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CLASS-CULTURE CONFLICT IN *KANYADAAN*: PSEUDO-VEIN OF REVENGE AND REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

One of the most controversial plays written by Vijay Tendulkar, *Kanyadaan*, revolves around the theme of marriage between an upper caste Brahmin girl Jyoti and lower caste Dalit young man, Arun. The present paper attempts to explore the socio-cultural hypocrisy leading to idealistic defeat of the progressive thoughts in India. The play also portrays an image of misery and disillusionment on account of an unconsciousness revenge motive emerging in the name of social revolution.

Key words: Brahmin, Dalit, marriage, caste, class

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Kanyadaan (*Giving a Daughter Away*) (1983) is an emblem of idealistic upheaval of Vijay Tendulkar. The contemporary socio-cultural reality as the nucleus of the play raises some fundamental social and moral questions while portraying the intellectual illusions and idealistic defeat of the so called progressive liberal thoughts in post-independence India. Though Tendulkar won 'Saraswati Samman' he faced the raging 'chappal-throwing' for the play when it was first performed in Marathi.

Tendulkar takes an extremely sensitive socio-cultural and political issue: the conflict between upper castes and Dalits. He probes into the psyche of so called radical Dalits who use caste as a highly maneuverable device for balancing hypocrisy and self-interests. The play raises some extremely pertinent and poignant issues which ignite for an analytical reasoning about the manner, means and goals of the Dalit movement as a form of social revolution in a state of uncomfortable and psychologically bitter relationship between the

'Savarna' (upper castes) and the 'Dalit' (lower castes) classes in India.

As the title, in its basic cultural context, suggests, the play veers round the theme of 'marriage'. Indeed, it is an unconventional marriage that it brings out self-created and unforeseen complex problems. A young Brahmin girl, Jyoti--daughter of an MLA Nath Devalikar, and Seva, a busy social worker, who stand for politically and socially active class people of urban middle class progressive-minded family--decides to marry Arun Athavale, a Dalit young graduate poet-student from rural society. Jyoti puts her decision to marry Arun before her parents and her brother Jaiprakash who is an M.Sc. student. The image of class conflict becomes apparent at the very outset of the play when Nath Devalikar, an idealist who dreams of a casteless society, immediately gives his consent while his wife Seva, on account of her practical experiences of the caste-culture, foresees the apprehending misery that may befall on this marriage and forewarns her daughter:

My anxiety 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 change all this overnight is just not possible. He is different in every way. You may not be able to handle it. (*Kanyadaan*, 13)

Here Tendulkar brings out the inter-social, inter-cultural difference of the classes. They might be seen as the exploiter and the exploited. The natural reaction of anger and revenge motives of the exploited against the exploiter might come out as time serves. The ideological and socio-psychological differences which are fatal to wedlock become apparent when Joyti brings Arun home to introduce him to her family. Arun feels quite uncomfortable in a comfortable middle class Brahmin home. He says:

I feel uncomfortable in big houses...if you see my father's hut you'll understand. Ten of us, big and small, lived in that eight by ten feet. The heat of our bodies to warm us in winter. No clothes on our back, no food in our stomach, but we felt very safe. Here, these damn houses of the city people, they're like the bellies of sharks and crocodiles, each one alone in them. (*Kanyadaan*, 16)

The image of the bellies of sharks and crocodiles brings out the running resentment against the upper class in the mind of Arun. It also beams the malcontent spirit of the said class which emerges as a social rebel. The bitterness of thought is clearly visible when on request of Jyoti to accompany her to kitchen Arun bursts out "men who sit and chat in the kitchen are pansies!" (*Kanyadaan*, 17). As the play progresses, Arun becomes more and more vibrant, resentful and eloquent on the issues of untouchability. His venomous spirit becomes apparent. His words express his deep rooted hatred against Brahmins when he questions Jyoti:

Will you marry me and eat stinking bread, with spoilt *dal* in my father's hut? Without vomiting? Tell me Jyoti can you sit everyday in slum's village toilet like my mother. Can

you beg, quaking at every door, for a little grass for our buffaloes? Come on tell me! (*Kanyadaan*, 17)

Arun further expresses his bitterness by saying "And thought of marrying me: our life is not the socialist's service camp. It is hell, and I mean hell. A hell named life" (*Kanyadaan*, 18)

Tendulkar's presentation of this image in a changing social situation where a Brahmin girl is ready to break the bondages and barriers of traditional Brahminical order makes the subject convey manifold meanings—at one point it may be taken as the acceptance of the bitter reality of life of the Dalits, at the other it might, more critically, be an examination of hatred and violence against the upper classes lying in the continuing consciousness of the so called Dalits. The same flux continues when Seva enquires about Arun's education and future prospects. Arun feels nervous, bored and angry, the moment she points him towards a stable career. Arun's discourteous reply—"No problem, we shall be brewing illicit liquor" (*Kanyadaan*, 21)—shocks both Seva and Jaiprakash but in his fit of reactions Arun continues:

So I was saying this business is highly profitable. Secondly it is fun for the man and wife. Can take it easy. If there are children, there's work for them also, to wash glasses and plates, to fetch *paan* and cigarettes (*Kanyadaan*, 21)

But, in spite of Arun's rude behavior, Nath behaves very politely with him. He pacifies his wife by saying:

...Seva, until today, 'Break the caste system' was a mere slogan for us....But today I have broken the caste barriers in the real sense. My home has become Indian in the real sense of the term. I am happy today, very happy. (*Kanyadaan*, 23)

Thus, Jyoti gets moral support from her father and marries Arun but it is not a happy ending. What comes later gives an image of violence, misery and disillusionment because of an unconscious revenge motive emerging in the name of social-revolution.

Act II opens to present before the audience a Jyoti who has become tired and crushed in her married life. She works and earns while Arun spends it, often gets drunk and beats her mercilessly. When

it becomes unbearable for her, she comes back to her father's home with a determination of not to return to her husband. But her father is firm on his resolution not to break the relationship. He is not ready to give up his ideals. He says to his wife:

...Seva let not this wonderful experiment fail! This dream, which is struggling to turn real, let it not crumble in dust before our eyes! We will have to do something. We must save this marriage....This experiment is a very precious experiment. (*Kanyadaan*, 41)

Meanwhile Arun, fully drunk, comes to apologize for his maltreatment to Jyoti. His response at Seva's questioning of beating her daughter explores the specific ebb of consciousness continuing in so called Dalits regarding their behavior towards women:

Arun: 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 beating is what gets publicized....

Seva: Jyoti is not used to this kind of barbarism.

Arun: 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.

Seva: She thought you would improve after marriage.

Arun: If she thought so your Jyoti is a stupid fool. (*Kanyadaan*, 44)

The argument between Arun and Seva ceases as Nath intervenes. Jyoti, in order to save her parents from further humiliation, leaves the house with Arun. Nath exclaims—"Jyoti, I feel so proud of you. The training I gave you has not been in vain....I'd go down on my knees and pray for you...." (*Kanyadaan*, 45). This is indicative of the conflict between tradition and modernity as well as a vain of revenge and revolution in cultural context going on in Indian society.

As the play progresses Arun publishes his autobiography which is widely acknowledged and critically acclaimed in literary circles. Nath also praises it. Jyoti becomes pregnant. Seva persuades

her to come home but Jyoti refuses. Seva reports Nath how cruelly Arun beats and kicks Jyoti in spite of her being pregnant: "Such behavior towards a pregnant wife! What happens if she dies?" (*Kanyadaan*, 47) Seva cannot control her rage and cries before Nath:

The truth is that you Dalit son-in-law, who can write such a wonderful autobiography, and many love poems, wants to remain an idler. He wants his wife to work. And with her money he wants to drown himself in drink....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 his is a monumental mission he has set out to fulfill. (*Kanyadaan*, 47-48)

Seva's sense of 'returning all the kicks' of a Dalit to a Brahmin lady makes the audience question about the social revolution and changes taking place in Indian society. The audience might question—what kind of change is it? Is it a social revolution or revenge in the guised form? Nath also seems losing hope over his ideals when he says that whatever Arun has said "about injustice and exploitation is hypocrisy of the first order". (*Kanyadaan*, 49) later Jaiprakash's statement on a news item that the Jews who were once persecuted have now become merciless murders of Palestinians—"Yesterday's victim is today's victimizer"—points towards the persecution of a Brahmin lady by a Dalit youth.

The class-culture conflict rooted deeply in psyche of the so called progressive people becomes apparent when Nath refuses to speak on Arun's book. Arun blackmails his father-in-law by saying that his name is included in the list of speakers; if he does not speak, the people would say that the rise of the Dalit son-in-law to the literary heights caused jealousy in the heart of upper caste father-in-law. Finally Nath attends the occasion to speak on Arun's autobiography and appreciates the book. But Jyoti calls the speech of her father a lie. She accuses her father of making her mentally weak and invalid and finally leaves the house, never to return. The

playwright leaves the audience wondering about the future of Jyoti and her family.

Tendulkar makes a psychological analysis of the class-culture conflict and social tensions caused by the prevalent caste-system in Indian society. He has brought into light the hypocrisy of both the promoters and beneficiaries of Dalit movements. The play presents socio-psychological hurdles in the creation of casteless society. It also stands as a revolt against the established values of both the upper and lower classes of a fundamentally orthodox society.

The play presents the violence and torture to analyse the psyche of the modern man. It reveals modern man's constant involvement in aggression. To modern man violence seems an easy refuge to cope up with his own problem of being. Therefore, a Dalit husband maltreats his Brahmin wife with all his ruthlessness. To Tendulkar, violence is not something ugly and discarding because it is innate in human nature. Violence is quite fascinating and there are many variations in the way violence manifests itself through human behaviour. (Barve, 24) Tendulkar believes that violence is a basic quality and he not only presents it in his plays but defends it too. In *Kanyadaan* the Dalit young man's torturous treatment of his Brahmin wife is a manifestation of innate human violence.

Kanyadaan, like other plays of Tendulkar, brings into light the class-culture conflict by showing the exploitation and oppression of woman in every form in a patriarchal India society. It clearly shows that the position of women in India is in no way better than the so called Dalits who have been humiliated, exploited and oppressed by the upper class Hindus for ages.

Tendulkar, like early 20th century English playwrights—Shaw, Galsworthy, and Harley Granville-Barker—has put forth the social problems before us without suggesting any clear-cut remedies. He feels that human situation is so complex that we can hardly suggest any viable solutions. (M.S.Babu, 151) He admitted in an interview with *The Indian Express*, "I try to take my audience with me in this exploration. At its best, it can provide insights into the great jigsaw puzzle of

human existence and enrich your understanding of life around you." He just presented the problems and left the solution to be found out by the society itself. In *Kanyadaan* Tendulkar's foremost concern is to provide eye-opener for the society by raising certain class cultural issues which continue to evade readymade solutions.

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