



Exploration of marriage, caste and violence: Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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Abstract

Kanyadaan, the most controversial play of Vijay Tendulkar, deals with psychological study of social tensions caused by casteism in India vis-à-vis the development of Jyoti's character from a soft spoken and highly cultured Brahmin girl into a hardened spouse of her dalit husband. In the same way it portrays metamorphosis of Nath's attitude from hard core idealist to disillusioned realist. The play also reveals Arun Athavale, a Dalit poet's psychological, physical and verbal violence, which is rooted in his ethos, familial background and caste consciousness. *Kanyadaan* not only deals with the problem of marital relation in patriarchal society through Jyoti and Arun but also throws light on class differences and caste conflict in modern Indian society. It may be seen as indirect comment on the evil consequences of father's obsession with idealism and husband's obsession with caste consciousness. The playwright has focused on the problem that it is difficult to bridge a gap between two different sections and castes of the society. Moreover, the attempt to overcome a taboo leads to greater pitfalls that are difficult to handle.

Keywords: Caste struggle, dalit, discrimination, idealist, realist

Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar was a prolific Indian playwright who wrote about contemporary issues and themes in a novel way. Tendulkar's plays derived inspiration from real-life incidents or social upheavals, which throws clear light on harsh realities. In an interview, Tendulkar once said, "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 can't do it, I have to speak the truth." Tendulkar's plays have dealt with themes that unravel the exploitation of power and latent violence in human relationships.

Tendulkar was a writer who thought beyond the caste system and class system. *Kanyadaan*, one of his plays, is a psychological study of social tensions caused by casteism. *Kanyadaan* was originally written and performed in Marathi in 1983 and was translated by Gowri Ramnarayan. *Kanyadaan* means giving away of a daughter in marriage. In an interview to Ranjit Pardesi, Tendulkar asserts about genesis of *Kanyadaan*, "All my creative writing begins, not from an idea but from an experience, mine or somebody else's which then becomes mine. It was such an experience of another to begin with, that provided the starting point for *Kanyadaan*" (Vijay Tendulkar 104).

As the title suggests, the play centers on the marriage which is solemnized between a Dalit poet and a daughter of upper class socialist. The theme deals with class difference and caste conflict in modern Indian society as well as problem of marital relation in patriarchal society. The play *Kanyadaan* has the background of the twentieth century

history of the struggle over the practice of untouchability and the immediate phase of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and in the nation as a whole. It is a psychological study of the social tensions caused by casteism in India and the development of Jyoti's character from a highly cultured Brahmin girl into a hardened spouse of her Dalit husband.

The play, *Kanyadaan*, has two acts with a total of five scenes. The play begins with a discussion in the small room of Nath Devalikar where he enquires about the bus to Asangaon. Nath is an idealist Gandhi supporter, an active social worker and an MLA. Seva, his wife, is also busy with social service and the movements which take place in upliftment of women. They have two children, a son and a daughter, Jayaprakash and Jyoti respectively. Jyoti is an educated Brahmin girl who falls in love with Arun Athavale, a young Dalit poet. Jayaprakash is studying in M.Sc. Jyoti has been in search of meeting with her parents to let them know about her decision of marriage but she misses them together at home. The children have to take appointment from their parents to discuss social issues and personal decisions. Nath asks Seva to listen to Jyoti:

Seva, our Jyoti here, she wants to tell us something. To us means to you and to me and we are simply never able to meet these poor children together. Therefore this girl has taken an appointment with us today. Fifteen minutes (To Jyoti) only fifteen, right...? We will now talk to her. Sorry. We will listen to her (To Jyoti), Right (*Kanyadaan* 21).

Nath and Seva both don't spend much time with their children due to social and political activities. Jyoti has to discuss the question of her marriage—a matter of life and death to her—in fifteen minutes, as the father has to catch a bus, which will take him to his speech-making tour and the

mother has just returned home tired after a rally. This, in its own way, as Madge observes, is a comment on the quality of the family life these two social reformers have been able to give to their children, despite their observance of democratic norms. In fact, the children are seen not as individual with their own aspirations, but as mere extensions of their parents' social experimentations (155).

Jyoti tells her parents that she wishes to marry a dalit, mahar boy who does a part-time job in 'Shramik Samachar'. The reactions of Nath and Seva are different on the decision of Jyoti. Nath, as an idealist, appreciates her decision since he believes that society cannot be transformed by mere words. He supports the decision taken by his daughter. He also welcomes the liberal idea of his daughter. He says, "I know it doesn't make a difference. But if my daughter had decided to marry into high caste, it wouldn't have pleased me as much" (Kanyadaan 23).

Seva opposes the idea of getting married to a dalit boy. She asks Jyoti some questions regarding Arun because she is worried about the future of her daughter. She wants to know more about the economic conditions of Arun Athawale, his family background and his job because she gives more importance to the economic stability of a person. Seva says, "Of course we will see him when he comes. But when a girl thinks of marriage, she has to look for some kind of stability..... After all, it is a matter of a lifelong relationship" (Kanyadaan 26). It seems that Sava's reactions are more of a mother than of a social activist. When she finds Nath supports Jyoti, she tries to persuade her by saying:

My concern is not over his being a dalit. You know very well that Nath and I have been fighting untouchability tooth and nail, God knows since when, so that's not the issue. 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 (Kanyadaan 27).

Jyoti dismisses her mother's fears by saying that she can manage. Seva's character proves that inspite of modern thoughts; she thinks like a traditional mother who takes caste, background, attitude, character, economical position of the bridegroom. Seva and Jayaprakash oppose at first but they also agree for the marriage.

The very first meeting between Jyoti and Arun that takes place in her house, ends with the feelings of disgust. Arun tells Jyoti that he is the son of a scavenger and a slum dweller. He says, "If you see my father's hut you'll understand.... No clothes on our back, no food in our stomach, but we felt very secure. Here, these damn houses of the city people, they're like the bodies of sharks and crocodiles, each one alone in them!" (Kanyadaan 30). He distinguishes between the slum dweller and the people who live in big houses of the cities as well as brings forth two images for comparison- "shark" and "crocodile" which eat the flesh of the weaker ones and suck the blood of the people like him.

Arun tells Jyoti, "Generation after generation, their stomachs used to stale, stinking bread they have begged! Our tongues always tasting 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?" (32). He taunts Jyoti continuously for her upper caste upbringings and possible susceptibility towards a dalit way

of life. When she resists this, Arun responds by twisting her arm which is the sign of violence inflicted on Jyoti's body.

Arun also talked rudely to Seva and Jayaprakash on asking of his economic condition and job as he feels that Seva is mocking at his low status. In his frustration which arises due to the sentiments of disgust, he tell Seva about his future plan that the process of brewing illicit liquor as the best source for improving his economic conditions, "It is a first class profession for two persons. The man bribes the police and the wife serves the customers. People call her aunty. The more attractive the aunty's looks, the brisker the trade...." (Kanyadaan 35). He also assigns role to his children in the profession. He becomes happy to see Seva's face and her emotional turmoil.

After Nath's arrival the atmosphere changes and Arun speaks very less. Nath thanks Arun for giving him the chance to discard the caste system. Nath says, "'Break the caste system' was a mere slogan for us..... But today I have broken the caste barrier in the real sense. My home has become Indian in the real sense of the term" (Kanyadaan 37). After his departure Seva and Jayaprakash reject him as Jyoti's suitor. They find him uncultured, uncivilized, and his misbehaviour to Jyoti, shock them. But Nath tries to convince them that he has been brought up in the midst of poverty and hatred. He says in his favour, "Not only is he not a middle-class man. He is a dalit. He has been brought up in the midst of poverty and hatred. These people's psychological make-up is totally different.... We must try to understand him and that is extremely difficult" (Kanyadaan 41). Inspite of strange behaviour of Arun, Jyoti is firm in her decision of getting married to Arun. Hence Jyoti and Arun get married, but "what follows is a sequence of violence, misery, and disillusionment" (Wadikar 26).

Arun always remains conscious of his lower class origin and inflicts cruelties and miseries on Jyoti. His acts of brutality against Jyoti, his wife from the upper caste, appear to be a consequence of the accumulated hatred and frustration his people have suffered for a long period. Though educated, his wife Jyoti has become a mere thing for him on whom he can show his love whenever he is pleased and can show his anger by beating her if he is angry. Jyoti after months returns home and declares that she has left Arun forever. She says, "He.... he will not enter this house. Because I have left him ... I am not going back to him again... never." And further adds, "I must tell you, Bhai. I must. I am fed up with him Fed up! Fed up!" (Kanyadaan 51).

Arun comes to say sorry to Jyoti. Seva asks him the reasons for his beating. He does not feel shy for his behaviour but defends himself by saying that abuse and beating are knitted in the webs of their lives. He says, "When have I claimed that I am civilized and cultured like your people? From childhood I have seen my father come home drunk everyday, 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 the tears" (Kanyadaan 55). He considers his upbringing responsible for his behaviour. The family life which he has seen consists of only abuses, beating and quarrels. Married life for him means love plus beating. Jyoti's behaviour to leave him after beating sounds unfair to him as his mother has tolerated such a life without complaint. As Arun has seen the oppression of his mother in the hands of his father, he wants to take revenge of it. He says, "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” (Kanyadaan 55).

Seva and Nath are disturbed with the behaviour of Arun with Jyoti. He does not even want to change himself because he does not want to lose his identity of Dalit. Moreover it is a matter of being ‘Male’ which is superior and ‘Wife’ is merely a ‘second sex’. Whether a male belongs to lower class or upper class, he dominates. He says, “I am what I am... and shall remain exactly that. And your Jyoti knew what I was even before she married me. In spite of that she married me, she did it out of her own free will” (Kanyadaan 55). At last after arguments Jyoti decides to leave with Arun in spite of unwillingness of her mother and brother.

There is inferiority complex in the mind of Arun as he is always conscious of the origin of his wife that she belongs to upper class. That class consciousness in Arun’s mind makes him to behave in the rigid manner with his helpless wife. The play reflects the conflict in the values of Nath and Arun. Nath’s blind faith in his Gandhian values and ideals makes his life miserable. On the other side by torturing Jyoti Arun not only disturbs Jyoti but all the family members of Devalalakar. He does not feel anything wrong in his worst treatment given to his wife. His acts of violence towards his upper caste wife Jyoti appear to be a result of the accumulated hatred and frustration his ancestors have suffered for a long period.

Arun receives acclamation for his autobiography. The name, fame and position in society do not bring any change in the brutal treatment which he gives to his pregnant wife. Through the neighbor Seva comes to know that Arun beats and kicks Jyoti at night. Mr. Nath is totally broken and finds it incredible as to how a man can beat a pregnant wife. Arun has recently written autobiographical novel which is sentimental as well as poetical. Mr. Nath, after reading it, is overjoyed and praised it like anything and now the disclosure of Jyoti’s condition moves him and he laments:

Such bastardly behaviour by someone who wrote this beautiful autobiography? How can he? Here in these pages he describes the humiliations he has undergone with extraordinary sensitivity... and the same man kicks his pregnant wife on her belly? How...? (Kanyadaan 58)

Nath understands hollowness of idealism. He cannot understand Arun’s split personality. Seva ironically comments that their dalit son-in-law, who writes lovely poems and wonderful autobiography, is an idler who lives on the money of Jyoti and drinks and beats his wife. Seva also says, “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 accomplish” (Kanyadaan 58).

Jayaprakash compares Arun’s inhumanities with that of Israeli forces when they launched a strong and offensive attack against Palestinians and also chronicled the inhumanly behaviour of Nazi troops few years ago. He analyses the behavior of Arun by saying:

But this means that the very victims of violence may go on to perpetrate the same brutal violence upon others. Perhaps they get a peculiar enjoyment out of it. 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 (Kanyadaan 61).

A discussion is arranged on Arun’s autobiography and Nath is invited as the chairperson by Arun himself with his friends. When Nath refuses, he gives an oblique statement that the rise of a *dalit* son-in-law “caused heart burn in the upper caste socialist father-in-law” (Kanyadaan 65). He reminds Mr. Nath about the social criticism if he was not present in the function. People would conclude that father in law and son-in-law are not in a good terms. He further tries to convince him by reminding the gap between the upper caste and lower caste. Moreover Mr. Nath’s rejection may be due to the fact that he does not want to mix with lower class people. Arun says:

Your connections are with the elite. Our friends here belong to a low caste, brought up on the flesh of dead animals. Our ancestors trudged around with a load of shit on their heads. It is my great good fortune which made a fair and lovely bird from a well to do, high class background fall to my lot. My respected mother-in-law has always been angry with me. She would have liked a fair, rich, highly educated son-in-law occupying a high office chair. But fate favoured me instead. A poet and a writer! And dalit at that! (Kanyadaan 65).

The slightest rejection is enough to remind him the fact that he belongs to low caste and so rejection is his destiny. He taunts Nath by saying, “These people believed you were a well-wisher of the dalit community. That you championed the cause of ‘a well in every village for the dalit’. You launched a satyagrah for that cause. You deliver socialist addresses at the state Assembly. With the trumpet call of idealism you got your daughter married to a dalit” (Kanyadaan 66). These words of Arun break Mr. Nath totally. He remembers the words of Jayaprakash, “...yesterday’s victim is today’s victimizer. If he has been shot at yesterday, he shoots today. Therefore, there is no hope of a man’s gaining nobility through experience, he can only become a greater devil” (Kanyadaan 62).

In spite of his unwillingness, Nath goes to the function to save Jyoti from more misery. He praises the book publicly but Jyoti condemns her father for hypocritical speech. Jyoti accuses her father of teaching false idealism:

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 god head within is an absurd notion. You made me waste twenty years of my life before I could discover this. I had to meet a man named Arun Athavele. Arun gave me what you had withheld from me (Kanyadaan 75).

Nath suggests Jyoti to give up ideals. Jyoti has two choices; either to stay at parental house without changing identity or to live with Arun by adopting dalit identity. She shares her experience while choosing the second option, “Hard experience taught me I would always fail. Arun is both the beast and the lover. Arun is the demon, and also the poet. Both are bound together, one within the other, they are one. So closely bound that at times it is not possible to distinguish the demon from the poet” (Kanyadaan 76).

Nath tries to convince Jyoti but she criticizes her father for her teaching and reminds the poems taught by him, “‘I march with utter faith in the goal!’; ‘I grow with rising hopes’ and ‘Towards stay ashore, every wave opens a path for me’” (Kanyadaan 76). Jyoti accuses her father for making her mentally crippled with his false idealism. When

Nath asks her who will take care of her during delivery, Jyoti harshly replies:

I have my husband. I am not a widow. Even if I become one I shall not knock at your door. I am not Jyoti Yadunath Devlalikar now, I am Jyoti Arun Athavele, a scavenger. I don't say harijan. I despise the term. I am an untouchable, a scavenger. Don't touch me. Fly from my shadow, otherwise my fire will scorch your comfortable values (Kanyadaan 77).

Jyoti leaves her father's house with a firm decision never to return back and accept life as it comes. Jyoti, in the end, understands the futility of shallow ideals by becoming one with the dalits. She comes to know that it is not possible to change people.

Kanyadaan exposes the characters becoming victims of their own sham and hollow idealism, as it reveals how a father's idealism becomes a cause of misery for her own daughter. In the play Nath attempts to forget caste by his idea of liberal reforms and inter-caste marriage whereas Arun reminds Nath and others about the history of caste struggle, a struggle which is difficult for him to forget and reconcile. In the end, Nath loses Jyoti as he uses his daughter as a stepping stone to fulfil his utopian dream of casteless society. On the other side, Arun is not ready to mingle with the main stream. The genuine concern of the elite class appears to him merely hypocrisy as he cannot forget the suppression of dalits in the past by higher caste. Jyoti becomes a vehicle for her father as well as for her husband as the former uses her for implementation of the agenda of caste reformation and the later unleashes torments on her thereby takes revenge on upper caste.

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