

## Tragedy of an Idealistic Father in Vijay Tendulkar's Play Kanyadaan

Dr. Harish G. Tapadia

Asst. Professor of English

V. N. Govt. Institute of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur.

HHH

### Abstract

*Vijay Tendulkar is one of the leading Indian English dramatists. Kanyadaan (1983), one of his finest plays, deals with the tragic after-effects on the lives of an idealistic family which allows the daughter to get into an inter-caste marriage. Nath, an upper caste politician, envisions the creation of an egalitarian, humanitarian society where human beings are treated as human beings and not as animals. So, his daughter Jyoti's marriage with Arun, a Dalit, is a step taken towards the fulfillment of Nath's dream. The hollowness of his idealism dawns on Nath when he finds that getting name, fame and position in society does not alter Arun's cruel behaviour towards Jyoti. The play depicts the miserable failure of Nath's idealism. In his over-enthusiasm for a liberal outlook, he ends up failing in his duties as a father.*

**Keywords:** Vijay Tendulkar, Kanyadaan, inter-caste marriage, Dalit, Jyoti

Vijay Tendulkar's play 'Kanyadaan' (The Gift of a Daughter) has been translated into English by Gowri Ramnarayan. It depicts the tragedy of an idealistic father and daughter duo, Nath Devlalikar and Jyoti. Nath, a humanistic and liberal politician, encourages his daughter Jyoti's marriage with Arun Athawale, a Dalit poet and writer. Jyoti is unable to lead a happy domestic life with Arun. This inter-caste marriage fails to work due to the social tensions caused by casteism. This play concerns itself with questions that are crucial to all societies grappling with change and social barriers. The playwright actually felt disturbed and confused when this play was selected for the Saraswati Samman. According to Tendulkar, Kanyadaan "is not the story of a victory; it is the admission of defeat and intellectual confusion. It gives expression to a deep-rooted malaise and its pains." (Tendulkar 598)

Nath is a member of the State Legislative Council. His wife, Seva, is also actively involved in politics. The couple is so busy that they hardly have any time to give to their children, Jayaprakash and Jyoti. Jyoti, aged about 20, is an obedient and dutiful daughter. She has imbibed all the ideals and principles of her visionary father and is determined to embark on a path of truth and goodness as

shown by him in her life. Nath, a seasoned and principled politician, is a socialist. He believes in the dictum: Hate the sin, not the sinner. He is fully committed to uprooting casteism and caste distinctions from society. His wife Seva also shares his concerns. Her approach towards life, however, is practical as against her husband's idealistic and liberal attitude.

At the beginning of the play, we are given a vivid picture of the everyday life of Devlalikar family. Nath and Seva are always busy in travelling from one place to another in connection with their political activities. Jyoti and Jay try to help them as much as possible. It is only on rare occasions that the whole family is able to sit together. Jyoti has to almost take an appointment from Nath and Seva when she wants to tell them together something important. She says that she has decided to get married to Arun Athawale, a Dalit poet and writer. Nath and Seva react differently to the information about Arun's background. Seva expresses her apprehensions due to Arun's not having a secure job and the vast cultural difference between them. Nath, on the other hand, is overjoyed to hear that his daughter wants to marry a Dalit youth. Nath says: "But if my daughter had decided to marry into high caste, it wouldn't have pleased me as much..." (Tendulkar 504) All his life he has been crying hoarse for destroying the caste distinctions in our society. Now he has actually got a chance to do something concrete in that direction. It appears as if he thinks of Jyoti's decision from only an idealist's point of view. As Jyoti's father he should have considered the prospects of her happiness after this marriage. Jyoti makes it clear that she has not fallen in love with Arun. They had met in the socialists' study group. She was impressed by his poetry and felt that she "could do anything to make him happy." Arun once asked her whether the very idea of marrying a Dalit youth like him is dreadful to her. She replied in the negative. Probably incredulous, he suggested that they should get married in that case. Jyoti accepted it. Now she herself appears to be in two minds though she has no intention of going back on her words. Seva's sane suggestions that there is no compatibility in Arun and Jyoti's lifestyles and she may not be able to handle the relationship with a person culturally different from her,

fall on deaf ears. Nath, in his over-enthusiasm to break caste barriers, supports Jyoti whole-heartedly. Traditionally a father performs the Kanyadaan i.e., the giving of the gift of a daughter to a suitable boy only when he is certain that his daughter will lead a happy life after the marriage. Here, however, Jyoti's marriage, for Nath, becomes a kind of experiment to bridge the gap between various sections of our society. He does not for a moment think that he is making a guinea pig of his daughter in this difficult experi

Jyoti brings Arun to her house to introduce him to her family. Arun is restless at finding himself in an upper-class atmosphere. The memories of the difficult wandering life and the hardships of his ancestors flood his mind. He wants to know whether Jyoti will be able to adjust to his lifestyle. He says: "Will you marry me and eat stinking bread with spoilt dal in my father's hut? Without vomiting?" (Tendulkar 513) It is clear that there is a great deal of pent-up anger in Arun's mind about the atrocities committed on Dalits by the upper caste people in the past. Jyoti innocently tries to make a little fun of him and gets her arm twisted by him in return. This does not go well with Seva who watches this incident having just returned from outside. She enquires about Arun's future plans. She hints at the difficult challenges he will have to face in career as well as life. Arun feels piqued. He declares that after marriage they will brew illicit liquor and earn a lot of money. When Jyoti tries to save the situation, he abruptly asks her to shut up. Now Nath enters and behaves very cordially towards Arun. After Arun has left, Seva and Jay express their displeasure at Arun's rude behaviour. Nath tries to justify Arun's rudeness by pointing to his upbringing in a hostile environment. He alludes to the old social reformers who not only advocated widow remarriage but themselves married widows. He exhorts his family members to change their outlook. On being questioned about her impression about Arun, Jyoti replies that he is a complex person. She is hopeful of understanding Arun and adjusting with him. Nath also feels that upper caste girls like Jyoti can polish off the rough edges in the personalities of Dalit youths like Arun. He burdens Jyoti with the responsibility of bringing out the true potential in Arun. Maya Pandit writes that Nath "puts the entire onus of bringing about the transformation in society on Jyoti." (Pandit 71) This implies that it is a path of no return for her.

Now the action of the play shifts to some months later. We find that Arun and Jyoti have got married. But Jyoti still lives with her parents, as Arun has not been able to procure an accommodation for them. Sometimes Arun takes Jyoti out and they spend the night at the residence

of someone of Arun's acquaintance. No one is happy. Nath keeps brooding all the time. Seva suggests to him that they should never have allowed this marriage to take place. Arun sometimes gets drunk and even beats Jyoti. Nath thinks of allowing Arun to live in the house along with Jyoti. He is surprised when Jyoti tells him that she is fed up with Arun's rude behavior and has decided not to live with him anymore. Nath still thinks of this marriage as a significant social experiment. So, he desperately wants this marriage to work. Nath says: "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." (Tendulkar 537) Arun arrives in a drunken state. He asks for forgiveness from Jyoti. He even pretends to punish himself by cutting off his hands with which he had beaten Jyoti. He justifies his violent behaviour by saying that he has grown up watching his mother get beaten by his drunk father every day. He claims that he is a barbarian and cannot give any guarantee of good behaviour in future. Jyoti realises that she will have to solve this problem herself as she has married Arun of her own free will. So, she decides to live with Arun. Nath feels proud of his daughter's courage in trying to face this problem squarely. However, he also realizes the abundance of the hardships that may be there in store for her. N.S. Dharan aptly comments that Nath is besieged by unknown fears regarding Jyoti's future. (Dharan 92)

Once again, the action of the play shifts to some months later. Jyoti and Arun are living in a dirty room in a slum. Arun is not doing any job, so the responsibility of earning has fallen on Jyoti's shoulders. Moreover, she is in the sixth month of pregnancy. Arun still tortures and beats her. Recently he has kicked her in the belly, which has resulted in her getting an internal wound. One is left aghast at this cruel and inhuman treatment meted out to Jyoti by Arun. In the meanwhile, Arun's autobiography gets published and wins accolades. Nath is impressed by Arun's depiction of his humiliating experiences in life in his autobiography. When he comes to know about Jyoti's physical torture at the hands of Arun, he is extremely perplexed. He just cannot apprehend how a person who gives a sensitive literary portrayal of his hardships can cause sufferings to his wife. Seva sees through Arun's behaviour quite clearly. She says that Arun is taking out his anger against the high caste people on his wife who also belongs to that class. She says: "I will say that in this excellent book, whatever the author has said about injustice and exploitation is hypocrisy of the first order. Because this man himself exploits my daughter." (Tendulkar 545). Here Arun comes out as a great hypocrite who talks about his own exploitation in his book, but

himself becomes an exploiter of his upper caste wife. According to Dr. Tamilselvi Kanakiah, Arun's ill treatment of Jyoti is an instance of a Dalit avenging the sufferings of his community for ages together. (Kanakiah 247) He also accuses Jyoti's parents of false and dirty crimes. Nath is quite troubled to hear all this. However, he stops Jayaprakash from abusing Arun.

Arun enters in the company of Hammeer Rao Kamle and Vamanseth Nevrgaonkar, two Dalit litterateurs. He requests Nath to preside over a function in which his autobiography is to be discussed. When Nath refuses to accept this proposal, Arun says that Nath's name has already been announced in this regard. The organisers had taken his consent for granted. Arun tries to blackmail Nath by saying that people will accuse that the upper caste father-in-law could not digest the literary success of his Dalit son-in-law if he refused to attend this function. Nath refuses to bow down to such blackmailing. After Arun leaves, Nath is unable to control his fury at Arun's unscrupulous tactics. He starts calling Arun names whereas he himself had stopped Jayaprakash from doing that a little while earlier. Seva, however, thinks calmly about this situation. She then suggests to Nath to accept Arun's wish so that Jyoti's further torture may be prevented. Nath also realises it. He feels completely helpless and decides to go to the function.

After Nath's return from the function, Jayaprakash praises the speech that he gave about Arun's autobiography. But Nath who is looking dispirited and weary disagrees with him. Nath knows inside his heart that he has given an insincere and hypocritical speech. He has praised Arun only with a view of saving troubles for his daughter at the hands of Arun. To complicate the matters Jyoti too comes to the function and listens to his speech. She has been the most severe critic of his speeches right from her childhood. The expression on her face makes it clear to Nath that she has seen through the hollowness of his speech. Now Jyoti arrives and questions Nath about his intentions behind making an insincere speech. She cannot tolerate falsehood in her father who has taught her to follow the path of truth. Nath, at first, tries to defend his behaviour by stating that he has really liked Arun's book. Jyoti accuses him of trying to dodge the issue. She had learnt from Nath that the beastliness in man can be subdued and the goodness in him can be aroused. Her experiences of life have taught her otherwise. She has realised that Arun is both the beast and the lover, inseparable and incurable. Believing in and following her father's principles have closed all her options in life. She minces no words in telling her father that she was deeply offended by his hypocrisy. She could perceive Nath's intense hatred for Arun hidden behind

his hypocritical praise of him. But Jyoti refuses to budge from the path, which Nath has shown her though he himself has got away from that path. She is determined to accept Arun as he is. Finally, Nath gives up all his idealism seeing the suffering it has brought for his daughter. He suggests Jyoti to leave Arun as she has her father to support her. Jyoti angrily charges him of having made her a guinea pig in his experiment to transform the society. Forbidding Nath and Seva from even coming to her house, she leaves, obviously, never to return

According to Shailaja Wadilkar, Nath envisions the creation of "an egalitarian, humanitarian society where human beings are treated as human beings and not as animals." (Wadikar 99) So, Jyoti's marriage with Arun, for Nath, is a step taken towards the fulfillment of this dream. The hollowness of his idealism dawns on Nath when he finds that getting name, fame and position in society does not alter Arun's cruel behavior towards Jyoti. On one hand he gives a poignant expression to his painful experiences in his autobiography, on the other hand, he kicks Jyoti in the stomach though she is in the sixth month of pregnancy. This event shakes Nath's conviction that earth can be turned into heaven by destroying the propensities towards evil that exist in man. His firm belief that 'no man is fundamentally evil' is shaken. Nath blames himself:

"I had this maniacal urge to uproot casteism and caste distinctions from our society. As a result, I pushed my own daughter into a sea of misery..." (Tendulkar 557). N.S. Dharan rightly states that Nath the idealist, in the end, turns into a disillusioned realist due to the bitter experiences of life and Jyoti, from a soft spoken, highly cultured Brahmin girl, transforms into a hardened Dalit girl. (Dharan 88)

Thus, the play *Kanyadaan* depicts the miserable failure of Nath's romantic idealism. In his over-enthusiasm for a liberal outlook, he ends up failing in his duties as a father. One cannot help having the feeling that Jyoti's miseries could have been avoided had Nath considered the pros and cons of her marriage to Arun a little more rationally. Casteism and the conflict between the upper caste people and Dalits has been a burning social problem in India. *Kanyadaan* depicts a family's attempt to cure this social deformity and its disastrous consequences. The play deals with the problems in the way of creating a casteless society and brings out the ambivalence inherent in the words and deeds of both the promoters and the beneficiaries of Dalit upliftment programmes. Tendulkar appears to be suggesting that an inter-caste marriage is not a child's play. He warns about the risks involved in it if appropriate care is not taken.

Works Cited

- 1 Dharan. N.S. *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*. Delhi: Creative Books, 1999.
  - 2 Kanakiah, Dr. Tamilselvi. *Critical Responses to Indian Writing in English*, ed. K. Balachandran. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004.
  - 3 Pandit, Maya. "Representation of Family in Modern Marathi Plays: Tendulkar, Dalvi and Elkunchwar." *Vijay Tendulkar's Plays An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, ed. V. M. Madge New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007, pp. 71.
  - 4 Tendulkar, Vijay. *Collected Plays in Translation*. New Delhi: OUP, 2003.
  - 5 Wadikar, Shailaja B. "The Theme of Casteism in Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan." *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar Critical Explorations*, eds. Amar Nath Prasad, Satish Barbuddhe. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2008, pp. 99.
-