



Dalit Consciousness vs. Bourgeois Liberalism :A Critical Reading of Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

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Abstract: *Kanyadaan* (1983) is one of the controversial plays of Vijay Tendulkar which depicts the conflict between bourgeois liberalism and dalit consciousness and the consequent catastrophic failure of idealism and inter-caste marriage. The play focuses on the inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin girl, Jyoti and a dalit boy Arun Athavale which was settled by Jyoti's father Nath Devalikar in the illusion of establishing a sentimental reconciliation between the upper caste and lower caste. Ironically the marriage proves to be a fiasco and Jyoti becomes the victim of oppressive caste system. The article argues that the tragedy of the play is not only the failure of inter-caste marriage, but also a collapse of the entire ideological, illusive attempt to obliterate the historical scars of dalit consciousness. It ruthlessly exposes the violence, hypocrisy and power politics, deep into Indian society. It criticizes the progressive reformism which tries to remove inequality.

Key Words: Bourgeois liberalism, subaltern. marginalized

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the most influential dramatists of contemporary Indian theatre who has carved a niche among other dramatists by virtue of his sincere concern with the agonies of the middle class society and his effective and bold criticism of problems and evils of Indian society. He has enriched the Marathi theatre by his twenty-eight full length plays, twenty- four one- act plays and eleven children's dramas several of which have been classics in modern Indian theatre. The prestigious awards such as the Padma Bhushan, the Vishnudas Bhave Memorial Award and the Katha Chudamani Award conferred upon him distinguished Vijay Tendulkar as one of the greatest playwrights of our times. His multifaceted personality as a dramatist, movie translator, literary essayist, political journalist and social critic has a prominent role in handling of the complex issues of his dramas. He is known both as a respectable and a controversial figure. His Marathi plays have become classics that have attracted readers all over India and abroad and inspired translation in various languages. His experience as a journalist provided him an opportunity to delve deep into the realities of Indian life. During his observation he was deeply moved by the miserable predicament of the marginalized sections of the

society, such as women and Dalits. His significant works depict the complex human relationship and the dilemma of the middle class individual trapped in the hostile conditions of model society. A survey of his works indicates the variety of themes and forms: purely naturalistic plays, stark tragedies, absurd drama, full length plays, one act plays, farces etc. Arundhati Banerjee writes,

“But it is probably only natural that his work should have such a wide ambit when one considers the multifacetedness of his creating genius.... His creativity has a prismatic quality- myriad potentials and multitude of colours seem to emanate from it.”¹

Kanyadaan(1983) is a conspicuous play of Tendulkar which earned him the Saraswati Samman aboard. It was originally written in Marathi in 1983. Subsequently, it was translated into Hindi by Vasant Dev and into English by Gowri Ramnarayan in 1996. The play was criticized for being anti-dalit and provoked a great deal of anger and protest from the audience and readers. The play tries to focus on the issue of caste conflict. On the other hand, it also points out male authority over women and the consequent suffering of woman in the patriarchal society. The play exhibits the misuse of power and violence either on the base of caste or on gender. The play is about marriage between two persons belonging to different castes and the resulting violence which exposes the fact that a reconciliation between the two different castes and the attempt to uplift a dalit community by inter-caste marriage is futile and only an illusion. Vijay Tendulkar sees the power violence syndrome in all the sections of society, whether it is the middle class or lower class or the rich class, or the educated class.

Social structure is a power-structure where every social category reflects the power relations with other in hierarchy. Caste is one of the decisive derivatives in India to measure human relations. It is something which has defined the social hierarchy based on the birth of an individual. Caste has become the most striking method of discrimination of people in India with its maligned and fabricated interpretations. Indeed, it was originated for distribution of people on the basis of their work for proper functioning of society. With passage of time Indian caste system has become rigid. A person's social position is based on the caste in which he is born. Vijay Tendulkar, a Marathi playwright and one of the founding pillars of Modern Indian Drama along with Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad, has discussed the problems of caste discrimination and general perspectives about inter-caste marriages in India in his play *Kanyadaan*. Parul Tiyaagi comments upon the play,

“The most problematic play by Vijay Tendulkar is *Kanyadaan*. The conflict between the higher caste (Savarna) and Dalits, which is still rife in many parts of India is addressed since it is a very delicate social and political issue.”²(Tiyaagi,109)

Another critic Dr Ratan Chandra Das discovers Tendulkar's vision to transform the society and his picture of caste based marginalization in the play *Kanyadaan*. He writes,

“*Kanyadaan* projects a totally different picture of our caste and class based society. Tendulkar wants to transform people's emotions by understanding the mindsets of dalits who have been tortured, tormented and discriminated against throughout history, and whose minds have grown rebellious. The playwright tries to delve into the shattered psyche of pre-independence India's dalits to discover the dalit experiences.”³(Das,p.44)

The title of the play is apt which evokes the traditional Hindu ritual of handing over daughter as a gift to the groom which ironically delineates the sacrifice of daughter for the sake of fake ideals of the upper class father. *Kanyadaan* is about marriage between two persons belonging to different castes. The dramatist has tried to show that inter-caste marriage is not the solution. The act of marriage which was meant to bring a harmony between the two different castes turned into the causeway of domestic tragedy. Nath Devalikar, an influential MLA, and a passionate socialist thinker considers the alliance between his Brahmin daughter Jyoti and the Dalit Arun Athavale as a triumphant social experiment and his ideal of egalitarian rhetoric, but the marriage rapidly descends into an abusive nightmare of domestic violence, psychological torture and emotional alienation. The tragedy of *Kanyadaan* is not merely the

tragedy about Dalit, but also a tragedy of a woman. The play is not merely about the failure of individual marriage, but it is also about the collapse of the entire ideological superstructure of upper middle class.

At the outset of the play, we come across a liberal urban upper- caste bourgeois Nath Devalikar, who is an idealist, Gandhi supporter and an active social worker. He manifests his unyielding faith in secularism, democratic institutions and bourgeois liberalism. Through his words we come to know that he is a high minded humanist influenced by European enlightenment values and Gandhian ideals. For him, social reform is governed by debates, policy papers and rhetorical commitments to the upliftment of the downtrodden. When his daughter Jyoti declares her decision to marry a dalit boy, Arun Athavale he supports the marriage. He does not pay attention to the warnings of his wife, Seva and son Jayaprakash. His wife, Seva who is also a social activist and works for the dalits, is well aware about the challenges and risks involved in the inter-caste marriage. She tries to prevent Jyoti from marrying Arun Athavale. She predicts about the linguistic, cultural and behavioural chasm between her polished urban family and Arun, but Nath , hardly, realizes the real life complexities. He reacts to Jyoti's choice positively and dismisses his family members' anxieties as caste biases. He says,

“ Up to this day, we have only talked about social change. Now it has knocked on our door. We must welcome this opportunity with open arms.”

Nath views Arun as a project, a symbolic site through which he can execute his progressive ideas. He does not view Arun as a complex human being with his own distinct individuality, anger and caste consciousness. He lives in an illusion that the age -long exploitation and oppression of dalits by the upper caste is deep seated into the minds of the dalits and cannot be dissolved through goodwill or refined manners or domestic hospitality. Nath misunderstands Arun. He thinks that by offering his daughter, Jyoti, to a dalit youth, he is trying to fill the gap of caste and hegemony. His liberalism distances him from seeing the ugliness of actual social conflict. He assumes that he is trying to integrate a marginalized person into the bourgeois structure by his refined manner, sound goodwill. The romanticized overview of the subaltern fails. He says to Seva ,

“ Later, Seva, until today , ‘Break the caste system’ was a mere slogan for us. I've attended many intercaste marriages and made speeches. But today I have broken the caste barrier in the real sense. My home has become Indian in the real sense of the term.”(p.519)

He makes Seva understand about the personality of Arun. He says, “Remember, it is we who are responsible for the age old sufferings of these people. We have betrayed them for generations. We should feel guilty about this. And now, if Jyoti breaks her word, if she wriggles out of her responsibilities, it would be a kind of treachery.”(p.527)

He thinks that the serious matter of caste oppression can be resolved through family relationship and conversation. His ideological framework is unable to remove the deep seated historical trauma in the consciousness of Arun.

On the other hand, Arun Athavale shatters the polite idealistic and liberal hospitality of the Brahminical Devalikar household. He represents the radical dalit consciousness. His consciousness rejects the Brahminical hegemony. He does not approve of the upper caste .He is aware of the invisible wall between the high caste and the low caste. He says to Jyoti, “Generation after generation, their stomachs used to the stale, stinking bread they have begged! 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?”(p.513)

“ At times a fire blazes- I want to set fire to the whole world, strangle throats, rape and kill. Drink up the blood of the beasts, your high caste society.”(p.514)

He represents the dalit consciousness aligned with the historical ethos of the Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra during 1970s and 1980s. He has deep suspicion of upper caste reformist benevolence. When he enters the room of Nath household, he does not experience relief. Rather, he is alienated by the class hostility. He doesn't feel gratitude to the domestic hospitality of Nath family. His language is coarse, assertive and deeply aggressive. He tells to Jyoti, "Your house smells of culture. It makes me choke."

Arun's autobiography describes a world of material deprivation, endurance, humiliation and physical exploitation which strip away human dignity. For him, his autobiography is not an artistic work meant for aesthetic pleasure by the elite; It is a means of survival, a weapon of resistance. But Nath reads Arun's autobiography with academic admiration. He is least concerned with the deplorable plight of the dalits.

When the dalit consciousness of Arun encounters with the bourgeois liberalism of Nath, we perceive the inherent hypocrisy. Arun's subsequent behaviour is pursuit of alcoholism. His erratic mood swing and psychological and physical abuse of Jyoti are reaction to the hypocrisy of the upper caste liberalism. Arun inflicts violence upon Jyoti because he considers Jyoti as a symbol of upper caste and he discharges his anger and frustration through her. His action and words represent the chaotic and destructive return of the historically replaced dalits.

The marriage union between the two different castes results into a failure and it exposes the failure of Nath's liberal assumptions. Nath's attempts to assimilate the subaltern by domesticating and elevating him to a refined and responsible husband proves to be a failure. Arun reacts brutally to Jyoti's attempts to bring order and middle class decorum into his private space. He beats her, insults her lineage and forces her to endure public humiliation. Seva, a pragmatic social worker, urges Jyoti to leave Arun due to his criminal behaviour. On the other hand, Nath suffers from torturous mental condition because he cannot easily accept the defeat of his philosophical and ideological reputation which he has earned from inter-caste marriage. Therefore, Nath suggests Jyoti to endure the hardship. He romanticizes domestic abuse and transforms his daughter's physical suffering into a noble sacrifice for social well being. Here, Vijay Tendulkar criticizes the bourgeois liberalism which can lead to oppression of an individual in order to protect its own ideological illusion.

The scene where Arun requests Nath to preside over a public launch of his new book of poetry and deliver a keynote of address, praising his work is remarkable in dramatic irony. Nath secretly despises the violent behaviour of Arun, but he is forced to praise Arun publicly to show his progressive ideas. In this way, Arun traps Nath in his own cage of progressive rhetoric. The moment signifies the total surrender of bourgeois liberalism to the Dalit consciousness. After the end of his speech, Nath's language loses its polished and academic tone. He refers to Arun as a scoundrel and animal. He screams that his house has been polluted and defiled.

In the conflict between bourgeois idealism and dalit consciousness, the only sufferer is Jyoti, who is offered as a gift or an object of sacrifice to the subaltern youth by her liberal father. She functions as an object of experiment for his father's liberal ideology. By the end of the play, Jyoti undergoes a transformation. She emerges as a profound and pragmatic woman. She rejects boldly her father's patronising idealism and her mother's pragmatic domesticity. She confronts her father with clarity and shatters his remaining illusions. She tells her father that his teachings were wrong and made her a misfit in dealing with the real world of our own harsh environment. Her decision to return to Arun is the result of her realization that she has crossed a historic boundary from which there is no return. She accepts the messy reality of her situation. She rejects the concept of kanyadan. She is not a gift to be taken back. In

this way, she proves to be a strong lady who chooses to live within the chaotic and violent world of Arun instead of accepting the luxury of her father's hypocritical home.

In this way, Vijay Tendulkar shows us the result of inter-caste marriages. Neither does he present a conservative argument against inter-caste marriages, nor does he prove Dalit consciousness as destructive. Rather, he exposes the limits of bourgeois liberalism. He demonstrates that upper caste privilege is inadequate to delete the scars of history. Nath's Liberalism fails because it demands a dalit to adapt to the manners and morals of the upper caste. The play also points out that individual acts of upper caste charity and domestic hospitality cannot do the social justice. Beena Agrawal appreciates Tendulkar's effective treatment of the horrors of the caste system in his play *Kanyadaan*. According to her, the dramatist has rocked the contemporary Indian theatre with the depiction of caste based marginalisation, insecurities, discontents of a dalit. She writes,

"Tendulkar used theatre to get at the root of uncompromising discontent of man that makes his survival difficult against the unhealthy and irrational practices of society. The collective impressions of childhood born out of the mechanism of oppression, constitutes the psyche of negation and rebellion. Social practices, religious faiths, family traditions, ethical commitments contribute to childhood insecurities and discontents and these discontents furnish the suitable material to Tendulkar to rock the contemporary Indian theatre with new awakening. The play *Kanyadaan* is a dramatic account of the horrors of caste system."4 (Agrawal, 182)

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