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## Critiquing the Discourse of Gender and Caste in Vijay Tendulkar's Plays

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***Abstract:** Vijay Tendulkar is one of the finest playwrights in Indian theatre. His plays express his deep concern for society. He deals with the themes that genuinely interested him and were vital, i.e. the several social problems the Indian society was beset with. He prods us to think by portraying these problems in a frank and objective manner. Instead of aiming at making the audiences laugh or weep, he aims at forcing them to think. He has expressed his vision of the rottenness in contemporary society with an unflinching realism. He speaks clearly, while portraying the stark reality as it is. He has shown a mirror to the society while expressing his heart-felt feelings and sincere reactions to the contemporary situation. Tendulkar's socially and politically significant plays revolutionised the Marathi drama, which was trapped in a melodramatic mode. He forced the reader-audience to confront the brutal realities of life through his portrayal of society and human life with all its ugliness and crudity. A thematic study of Tendulkar's plays brings to light the fact that he made the reader-audience face the brutal realities of life through his portrayal of its harsh realities.*

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), a versatile genius, an author of a number of short stories, books for children, screenplays, essays and novels, is widely acclaimed as one of the leading modern Indian dramatists like Girish Karnard, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Asif Currimbhoy and Mahesh Dattani. He has come to be regarded as one of the most revolutionary and controversial playwrights whose works have generated endless debates and discussions about his themes and style, his views and vision of life.

It is a fact that since the late 1960s the Indian middle class whatever its sociological reality has become one of the main mediums through which a series of contemporary concerns can be analyzed. In most of Tendulkar's plays, we find a close representation of the middle class psyche of post-colonial India. As a social observer and social activist Tendulkar has declared:

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 cannot do it, I have to speak the truth. (Tendulkar 5)

Tendulkar, through his study of the middle class psyche for the first time becomes a voice for the women of the middle class. In most of his plays, he tries to analyze the institution of marriage and the condition of women within it. This is the outcome of characters like Jyoti,

Kamala, Sarita, Laxmi or even Champa. In spite of realizing their plight they finally surrender themselves to social customs. Any woman, like Benare, Manik or perhaps even Mitra, who by their own courage dare to break through such social customs and exercise their own will become victims of the patriarchal society and are cornered, suppressed and in most cases are left totally shattered. This helpless condition of middle class women had always been and continues to be true. This condition is so naturalized that enduring violence has now almost become a part of womanhood itself. As a realist, he did not sketch his women figures rebelling against their condition. Rather he portrayed their actual condition perhaps to make his audience realize and feel for women and their situation within the patriarchal society. As a proto-feminist, he created awareness and prepared the ground for contemporary feminists to bring some hope for Indian women.

It is therefore clear that through his explorations Tendulkar has confronted the problems of his time and accepted the challenges of his subject material by becoming a “new voice” not only in the theatre world but also in the society he belonged to in general. The theatre during his time was mainly meant for Indian ‘gentlemen’ with conservative attitudes the *bhadralok* (well-mannered person), so to say. So the real depiction of their spicy lives naturally resulted in severe controversies. But now, with the advent of critical examination in philosophy, social history and other related fields, the intelligentsia has become more open to candid and honest appreciation and critiques of life. Hence in the twenty-first century, the honesty in Tendulkar’s works better appreciated.

Vijay Tendulkar always came across controversies. The subjects of his dramas, his interviews and the circumstances made him controversial. Some people accused him that he knows the pulse of media and publicity and for the sake of the success of his plays, he involves in controversy. Tendulkar never scared to express his thoughts in public. He talks on the death sentence, he talks on Godhara riots; he talks on Narmada dam, and his statements always make underground eruption in society. He became one of the most virulent and radical political voices in India, providing his scathing insight and viewpoint on every social event and political upheaval. Here he depicts the social problems such as gender discrimination in *Silence! The Court is in Session* and caste conflict in *Kanyadaan*. Arundhati Banerjee appropriately comments:

Tendulkar is both a venerated as well as controversial figure in the country’s theatre scene. Most of his plays derive inspiration from real-life incidents or societal upheavals. The political, social, economical cultural power structures of caste, class, gender and religious domination were his main areas of exploration. In his plays, there is a perfect blending of structure, style and dramatic purpose in the real sense. In other words, he has not used structure and style for the gimmicks but he has wedded it to enhance the effectiveness of dramatic purpose. Tendulkar asserts that his intention in writing these plays is not self-centered but as part of the society. He considers that it is his moral duty to spread the feeling of brotherhood and bring awareness about

humanity. His real intention is to study the situations, which create such questions, and to dig out the dramatic elements in such an endeavor. (Banerjee 15)

Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a critique of patriarchal values and institutions; and it also shows how law operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. The word 'silence' in the title has different levels of significations. Literally it means the judge's order for maintaining silence in the court-room but metaphorically it implies legally silencing the weaker sex's plea for justice. The urban middle class society which Tendulkar presents in this play enforces law to subjugate women by maintaining a hypocritical moral code. In this play, Leela Benare is a woman, who is modern, independent, self-sufficient, free-thinking, who loves life, but happens to fall in love with a man who only loves her body and gets impregnated by him. It is the most powerful play of Tendulkar. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the sham moral standards of the so-called civilized urban middle class society of post-Independence India. The frustrated male members try to subjugate women to prove their power in social hierarchy. Miss Benare desperately fights her lone battle against the oppressive power structure. It shows how the so called modern society gangs up on a woman who has a child out of wed-lock. There is no sympathy, no help from the people of theatre group, but a sadist tendency to hurt Benare to somehow feel good about their own failures.

The character of Benare longs to displace and uproot the patriarchal hierarchy. She decides not to pay any attention to what the society says for women, instead live her life in a way she desires. She has learnt it from life that when one dies, only that person dies, no one else is willing to give a little of their lives to that person. Tendulkar, through his plays, asserts that gender has been defined by the patriarchal fathers as a social construct. While sex is a biological phenomenon, the attributes of the masculine and feminine are constructed through gender paradigms which is to give sense of identity to the individual in a society. Gender politics is a universal problem. He shows in his plays the natural instinct of his heroines to rebel when suppressed or exploited. Benare had been used and thrown by her maternal uncle when she was just fourteen. Thinking it to be an affair for life, she falls in love with him but sees the true face of life at such a young age. The mock-court session uses this incident to malign the character of Benare. Nobody once mentions the maternal uncle who must have induced her into that relationship. It is proved to be Benare's fault. Also, she is suspected of having an illegal relationship with Prof. Damle who remains absent throughout the play. Society cannot tolerate this unmarried expectant woman. She has been treated as "a sinful canker on the body of society" (Silence, 112). All the members condemn her as an evil influence that would dynamite the social structure but not even once is Prof. Damle condemned for being responsible for Benare's wretched condition. Tendulkar here focuses on the hypocritical double standard of the so-called civilized urban middle class society.

Vijay Tendulkar throws light on the evil practices inherent in human nature like crookedness, cruelty and violence. Here the white collar, middle class educated and civilized

people become aggressive and violent against their fellow companions and that, too, a female and entertain themselves at the cost of her honour and dignity. Benare suffers for the crime that she has not committed as she says, ‘these are mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See, their faces, how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires’ (Silence 117). Benare’s tragedy reveals the fact that women are born to suffer even in the most sophisticated, civilized section of the society.

*Kanyadaan* (1983) has taken to be the most controversial of all the plays written by Vijay Tendulkar. It dwells on an extremely sensitive social and political issue, namely the conflict between upper castes and Dalits, a phenomenon still rampantly prevalent in several parts of India. Despite fifty years of independence, Dalits continue to suffer abject misery and ill-treatment at the hands of the upper castes. Politicians, instead of trying to uproot this evil, seem to capitalize on it. Tendulkar delves deep into this social evil and presents it as it is. These interlocking issues are played out in this play. He raises disturbing questions, but never bothers to answer them. This method of the writer is truly characteristic of a genuine playwright whose foremost concern is to open his reader-audience’s eyes to a social problem, which continue to evade easy solutions.

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. In the last three decades, Dalit literature has become popular and it has spread awareness among the people about the exploitation of the Dalit in one or in another way. Despite sixty nine years of independence, Dalits continue to suffer abject misery and ill treatment at the hands of the upper castes. Politicians, instead of trying to uproot this evil, seem to capitalize on it. The traditional literature deals with kings, princes, the so-called people of upper “class” and “caste”. In that literature, no delineation of the downtrodden is visible. It depicts the “Gods” but not the “Man” who is suppressed, exploited. And today Dalit literature has come forward to give voice of such suppressed, exploited mass of the country. In Indian Society, due to casteism and class differences, the notable personalities like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had to suffer and they fought against the evils of the society. With the passing of time changes have occurred in the society, culture, religion, and literature in India but the complete revolution has not taken place yet. India has not produced the revolutionists like Karl Marx or Martin Luther. No doubt, Buddha, Phule, Gandhiji, Ambedkar, made a notable contribution in constructing new society. In India still the “Manu” of “Manusmriti” – the originator of class and caste differences is alive in the contemporary India. Still the downtrodden, suppressed group remains “Untouchable” and excluded from the main stream of the society. Their plight continues and so they have taken up the pen to express their agony, their culture, and society. Dalit literature has originated in the form of revolt against the injustice to the downtrodden people.

The play *Kanyadaan* 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. It deals with extremely sensitive social and political issue,

namely, the conflict between the upper caste (Savarna) and Dalits (lower caste), a phenomenon still rampantly prevalent in several parts of India. As the title suggests that the play centers around marriage. It is an unusual marriage in the sense that it brings in its wake complex problem – problems at once, self-created and unforeseen. Jyoti, the daughter of Nath Devalikar, an MLC who insists on democracy at home, has promised to marry Arun Athavali, a dalit youth. When she informs her parents, her father is ecstatic, but her mother Seva and brother Jayaprakash are unhappy, after they meet Arun, and shocked by his language and behaviour. Arun's excuse for his attitude is the mistreatment meted out to his family and forefathers at the hands of society. Jyoti's decision to marry Arun leads to a crisis, which worsens after marriage as Arun proves to be a violent husband.

At the end, Jyoti is compelled to come to terms with her fate as Arun's wife, as she realizes that it is not possible to improve people and change society. Tendulkar has focused on a problem that there is no bridge between the various sections of society and that the attempt to overcome a taboo often leads to greater pitfalls than one can handle. A close reading of the play reveals that it is written on the two modern trends of literature: dalit literature and feminism. Through these, the playwright discusses the problem of marital relation in the patriarchal society and the class differences and the caste conflict in modern India. Towards the end of the play, Nath suggests Jyoti to give up the ideals, but she rejects it for she thinks it cowardly to surrender to circumstances. The play ends here and reader-audience is left wondering what could be the future of Jyoti, and, of course, of her father.

The plays of Tendulkar variously deal with the different dimensions of man's cultural deformity and bring out its evil consequences on human body, mind and spirit. Biologically as well as culturally, human beings are divided into two classes: men and women. This division is further accentuated by the roles they are assigned to play in the making of family. Man is the head of the family, governing and controlling all its affairs. Woman is entrusted with the household responsibilities, particularly those of cooking food and rearing children. This leads to the formation of exploitative and oppressive society of men as against the exploited and oppressed society of women. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman.... It is civilization as whole that produces this culture...which is described as feminine." (Simone 20)

The analytical study of Tendulkar's plays reveals that the dramatist has a desire to strive tirelessly for perfection of life where there are no barriers of caste, class, sex, etc., in society. He dreams, so to say, of freedom, equality, and social justice for everyone. Like Chekhov, he aims at creating a kind of emotionally refined, integrated, and conscious world. The playwright seems to share Tagore's united, integrated sensibility in the lines quoted below from one of his songs in Geetanjali:

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection; where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit; into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (Geetanjali)

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