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Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*: A Study in Social Transformation

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar wrote “Kanyadaan” in 1983 in Marathi. He depicted social transformation brought about after the marriage of a Dalit boy Arun and a Brahmin girl Jyoti. When she talks about her desire to marry him, her mother opposes but her father, who is a social reformer, supports the marriage. The couple alters their mentality. Arun tries to take revenge by abusing her Brahmin parents and tortures her. She willingly agrees to lead the life of a Dalit girl and gives up the pretensions of having lived in a well-to-do Brahmin home. Her father is an idealist but he sacrifices his idealism for her sake. The paper aims to assess the instrumental role of inter-caste marriage in alternating the mindset of society. It also upholds the need of acceptance and supporting inter-caste marriages to harmonize the social transformation process in modern society.

Keywords: *Dalit, Brahmin, domestic violence, social transformation*

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*: A Study in Social Transformation

Ms. Savita Laxmanrao Andelwar

Introduction

Kanyadaan is one of the best known plays of Vijay Tendulkar. It was published in 1983. It begins with a family get-together in a middle class home. Nath Devalikar (father) and Seva (mother) are with their daughter Jyoti and son Jayaprakash. Jyoti informs her parents that she has decided to marry a Dalit named Arun Athavale who, among other things, writes poetry. Seva has doubts about the correctness of Jyoti's hasty decision. But Nath is supportive for he looks at it as a step towards his dream of a caste-less society. Jyoti and Arun come to her father's house. Arun grabs Jyoti's arm and twists it and she moans in pain. He also speaks uncouth language. Jayaprakash and Seva are not pleased with Arun. They try to convince Nath that he is not a suitable match for Jyoti. However, Nath's support and Jyoti's infatuation for Arun result in their marriage. Relations between them turn sour almost immediately after the marriage and she returns back to her parental home. When Arun comes and persuades her to return, she agrees to go back with him.

Nath tells Seva that he is overjoyed to read the autobiography of Arun. But Seva talks about Jyoti whom she has admitted in a nursing home since she is bleeding because of an internal wound. Neighbours told Seva that she should take Jyoti because Arun beats and even kicks her. She says,

The truth is that your Dalit son-in-law, who can write such a wonderful autobiography, and many lovely poems, wants to remain an idler. He wants his wife to work. And with her money he wants to drown himself in drink, and have a hell of a time with his friends. On top of that, for entertainment, he wants to kick his wife in the belly. Why not? Doesn't his wife belong to the high caste? In this way he is returning all the kicks aimed at generations of his ancestors by men of high caste. It appears that this is the monumental mission he has set out to fulfil (Tendulkar 47-48).

Arun comes to tell Nath that an announcement has been made that he (Nath) will preside over a discussion about his autobiography. Nath refuses but Seva expresses her fear that if Nath does not preside, Arun will direct his anger against Jyoti. Finally, his love for his daughter overpowers him and he decides to attend the meeting.

Then Jyoti comes home to know why he attended the function. He says that he did so because he likes the book. Jyoti says that the only reason was his fear that unless he did so, Arun would torture her. He attended the function and made a false and

deceitful speech. He has only hatred for Arun. She rather prefers dying by torture to being in a deceitful situation.

Nath preached truth to the world, but he became untruthful to himself. Jyoti calls it hypocrisy. She says that she is leaving never to return and asks Nath and others not to visit her either. V. Thillaikarasi explains,

What cannot be endured by her is her father's hypocrisy that is inconceivable and indigestible. The so called idealist, who was placed in the highest pedestal by Jyoti, exemplified his double-standard by delivering a deceitful speech, falsely magnifying the virtues of Arun's autobiography in a public meeting, lest that should make Jyoti more miserable. This change of colour in her father's quality, even though it is only for the sake of decreasing her suffering, Jyoti finds it unendurable (Thillaikarasi 67).

Ulka S. Wadekar remarks, "Jyoti, the female character of the drama willingly surrenders herself to the macrocosm of exploitation, oppression and inhuman treatment by Arun." She continues, "A well-educated woman becomes a victim of domestic violence, (and) mental harassment" (Wadekar et al 58 & 60). Nakul expresses a somewhat similar opinion, "To Arun, Jyoti appears merely a hostage from the upper caste and he seems to have commenced a mission against her class and community He is a Dalit, and Jyoti's presence reminds him of his traumatized existence for which Dalits hold upper castes responsible" (6). According to Alpna Saini, "He thus transmutes the humiliation received at the hands of society into violence against his wife. And it does not seem to him to be wrong, since he has seen his father do the same against his mother so many times. Arun claims to love Jyoti unconditionally, and offers to show his violence against her as an expression of love" (Saini 117) Ulka Pendse adds,

There is not a single instance of his love and concern for Jyoti. It seems that a marriage with Jyoti is a convenient and essential stepping stone for his rise up the social ladder and a tool to pour out all his urge of revenge, suppressed by his class for generations. Thus this love relationship seems to be one-sided (295).

Depiction of Social Transformation

There are three characters in the drama that undergo social transformation. The first among them is Nath. He is blinded by his desire to have a caste-less society which makes him agree to the marriage of Jyoti with Arun. He asks Jyoti if the boy is a Brahmin and when told that he is a Dalit, Nath exclaims, "Marvellous! but if my daughter had decided to marry into high caste, it wouldn't have pleased me as much" (Tendulkar 8). When he meets Arun, he says, "Very, very glad to meet you, young man! I have heard a lot about you.... A man should be like this... Strong! He may break but he will not bend...Very good." Then he adds gleefully, "... 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 of the term. I am happy today, very happy" (Tendulkar 23) He persuades Seva and Jayaprakash to

accept Arun by arguing, “He is like unrefined gold, he needs to be melted and moulded. This is the need of the hour. Who can perform this task if not girls like Jyoti?” Tendulkar 31).

When his dream turns sour and Arun makes the life of Jyoti miserable, his attitude towards Arun undergoes a transformation. He spends sleepless nights because of domestic violence which he perpetuates. When Arun comes to him requesting him to preside in the function regarding his autobiography, Nath turns down the request even though he calls it an excellent book. After Arun leaves, Nath calls him a scoundrel and exclaims, “... his visit has polluted this drawing room, this house, and this day ... It stinks.... I feel like taking a bath, like cleaning myself! Clean everything! This furniture, this floor... he has made them filthy, dirty, and polluted! Why did I have to come into contact with a man like this?” (Tendulkar 57) His dream of a caste-less society is thus shattered.

At this time Seva intervenes and pleads him to attend the function. She argues,

“Jyoti’s condition frightens me. It is a question of her life and death. And Jyoti is our daughter. Your refusal will make him find new ways to torment her. If you don’t go to the meeting, God knows what he... in his madness... will do to JyotiTherefore, you will have to go.... You will have to praise the book, because that is the only option left to us” (Tendulkar 58). He relents and agrees to it only because of his fear that this would infuriate Arun and he would torture Jyoti. So he presided over the book release function and his speech was acclaimed. Returning home at night, he admits that what he spoke was both rubbish and “Hollow, hypocritical, flat and meaningless drivel.” He adds, “... I made that speech under duress.... I hate that book.... My blatant lying today will make Jyoti’s life a little more tolerable....” (Tendulkar 60-61).

Jyoti then tells him boldly that his speech was “...not only lousy, it was a hireling’s speech.... you praised that book against your wishes” (Tendulkar 66). She again says that when Nath’s eyes fell on Arun, they dripped poison and after the function when Arun came to meet him, Nath ignored him. Thus, we see that Nath is a changed man. One great merit which he saw in Arun was that he was a Dalit. But subsequently he thinks that Arun’s coming to his house has made him unclean. Second, Nath becomes dishonest with himself. He praises a book which by his own admission he dislikes. Third, he has an ulterior motive in it, i.e., to protect his daughter from suffering.

The second character who shows social transformation is Arun. He is born in a poor Mahar family. He had witnessed social degradation in his childhood. He tells Jyoti,

Our grandfathers and great grandfathers 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 ‘Johaar, Maayi – baap! Sir-Madam, sweeper!’ and their calls polluted the Brahmins’ ears.... Generation after generation, their stomachs were used to the stale, stinking bread they have begged! Our tongues always tasting the flesh of dead animals, and with relish (Tendulkar 17)

His family life was not at all happy. He tells his in-laws, “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” (Tendulkar 43-44). By indulging in domestic violence, he seems to think that he is continuing the family tradition. When he marries a Brahmin girl (Jyoti), he sees it as an opportunity to pay back the Brahmins in the same coins. He constantly taunts Jyoti and her parents, heaping abuses on them for being of a high caste. Nath is full of regret that Arun tortures Jyoti for his entertainment because she is a Brahmin. He realizes that Arun has the monumental mission of subjecting Jyoti to domestic violence in retaliation for the oppression perpetuated by high castes on generations of Dalits.

The essence of *‘Kanyadaan’* is domestic violence. The play begins and ends with it for the sadistic pleasure of Arun. In his very first meeting with Jyoti’s parents, he displays his proneness to domestic violence. He grabs Jyoti’s arm and twists it. She moans in pain and tries to blow upon the arm to reduce the pain. When Jyoti returns to her parental home after her marriage with Arun, her father notices the mark on her arm. When he asks how she got it, she hides the arm. She stuns everyone by disclosing that she has left Arun. This shows the intensity to which domestic violence is done. Arun refers to his ‘fucking’ hands with which he beats Jyoti and takes a knife out of his pocket to cut them off (but Jayaprakash takes it from him). When Seva tells him that wife-beating is barbarism, he admits that he is a barbarian by birth and will always remain so. After Jyoti returns back with Arun, he does not mend his ways. Notwithstanding her pregnancy, he continues to beat her and even kick her so much so that Seva has to admit her in a nursing home because of bleeding from an internal wound.

In short, from the position of a victim Arun turns into a victimiser. He is delighted to inflict pain and suffering on Jyoti because he thinks that for centuries the Brahmins did the same to the Dalits. Thus, she becomes a victim of cultural sadism. Jyoti’s parents fail to understand Arun’s erratic behaviour. But Jayaprakash seeks to explain it when he remarks, “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” (Tendulkar 19). He cites the example of the Israeli army which razed villages of Palestinian civilians and mowed down men, women and children because the Nazi troops had decimated the Jews some years back.

The third character is Jyoti who under goes social transformation. Born in a Brahmin family, she thinks that she is capable to face both easy and difficult times. She admits before Arun, “I am not one of those delicate touch-me-not creatures” (Tendulkar 51). She lives up to this ideology and voluntarily gives up all pretensions of Brahmanism and willingly accepts the life of Dalit housewife in a Dalit home. Although Arun tortures her, she bears it with fortitude and goes to the extent of cutting-off relations with her parents and brother. When she visits them the last time, she behaves as though she were a stranger in the house. She accuses her father of doing charity to her

by delivering a speech at the function. She believes that she has ceased to be a part of the family. She asserts,

“I don’t belong to anyone in this house. Don’t ever say it again.... I belong to someone who makes your clean and pure soul impure by his touch” (Tendulkar 66). Elaborating further, she tells him, “Hereafter I have to live in that world, which is mine... and die there.... none of you should come to my house... this is my order.” She adds, “I have my husband. I am not a widow. Even if I become one I shan’t knock at your door. I am not Jyoti Yadunath Devlalikar now, I am Jyoti Arun Athavle, a scavenger.... I am an untouchable, a scavenger. I am one of them. Don’t touch me. Fly from my shadow, otherwise my fire will scorch your comfortable values” (Tendulkar 70).

Sociologists use the term ‘Sanskritization’ when a person of a low caste tries to climb up the social ladder by adopting the life style of a higher caste. In the case of Jyoti what we see is the opposite. From the position of one of a high caste, she deliberately stoops down to the life style of a person of a low caste. In this sense she presents a case of de-Sanskritization.

To conclude, Tendulkar’s *Kanyadaan* shows a modern society that accepts social transformation despite all odds. In the case of Nath, he sets aside his high ideology. For Arun, it means assuming the role of an avenger for the wrongs which the Brahmins had done to the non-Brahmins during the last several centuries. In case of Jyoti, she accepts the inevitable twofold division of the society and prefers to leave the upper strata to be an integral part of the lower strata. During the entire process social transformation depicted in the play, it becomes clear that social harmony can be established only by accepting the differences. For the purpose it needs mutually sympathetic attitude among upper and lower caste community members in Indian society. Transformation in terms of violence, revenge or subjugation cannot be accepted at any level. Every transformation should entail harmony in society. Revengeful attitude of a person like Arun can be averted when a kind and considerate mutual understanding grows in the society. Jyoti, and Nath are symbols of a true social change as they accept and realize falsity of social biases. Thus, social transformation needs a kind and considerate feeling among all castes with which we can assume pivotal change in the course of violence in families, societies and nations.

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