Prejudice....* quotes Ambedkar's words to support the argument:

To agitate for and to organise inter- caste dinners and inter- caste marriages is like forced feeding brought about by artificial means. Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the *Shastras*, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the *Shastras*, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry without your telling him or her to do so.

(Ambedkar)

The play is further criticised severely for presenting a brutal image of a dalit young man. Since the very beginning, Arun has been portrayed as a violent young man who twists Jyoti's wrist even at the time when he comes to meet her parents for the first time. He does so to make her realize that he can't accept anyone challenging his masculinity. He tells her in a fit of passion:

Arun: Our tongues always tasting the flesh of dead animals, and with relish! Surely we can't fit into your unwrinkled Tinopal world. How can there be any give and take between our ways and your fragrant, ghee spread, wheat bread culture?

(513)

He intentionally speaks to Seva about his plans of 'brewing illicit liquor' (517) to support his family after marriage. Even after their marriage he always treats Jyoti brutally and flaunts foul language to torture her. When he comes to Nath's house for taking her back with him, he speaks shamelessly of his wife- beating and labels himself along with others of his kind as 'scavengers'. (539) The play draws bitter criticism for this crude portrayal of Arun. Swathy Margaret pleads that untouchables are often described as drunkards whose victimization to alcohol is responsible for their deterioration and decline. It is a general outlook that their habits like drinking, eating meat, animal sacrifice and dancing etc. happen to be the cause of their beastlike, barbaric life which is 'beyond redemption'. (Margaret)

The play also delineates Arun as a dalit boy who is the 'product of the circumstances he has endured'. (526) He has been drawn as a victim who maliciously victimizes Jyoti as she represents the caste that has been in the role of the victimizer, for ages. He is delineated as a young man who weaves a plot against Nath, the M.L.A., to force him for promoting his

autobiography in a public meeting. Thus he shrewdly traps his 'socialist father-in-law' (551) and speaks hoarsely to him. These and many more hoarse words flow from his tongue to strengthen the argument that he can't be taken as one who needs to be chiselled.

Indexed among Post-colonial and feminist studies, the play voices ever-existing conflict between the *Brahmins* and the *dalits*, patriarchy and women. In the play, Jyoti assimilates the ideals and philosophies of her parents. Having witnessed her parents' crusades to strengthen the downtrodden and marginalized sections of society, she develops a sympathetic attitude for the marginalized sections of society. Resultantly, she decides to marry a dalit – Arun Athavale even without due understanding of his ideology and personality. Her decision to marry Arun is more a natural corollary of her socialization in a politically charged nuclear household than a sensible decision. She asserts her decision to get married which renders Nath buoyed and bolstered whereas Seva appears guarded and surprised:

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

Nath: [Excited] Congratulations!

Seva: [Surprised] Decided!

(P. 503)

Nath, Jyoti's father, is enthusiastic about her decision merely because it serves his obsession with liberal reformism. Seva, her mother, realizes that Jyoti's decision is the outcome of immaturity. She cautions Jyoti against the problems she perceives in her match. She is not against her decision to marry a dalit man as she has been a crusader against untouchability for years. However, she has apprehensions about her daughter's capacity to tolerate the kind of life that she would have to lead after her marriage with Arun. She fears that Jyoti has been brought up in a different environment and it would be very difficult for her to adjust and make compromises. Her fears about the success of this match are not rooted into casteism, rather they are grounded into patriarchy which doesn't allow a woman to step back as 'there is no chance for a woman to run away.' (P. 509)

But Jyoti appears a solid embodiment of Nath's ideals and values. She has imbibed his philosophies and ideals to the hilt and fails to view the practical implications of such an enforced yoking together of the two completely incompatible individuals. Seva and Jayaprakash try their best to prevent this marriage from being solemnized, but Nath motivates Jyoti and triggers off her to confront the situation. Being a champion of egalitarian society, Nath holds the upper caste people responsible for the sufferings of the downtrodden and he advocates for establishing friendly relations with them to help them recover from the trauma. (527)

Lost in his zest for an egalitarian society, he is not able to realize that glass ceilings can't be broken without hurting the limbs unnoticed. It is only when Arun blackmails him on the subject of delivering a speech for his autobiography that he realizes his mistake. He then, comprehends that for his 'maniacal urge to uproot casteism and caste distinctions from our society(he) pushed his own daughter into a sea of misery.....'(557) Like a wounded warrior he implores his son not to 'rely on his wisdom' because it will ruin their lives. (558)

Finally Jyoti holds mirror to his failure as an idealist when she blatantly speaks to him:

Jyoti: No man is fundamentally evil, he is good. He has certain propensities towards evil. They must be reformed.....All false, vicious claptrap! The truth is, you knew very well that man and his inherent nature are never really two different things. Both are one, and inseparable. And either you accept it in totality, or you reject it if you can.....Putting man's beastliness to sleep, and awakening the godhead within is an absurd notion.

(563)

She finds herself a victim of her father's hypocrisy and resigns to her fate following her mother's verdict- 'for a woman there is no chance to run away'.

Thus the play is also about a daughter's disillusionment with the ideals of her father. Hence Shailaja B. Wadikar finds the play "a psychological study of the social tensions caused by casteism in India side by side with the development of Jyoti's character from a soft spoken and highly cultured Brahmin girl into a hardened spouse of her Dalit husband."(Wadikar,pp. 97-98.) Whatever Nath envisioned for his political world, proved to be an utter failure in the world of reality. Nath always thinks of his ideals of freedom, equality and social justice and that his daughter's marriage with a dalit boy is a kind of success towards his way to egalitarian and humanitarian society. On the other hand, Arun, the dalit boy does not forget his low caste and always suffers from inferiority complex. The memory of the incidents of the village haunts him again and again and words like; *Johar, Maayi- Baap, Sir, Madam, Sweeper*' ever torture him. Nath fails to reorganize Arun's split personality which Jyoti could recognize as a wife:

Jyoti: Arun is both the beast, and the lover. Arun is the demon, and also the poet.filthy cursing is a part of his frenzied love: a sudden shower of hard, ardent kisses accompanies the rain of blows.....Arun is made of all these things bound together and I have to accept him as he is, because I cannot reject him.

(564)

Kanyadaan is perhaps the most tendentious of all the plays written by Tendulkar. It dwells on extremely delicate social and political issues. Nath and Seva both have always been social workers who have pleaded the cause of marginalised sections of the society. This play verifies

that the people nurturing reformist zeal and devoid of realistic vision not only fail to get their nurtured aim but also give way to new problems. Unfortunately, their children are victimized in the course of their experiments as happens with Jyoti in the play.

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