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Dalit and Subalternity in Indian English Drama: A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

BIBHAS CHAND

ABSTRACT

The sphere of Indian English drama is strikingly under-developed both creatively and critically in comparison with its fellow disciplines: Indian English poetry and fiction. Only a few exceptions are to be found in the case of the modern plays which are included in the university syllabi as play-texts. The critics and writers pay much attention on the plays which are studied as university texts. The readers may find ample books which have included the critical studies of the plays of modern Indian dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Badal Sircar etc., albeit with traditional point of views. So any new study of Indian English drama is always welcome. This paper intends to review Vijay Tendulkar's plays, particularly *Kanyadaan*, through the point of view of Dalit aesthetic theory and subalternity. Dalit literature has emerged as an important discipline now in academic and non-academic sphere. It occupies a separate entity in the broad spectrum of Indian English Literature. On the other hand, theatre is the most powerful lively medium to represent society and its contemporary problems. Dalits in India are placed at the lowest position in the Hindu caste system from the ancient time; and hence they are oppressed and marginalised not only in society, but also in literature. The representation of Dalits in the various fields of mainstream literature is very scanty. Thus representation of Dalit in Indian English Drama hints at a vast untouched area. Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), one of the most prominent Indian playwrights, has very exceptionally represented Dalit in his controversial play *Kanyadaan*. Being a non-Dalit writer himself, Vijay Tendulkar was

always conscious about controversial social themes, including violence, poverty, women's rights, Dalit question and corruption.

Key Words: Indian English Drama; Dalit; Subaltern; Other, Indian theatre; Representation.

Dr. Satish Kumar laments in his book *A Survey of Indian English Drama*, 'Indian English drama lacks both in fecundity and excellence of craftsmanship. It has not yet reached the high status of prose fiction or poetry.... Indian English drama lags far behind poetry and fiction both in quantity and quality' (D. S. Kumar 1). The pioneer historiographer of Indian English literature K.R. Srinivasa Iyenger also holds the same view in his seminal book on the subject: 'Modern Indian dramatic writing in English is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quality. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English – but seldom for actual stage production' (Iyenger 226). The most recent book on the literary history of Indian English literature *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* (2008) has included only one essay on the dramatists. In that essay Shanta Gokhale remarks 'The English drama of the two decades immediately after Independence produced very little work of any importance' (Gokhale, *The Dramatists* 380). However, having a rich dramatic tradition of thousand years, Indian Bhasa theatres do not suffer the same fate; they are equally flourished with their indigenous components. Sangeet Natak Akademi and National School of Drama (NSD) were established by Government of India just after Independence to promote Indian theatres in different regional languages. But Indian English Drama had to wait until 1970s and 1980s when we find some exceptionally talented playwrights cum actors like Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, Asif Currimbhoy who had filled the firmament of contemporary Indian theatre through the production of their plays on contemporary socio-political issues in both regional and English languages. Moreover, recent translation projects undertaken by Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of

Letters), NSD and Seagull (private organisation of arts and media) have made it possible to get major Indian plays in English. Yet the critical tradition of Indian English drama bears some void on its back. Mala Renganathan assumes, 'The setback is also due to the fact that Indian English drama does not enjoy the status among Indian drama critics the way regional theatres do. It is treated more as a pedagogical exercise rather than as a theatrical exercise' (Renganathan 23). Only a few exceptions are to be found in the case of the modern plays which are included in the university syllabi as play-texts. The critics and writers pay much attention on the plays which are studied as university texts. The readers may find ample books which have included the critical studies of the plays of modern Indian dramatists like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Badal Sircar etc., albeit with traditional point of views. Mala Renganathan's concluding remark is very thought provoking in this regard. She writes, 'What is required of Indian dramatic criticism is not a west-oriented critical perception/interpretation, but a criticism that is located within the political, historical, social, cultural and performative dimensions of performance text and its dramatic literature' (Renganathan 29). Thus, there lays a fertile ground to grow a critical tradition of Indian English drama based on nativism or indigenous theories. In this context, this paper intends to review Vijay Tendulkar's play *Kanyadaan* through the point of view of Dalit aesthetic theory and subalternity.

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), one of the most important dramatists of modern India, has chosen theatre to represent the Dalit subject in his own way in his drama *Kanyadaan* (1983). Tendulkar is always a very sensitive playwright. All his works are born out of burning social issues which he has chosen from reality around him. On the occasion of 'Vijay Tendulkar Drama Festival', Amol Palekar says in a conversation (*The Hindu*, Oct 30, 2005), that 'Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh and Rajender Nath were four pillars of the renaissance in Indian theatre... They gave a different meaning to our life, a new

perspective'. As a Writer and playwright, Vijay Tendulkar boldly depicts socially controversial subjects. Tendulkar himself writes about his position in 'A Testament' (published in *Indian Literature*, No. 147, 1992):

'As a writer I now find myself persistently inquisitive, nonconformist, ruthlessly cold and brutal as compared to the other committed and human me. The writer in me is more analytical than emotionally committed one way or the other. The writer in me raises inconvenient questions instead of choosing his side and passionately claiming thereafter that it is always the right one... As a social being I am against all exploitation and passionately feel that all exploitation must end' (Bandopadhyay xliii).

With this philosophy in mind, Tendulkar came to produce *Kanyadaan* which immediately received vehement public and critical response from all quarters. Dalit community was in rage against the playwright who has portrayed the hero of the play as harsh negative character. Yet this play which received such severe criticism brought Tendulkar the prestigious Saraswati Samman Award. In Saraswati Samman Award Acceptance Speech, delivered on 3 March 1994, Vijay Tendulkar remembered this fact: "As a part of this Fate, I may refer to a coincidence. For the play for which you are honouring me with the Saraswati Samman today, I was once insulted when at a function a chappal (slipper) was hurled at me. Perhaps it was the fate of the play to have earned both this honour and that chappal; and I as its creator respect both the verdicts" (Tendulkar, 'Saraswati Samman Award Acceptance Speech' 37). The last sentence is the signature of Tendulkar's strong mind with which he came to deal with all controversial issues on and off the stage. In the same speech he revealed himself thus, "It was not a sense of purpose or duty which forced me to write. The itch to write whatever it may be is the real reason for my writing. ... A writer is not a social scientist, nor is he an astrologer. He does not strive for answers on a mathematical basis. He only perceives or feels and this makes him restless." Tendulkar feels this restlessness in

mind whenever he finds any social stigma. *Kanyadaan* is no exception. Tendulkar asserts:

“All my creative writing begins, not from an idea but from an experience, mine or somebody else’s which then becomes mine. It was such an experience, another’s to begin with, that provided the starting point for *Kanyadaan*” (Gokhale, ‘Tendulkar On His Own Terms’ 104).

Tendulkar’s *Kanyadaan* has been appraised by many from various critical parameters. Nutan Gosavi reviews *Kanyadaan* as an expose of political progressives (Gosavi 153). He concludes, ‘*Kanyadaan* has turned out to be a sacrifice of his (Nath’s) daughter on the altar of his socio-political ideology’ (Gosavi 167). Manorama Trikha reads the play as representation of male-dominated society where family, women, marriage and relationship suffer from the lack of harmony. She observes, ‘...*Kanyadaan*, a play with a tragic dimension, fail to build a classless society in thought and action through marriage as an institution which is to be redefined in contemporary society. Jyoti suffers to keep this institution alive’ (Trikha 67). Shukla Chatterjee has not delved deep into the problematic of caste politics in her essay on *Kanyadaan*, but she has attempted a comparative study of language and aesthetic in the English and Bengali translations of the original drama (Chatterjee 62). M. Sarat Babu scrutinises this play as a projection of mental deformity at various levels. He states in his essay, ‘Tendulkar’s play, *Kanyadaan*, illustrates the mental deformity of an Indian woman caused by her own father. In pursuing the ideal of her father, the protagonist discounts the hard reality and risks her marital life. Finally, she realises the truth and tells her father in his face how he crippled her mind by setting unrealistic ideals’ (Babu 115). Besides all these studies, one cannot pass aside the view that *Kanyadaan* is one of those few exceptional plays of modern India where there is a serious representation of Dalit.

Although the voice of protest against untouchability was raised by B R Ambedkar much earlier, but the identity of Dalit

gained wider popularity in Indian socio-political scenario after the birth of the Dalit Panthers, a militant organisation of Dalit youth, in 1972. The Manifesto of Dalit Panthers defines Dalit as 'members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion' (Omvedt 74). Dalits in India are placed at the lowest position in the Hindu caste system from the ancient time; hence they are oppressed and marginalised not only in society, but also in literature. The representation of Dalits in the various fields of mainstream literature is very scanty. That is why Dalits have now come forward very consciously to represent themselves in their personal narratives and literatures. 'Dalit' is at present widely used in the place of word 'untouchable'. Saran Kumar Limbale is very clear about this word: "Harijans and neo-Buddhists are not only the Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, landless farm-labourers, workers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging behind economically will also need to be included" (Limbale 30). Having placed in the margins of society Dalits are always the subject of social deprivation and humiliation. As a result, struggle against the prevailing social system becomes their unwritten plight from birth to death. Baburao Bagul brilliantly puts the whole situation in a single sentence: "'Dalit' is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate" (Bagul 294). Dalit literature is a fine place where the pain and sufferings of Dalits find artistic expression with Dalit sensibility. Limbale also writes, "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits" (Limbale 30). Although in recent years some attempts have been made to look at Dalit literature as 'Rural Literature' or 'Protest Literature' like American Black

literature, yet Dalit literature holds a unique position in Indian context that deserves special critique. Raj Kumar critically points out, "Dalit literature aims at creating a counter-culture and a separate identity for the Dalits in society. Generally, Dalit writers are not against any group but against the establishment, the government and the social system, which, in their view, keep them depressed and deprived. In other words, the search for identity is a basic dynamism of Dalit culture" (R. Kumar 137). The present scenario of Dalit question in India does not revolve around the caste hierarchy only; but it has been a complex issue which has included economics, society and politics within its arena. D. R. Nagaraj has aptly opined, 'The caste system in India is not only a structure of cultural values but also embodies a certain pattern of inequitable distribution of power and wealth of different kinds along the lines of caste hierarchy' (Nagaraj 29).

It is still a matter of controversy that whether writing about Dalit by a non-Dalit writer is to be called a Dalit literature. But Dalit literature whether written by Dalit writers or non-dalit writers, must have an articulation of Dalit consciousness. This Dalit consciousness works as a goading spirit behind their war against the hegemony of the caste Hindus. "It is a consciousness against slavery. Values of equality, freedom, justice and solidarity are inherent to this literature" (Limbale 120). The purpose of Dalit Literature, writes Limbale, 'is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus' (Limbale 19).

'Subalternity', on the other hand, hints at the fact or status of being a subaltern, or, the state of being in a subordinate position. 'Subaltern' means 'of inferior rank'. The term is adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling/dominant classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups who have been denied access to 'hegemonic' power. 'Since the history of the ruling classes is realised in the state,

history being the history of states and dominant groups, Gramsci was interested in the historiography of the subaltern classes' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 215). The term has been widely accepted in South Asian Studies after the publication of Ranjit Guha's *Subaltern Studies-I* in 1982. Guha's project aims at rewriting the history of South Asia from the perspective of Subaltern with the view that the earlier history has focused on the elite group of the society. The philosophy of Subaltern Studies expounds a tension between Elite and Subaltern. Dalits in India are the Subaltern Other or Subaltern Inferior in their place in society as well as in mainstream literature.

In *Kanyadaan*, Jyoti a young girl of a rich high caste educated family has fallen in a relationship with a Dalit youth Arun Athavale. Arun, a member of socialist's study group, writes poetry and autobiography and is also engaged in a local newspaper. Arun normally carries anger for high class society which makes him and his family to live a life like beasts. Arun's articulations no longer remain the dialogue of the play, but become a personal narrative of pain and sufferings of a Dalit – a subaltern other or subaltern inferior. The conflict between Arun's status of being a Dalit and the views of the members of Jyoti's high caste family eventually becomes a Dalit discourse.

When Jyoti first introduced the youth of her match verbally among the family members, the obvious question came from her father (Nath):

NATH: ... Jyoti! Who is the boy? Who is the prince charming?

.....

JYOTI: His name is Arun Athavale.

NATH: A Brahmin?

JYOTI: No, he is a Dalit.

(Tendulkar, Collected Plays in Translation 504)

The dramatist consciously interfused such dialogue to show that the upper middle class society is suffering from an anxiety

that the match should not be with 'a Dalit'! This is nothing but the policy of social exclusion of Dalit. Jyoti's mother Seva could not conceal her anxiety:

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.

(Tendulkar, *Collected Plays in Translation* 509)

Seva also asked her daughter to change her decision. But finding no way to return back, Seva is thinking that Arun should come out of his Dalit community where his big family lives in a filthy dirty small hut in remote village area. So, she advises Arun to do some job to own a flat within Pune city to live the conjugal life with Jyoti. But Arun is proud of his Dalit identity. Giving a sudden shock to Jyoti's mother, he straightway announces, "No problem. We shall be brewing illicit liquor." Arun is trying to bring a cultured high caste girl down to his Dalit order.

Jyoti, the daughter of the local MLA who unlike Jyoti's mother and brother is very liberal, falls in the relationship with the Dalit youth without knowing very well the character of the person. That is why she fails to understand the wrath and anger coming out suddenly time to time from Arun. In the first meeting with Jyoti's parents, Arun could not resist his anger upon the high caste society. Having Jyoti as a representative of high caste family, Arun tortures her mentally and physically before and after the marriage to prove him a typical Dalit. He went on delivering his own status before 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 brahmins' ears. ...

“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? ...

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, quaking at every door, for a little grass for our buffaloes? ...

Our life is not the Socilaists’ service camp. It is hell, and I mean hell. A hell named life.”

(Tendulkar, Collected Plays in Translation 513-514)

Arun the Dalit youth not only referred to the practice of beating wife in their family history, but also suddenly proved it true after injuring Jyoti’s hand. Yet Jyoti married him. The situation gets worsened when Arun continuously tortured Jyoti mentally and physically after their marriage. Without bearing such unusual incident day by day, Jyoti’s mother charged Arun directly:

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; she did it out of her own will.

SEVA: She thought you would improve after marriage.

ARUN: If she thought so your Jyoti is a stupid fool.

(Tendulkar, Collected Plays in Translation 540)

Arun was perhaps successful to establish his typical Dalit identity after taking revenge upon high caste Hindu society through having his in-law house as one of the units of that class. Although Jyoti once planned to give up the marriage bond without bearing the tortures of her husband, but that was a temporary decision. She went with her Dalit husband in his slum area and at last came to realise the character of Arun. Arun's character as a Dalit becomes fulfilled when we see that he has written and published his 'Autobiography' and it becomes very popular. Ironically enough here we get a Dalit writer within a drama, who writes his pains and sufferings; and at the same time he is the cause of intolerable pain of and physical assault on his pregnant wife. The drama ends with Jyoti's total rejection of her high caste parental house after accepting the present status as her only fate. Jyoti becomes Arun's Jyoti: Sun's ray. With the philosophy of liberal humanism Jyoti's father failed to understand the Dalit condition. Thus the play ends with Jyoti's speech:

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.

(Tendulkar, Collected Plays in Translation 566)

At this final phase, Jyoti is not a sober, gentle, educated and cultured woman. The voice that is coming out from her personality is the voice of a Dalit who is suffering from strenuous pain, age-old hatred and humiliation from high caste Hindu society. Perhaps this message has been interwoven within the play that to realise the true pain of being a Dalit, one must be a Dalit. All other discussions are mere theoretical overview which is good to exchange in public conference as done by Nath, Jyoti's father. Keeping hand on hand with the crisis inside the

family, the country too marched towards Emergency, the crisis outside.

Samik Bandopadhyay viewed *Kanyadaan* as the exposition of power mechanism of two institutions: 'society and morality' (Bandopadhyay xlii). Most of the critics have examined *Kanyadaan* as a play of caste-problem, power-politics, violence and family-relationship. But the question of Dalit is much more serious and most important issue here. Tendulkar who used the theatre not to entertain the audience but to disturb them by shocking their sensibility raised the issue of Dalit as the most important theme of the play. 'Tendulkar has focused on a problem that there is no bridge between the various sections of the society, and that the attempt to overcome a taboo often leads to greater pitfalls than one can handle' (Note on *Kanyadaan*. Collected Plays). Vani Devulapally has rightly remarked: 'The play is, unhesitatingly, an expose of caste politics' (Devulapally 119).

Kanyadaan becomes controversial as it represents a Dalit person who is famous for his brutal mentality. But the representation of Dalit in this drama is unique in its class as it represents 'revolt'. Here Arun, the Dalit youth is the symbol of 'revolt'. Saran Kumar Limbale writes: "'Rejection' and 'revolt' in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalit's pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective. ... Revolt is the stage that follows anguish and rejection. 'I am human, I must receive all the rights of a human being' – such is the consciousness that gives birth to this revolt. Born from unrestrained anguish, this explosive rejection and piercing revolt is like a flood, with its aggressive character, and an insolent, rebellious attitude" (Limbale 31). This perspective will help us to study the character of Arun who is the result of age-old anguish and rejection from society. That's

why the problem of Arun with all his aggressive and rebellious nature is not a mere personal psychological one, but the outcome of collective revolt of Dalit in general against the caste based society which treat them as inhuman even in twenty first century modern India. Thus, a thriving representation of Dalit finds its place in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* where the elements of revolt and anger as Dalit consciousness are articulated to its highest pitch.

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NOTE

This paper is related to my ongoing research work on Indian English Drama. That is why the theoretical framework will remain more or less same in structure and language in all my subsequent papers under this project. – Bibhas Chand.