
Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadan*: A Dalit Perspective

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The play is finely layered ... the exploration of a social terrain that is a minefield atop an unstable ammunition dump. ... Gowri Ramnarayana's translation is extremely competent.

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary Indian drama in English translation has made bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuositities. It has been increasingly turning to history, listened, myth and folklore, tapping their springs of vitality and vocal cords of popularity with splendid results. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sarkar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada respectively but also on the Pan-Indian level. Leading the vanguard of the avant-garde Marathi theatre, Vijay Tendulkar symbolises the new awareness and attempts of Indian Dramatists of the last quarter of the century to depict the agonies, suffocations and cries of man, focusing on the middle class society. In all his plays he harps upon the theme of isolation of the individual and his confrontation with the hostile surroundings. Each of the plays of Vijay Tendulkar reflects contemporary Indian society, its problems, and its challenges. Most of his plays deal with the issues of the white-collar middle class people. They give the audience a new awareness of truth which is difficult to encounter. In his deft handling of the complex and varied issues one can clearly notice his keen observation of life. Kanyadan is a complex play about the cultural and emotional upheavals of a family. It deals with the violence in the subconscious of a Dalit poet who is married to the daughter of an inexperienced and young socialist. Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal was branded as an anti-Brahmin play and his Kanyadan as an anti-Dalit play. It is one of the most controversial plays. It actually tries to show how our romantic idealism fails. Nath, an idealist, encourages Jyoti, his daughter in her decision to marry Arun, a Dalit poet. Seva, her mother, and Jayaprakash, her brother discourage Jyoti in this and advise her not be hasty in taking her decision. In their hurry to pursue their ideal, Nath and Jyoti willingly remain blind to the harsh reality. Arun cannot follow the ideals that he expresses in his poetry and does not change his ways. Jyoti has got a job and becomes a bread-winner while Arun becomes a drunkard and beats his wife. A sequence of violence, misery and disillusionment follow. Returning is not possible for Jyoti. Her father has taught her all through her life that is cowardly to bow down to circumstances. The play is open ended and hence, the audience is left to ponder over what happens to Jyoti's prospects of married life and the father's idealistic fervour in the days to come. Nath realises the price of his foolishness being paid by his beloved daughter and feels guilty. Vijay Tendulkar presents the real situation where Nath is as much responsible for Jyoti's misery as Arun. Their disharmony is due to gender and social inequalities that have survived several reformist movements owing to their invisible resilience. The play is, despite its being based on actual life, appears to be

Tendulkar's comment on Indian society, particularly on the conflict between the upper and the lower class people.

Vijay Tendulkar's plays present a fine blend of fact and fiction rather more appropriately he brushes reality in sharp colours that it becomes biting through an equally powerful dramatic persona. Tendulkar chose themes, created characters and situations which filled his plays with the vivacity of present-day life. The material for his plays comes from his own observations of life, from newspaper reports or incidents narrated to him which he customised and tailored to fit his requirements as many dramatists do. Tendulkar's *Kanyadan* was written in Marathi in 1983. It was subsequently translated into Hindi by Vasant Dev, into English by Gowri Ramnarayan in 1996 from Oxford University Publications, Delhi. Ramnarayan says:

*I was interested in taking **Kanyadan** to different audience- not even readers. I thought it would be good to have an English text which can be used by theatre groups'*¹

Tendulkar's plays revolve around the themes of love, sex and violence. The play *Kanaydan* is based on a Marathi play. The translation of the play into English and Bengali has not escaped aesthetic and political compulsions. The play is perhaps supposed to be based on the life of a Dalit poet Namdev Dhasal. It is criticised as anti-Dalit and has provoked a great deal of anger and protests. *Kanyadan* deals with the conflict between the ideal and the real through the delineation of a daughter's sacrifice in pursuing her father's ideals. Jyoti, a young woman, hails from a politically and socially active family. She is the daughter of a socialist politician, Nath Devalalakar. Jyoti marries a young Dalit-poet, Arun Athavale, with her father's approval and encouragement. Her marriage brings in its wake complex problems, self created and unforeseen. Arundhati Banerjee says:

*The greatest quality which Tendulkar can claim as a creative writer and dramatist is an ability to simultaneously involve and distance himself from his creation. This endows his works with infinite subtlety. None of his creations are ever simplistic-like his genius they too have the same prismatic quality of giving forth new meanings, as one turns around in the light of one's comprehension.*²

Jyoti's parents and her family members are socialists and have worked for the people of lower strata for a long time. They are very sincere in their social commitments. However, they differ in their views, opinions and approaches. Seva, the mother of Jyoti works for the Dalits with a determined and conscious mind. She is well aware of the real problems and the risk involved and so she objects to Jyoti's decision of marrying a Dalit boy. She tries her best to prevent Jyoti from marrying Arun Athavale, a Dalit boy. But Jyoti, with her father's support marries Arun and later on faces the evil consequences of her decision as feared by her mother. She follows the dictates of her sentimental father and ignores the forewarnings of her cautious mother and invites serious threats to her married life. She loves Arun who she meets at the socialist study group. A mother's heart and eyes intuitively apprehend the misery that may follow this marriage and she forewarns Jyoti about it. When her intention is misunderstood, Seva clarifies herself to Jyoti:

Seva [To Jyoti.] 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 to change all this overnight is just not possible. He is different in every way. You may not be able to handle it. (Act I, scene I, p. 13)

But Jyoti tries to allay her mother's fears by telling her that she will manage. Talking about the reaction to his *Kanyadan*, Vijay Tendulkar says:

*You are honouring me with the Saraswati Samman today for a play for which I once had a slipper hurled at me. Perhaps it is the fate of the play to have earned both this honour and that insult. As its creator, I respect both verdicts.*³

Seva, Jyoti's mother and Jayaprakash, her brother discourage Jyoti in this and advise her not to be hasty in taking her decision. The final decision is postponed till they all see Arun and talk to him. Arun makes it very clear that he will bear with his wife and shows Jyoti how he is capable of beating his wife twisting her hand. He tells Seva and later Jayaprakash that Jyoti has to help him in brewing and selling liquor. In spite of all this Jyoti decides to marry Arun and Nath supports her. Arun cannot follow the ideals that he expresses in his poetry and does not change his ways. Jyoti does a job and earns their living while Arun drinks and beats his wife. When Arun comes to Jyoti's house she is alone. The feelings of inferiority that he has acquired in the Dalit environment imposed by our hierarchized society, surface in his mind and make him uncomfortable in this Brahmin's house. So he requests Jyoti to be with him when she is about to go into the kitchen to make tea for him. Their conversation makes it clear that Arun has unkind feelings towards Jyoti:

ARUN: 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 Brahmin's ears.

JYOTI: Arun . . .

ARUN: 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?

JYOTI: Arun . . .

ARUN: Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt dal in my father's hut? Without vomiting? Tell me, Jyoti, can you shit everyday in our slum's village toilet like my mother? Can you beg, quacking at every door, for a little grass for our buffaloes? Come on, tell me!

[Jyoti covers her face with her hands.]

ARUN: And you thought of marrying me. Our life is not the Socialists' service camp. It is hell, and I mean hell. A hell named life.

[*Jyoti is weeping.*] (Act I, Scene II, pp. 17-18).

Arun says that he can earn good money by brewing illicit liquor. When Jayaprakash comes, Arun repeats this to make him feel awkward:

ARUN [To Jayaprakash.] I was telling her about this matter of brewing illicit liquor. [With determined obstinacy.] So I was saying that 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. And very good income in the tips. Many hands to work, and so many chances to rake in money. [Arun is happy now seeing Seva's unrest].

[*Jayaprakash tense. Jyoti enters. It doesn't take her long to guess at the state of things.*] (Act I, Scene II, p. 21)

Jyoti vainly tries to alleviate the situation by saying that Arun is joking. She adds that she knows everything about him. Nath praises Arun and expresses his great joy over realising his ideal of breaking the caste barriers through the marriage of Jyoti and Arun. When Arun leaves Seva and Jayaprakash complains about Arun's rude behaviour. But Nath ignores their accusation and justifies Jyoti's decision to marry Arun. Nath says:

NATH: I am on Jyoti's side. It is perfectly natural that the boy should have rough edges; they are the product of the circumstances he has endured. In fact it would be surprising if these peculiarities didn't exist. But just because he has them, it doesn't mean he's a bad fellow. He may not be a gentleman, but neither is he a scoundrel. As a human being he has potential. He has intelligence, drive and creativity. He has come so far despite his circumstances: this is not an easy matter. It is the result of his effort and dedication. You cannot imagine at what cost these people have made the little progress that they have. 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? Of course it is difficult, but it needs to be done. Besides, she has given her word. 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. It would amount to running away from the challenge. As a father I would feel ashamed if my daughter were to run away . . . [Walks towards Jyoti and touches her gently.] I am with you, Jyoti. What you are doing could be both wise and foolish. But one thing is certain. It upholds the norms of civilised humanity, and therefore, I stand by you. Go ahead my child, let us see what happens. (Act I, Scene II, pp. 30-31)

Jyoti gets her father's approval and moral support and marries Arun. She exhibits total apathy or indifference to her mother's and her brother's rational arguments and blindly follows her father's path of idealism. Father-daughter relationship in the play reveal how idealism manifests in freedom of thought and action becomes the cause of misery. The play depicts the want of harmony in the inter-caste marriage of a Brahmin girl and a Dalit boy, who, with his brutal and inhuman ways of loving, sets his wife on torture. Jyoti works and earns while Arun spends it. He often gets drunk and beats her mercilessly. When she cannot bear it any longer, she comes to her

parents' house. Tendulkar has portrayed the women subordination and male chauvinism in a male-dominated society. Women are not consulted in decision making and are often forced to remain indoors and are subjected to domestic violence and abuse, physical and psychological repression. Gradually the artificial and polished behaviour vanishes and Arun in a very straight forward manner starts revealing to Jyoti the harshness and ugliness of his life in the most repulsive manner. The real man in him comes out and feels challenged when Jyoti discounts his statement that he will beat his wife, he twists her arm and she feels more shocked than hurt. Circumstances have made Jyoti totally crushed and tired within a few months of her married life. When she cannot bear it any longer, she comes home with a determination never to return to him. Nath attributes Arun's cruelty to his despair due to their lack of residence. So he offers a room in his house for Arun and Jyoti. But Jyoti was fed up with her husband. When her father proposed to call Arun to stay with them she says:

JYOTI: [Agitated.] He . . . he will not enter this house. Because . . . [With great effort.] I have left him . . . I am not going back to him again . . . never.

[Everyone stunned.] (Act II, Scene I, p. 39)

Jyoti now realises that she was wrong with her decision to marry Arun. She now confronts the reality, her aspirations rot in the dirt and ugliness of Arun's life. But Nath does not give up his ideal:

NATH: [With passion.] Seva, let not this wonderful experiment fail! This dream which is struggling to turn real, let it not crumble into dust before our eyes! We will have to do something. We must save this marriage. Not necessarily for our Jyoti's sake . . . This is not just a question of our daughter's life, Seva, this has . . . a far wider significance . . . this experiment is a very precious experiment. (Act II, Scene I, p. 41)

Arun apologises for his cruelty but Seva is not happy with this. There is angry wordy duel between Seva and Arun around his cruel treatment:

SEVA: This is no answer to my question. WHY DO YOU BEAT JYOTI?

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 the beating is what gets publicized . . .

SEVA: Drunk or sober, wife-beating is called barbarism.

ARUN: I am a barbarian, a barbarian by birth. When have I claimed any white collar culture?

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. (Act II, Scene I, p. 44)

Nath cannot comprehend Arun's split personality. Seva cannot control herself any longer and bursts before Nath:

SEVA: If you can express your opinion, I too must have the right to say what I want. You can't stop me. You think that I sound idiotic, but these are my views. Not the views of someone who sits at home, but of someone who has gone out and worked for the downtrodden all her life. 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 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 kick as 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. (Act II, Scene II, pp. 47-48)

Kanyadan deals with human nature. Of course, the characteristic of human nature Tendulkar explores is in the Indian context. Lilette Dubey observes:

*I picked up a much performed play because it moved me to the core . . . It is ultimately about the layers of human relationships more than the social issues. It was a tale both universal and contemporary.*⁴

The play is charged with significant social and moral questions, which have no easy answers. It is also laced with a gentle humour, charged with an undercurrent of violence, uncertainties and anger, and concerns itself with questions that are crucial to all societies grappling with charge and social barriers. In spite of these multiple layers of issues, the play deals with most of the spectators. It is the clash of cultures that has become an important aspect to divide the play's reception. The characters of Nath and Arun are in contrast. Arun's brutal treatment to Jyoti renders Nath helpless and somewhat pitiable. On knowing what kind of problems of married life are facing his daughter, he jumps to the conclusion that nothing is real about Arun, his book, and his values. Still he chairs the felicitation function and showers praise on him in his speech in the hope that his blatant lying, his false praise, will perhaps make his daughter's life a little more tolerable. Consciousness of Jyoti's suffering does not make him change his views. He has paid a huge of price. Arun has developed the sense of inferiority because of his Dalit background and environment. He is so in his life because there is something barbaric in his veins. Throughout his life, he has seen his father coming home over drunk and beating his mother half-dead. The incident is carved on his heart permanently. So even now he often happens to hear the echoes of her broken sobs. Nobody was there to console her crying heart and wipe her tears. Jyoti has the same experience after her marriage. She notices a savage beast in his eyes, his lips, face and cannot isolate this bestiality from his personality. He is at once the beast and the lover, the demon and the poet. Arun is so angry with the world that he wants to set it on fire, to strangle the people, to rape, to kill them and to drink their blood. The violence projected in the play has three dimensions: physical, psychological and verbal. Psychological and physical violence are noticed in Arun's cruel inhuman treatment to Jyoti, which is also his way of overcoming his inferiority

complex. Verbal violence can be seen in Arun's abusive, obscene language. Arun comes along with his two friends and requests Nath to talk about his book in the meeting. When Nath politely refuses, he blackmails him by saying that as his name is included in the list of speakers, the people will say, says Arun:

ARUN: These people will certainly give suitable explanations. [Winking at Vamanseth.] 'Due to unavoidable circumstances, Nath saheb could not', etc., etc. But nowadays people have become very smart. They read too much into such situations. They make one plus one add up to eleven. They will say that father-in-law and son-in-law don't see eye to eye; that I regularly torture your daughter, and more nonsense along those lines . . . Vamanseth, don't you think so? [Vamanseth nods.] What's to stop people from saying that I got your daughter thrown out of her house? Other gossip will have it that the rise of the son-in-law could not be endured by the father-in-law. The rise of the Dalit son-in-law to literary heights caused heartburn in the upper caste, socialist father-in-law. (Act. II, Scene. II, p. 55)

Seva advises him to concede Arun's request because she fears:

SEVA: First listen to me, then do what you like. Look, we are badly trapped. If we go against his wishes, it will mean more suffering to Jyoti. He will take it out on Jyoti. [Nath wants to say something; she stops him.] Wait, let me finish. 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 Jyoti . . . [She cannot speak further.] Therefore, you will have to go. You will have to preside over the function. You will have to praise the book, because that is the only opinion left to us.

[Nath tries to speak but cannot.] (Act. II, Scene. II, pp. 57-58)

Tendulkar presents the real situation where Nath is as much responsible for Jyoti's misery as Arun. Their mental disharmony is due to gender and social inequalities that has survived several reformist movements owing to their invisible resilience. Finally Jyoti accuses her father of making her mentally crippled:

JYOTI: You think about it, I have to stop thinking and learn to live. I think a lot. Suffer a lot. Not from the blows, but from my thoughts, I can't bear them much longer . . . forgive me, Bhai, I said things I shouldn't have. But I couldn't help it. I was deeply offended by your hypocrisy. I thought: why did this man have to inject and drug us every day with truth and goodness? And if he can get away from it at will, what right had he to close all our opinions? I haven't been able to forget an image I saw years ago on my way to school. A man opened the lids of two baskets slung upon the pole he carried. On his shoulder. And from them, two shaking, swaying, staggering creatures slipped out, human in appearance, their wrinkled skin covering twisted bodies. Someone said these people kidnap little children, break their limbs and make them cripples. Bhai, forgive me for my words, but you have made us . . . [She cannot go on.] (Act. II, Scene. III, pp. 69-70)

She tells Nath, her father, how he has made her mentally crippled and how Arun is better than he. She, then, orders everybody not to visit her house and leaves. Jyoti becomes mindless and surrenders to the situation. Her role prevents her from perceiving the reality. Nath is as good as Ghashiram in making his daughter as scapegoat in his experiment. The play presents the real situation in the society and it is neither anti-Dalit nor anti-Brahmin. The play ends with Jyoti's speech at the time of her departure:

JYOTI: [Harshly.] 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 Athavale, a scavenger. I don't say harijan. I despise the term. 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. (Act. II, Scene. III, p. 70)

Tendulkar has written about his own experiences and about what he has seen in others around him. The play demonstrates how the ideal people devoid of realistic vision, not only fail to achieve their cherished aim but also create new problems. Moreover, the children of these ideal people often become victims of their experiments with their ideals. It can also be seen in the play how their ideals cripple their mind, their thinking and their perception of reality.

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- iv Vijay Tendulkar, "Afterword", *Kanyadan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 71.
- v From an interview on Lilette Dubey, *Deccan Herald*, Metro Life, Aug, 6, 2007.