

Interrogating Liberal Idealism: Caste, Gender Violence, and Inter-Caste Marriage in Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan

Shruti¹ and Dr. Anita²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English

²Assistant Professor, Department of English

NIILM University, Kaithal, Haryana

Abstract: *Vijay Tendulkar, one of the pillars of modern Indian theatre alongside Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, and Mohan Rakesh, is renowned for his unflinching portrayal of social hypocrisies, power dynamics, and human frailties. His 1983 Marathi play Kanyadaan (translated into English by Gowri Ramnarayan) stands as one of his most controversial works, earning him the Saraswati Samman while also provoking outrage, including a shoe hurled at him during a Dalit literary conference.*

The play's title, evoking the Hindu ritual of "giving away" a daughter in marriage, ironically underscores the sacrificial nature of an inter-caste union that exposes the fissures in liberal idealism. Through the story of an upper-caste Brahmin family's attempt to bridge caste divides via marriage, Tendulkar dissects the naivety of progressive reformism, the entrenched violence of caste hierarchies, and the gendered burdens of such experiments. This article interrogates how Kanyadaan critiques liberal idealism, revealing its limitations in addressing caste oppression, gender violence, and the complexities of inter-caste marriage in post-independence India.

Keywords: Caste System in India, Gender Violence, Patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* serves as a powerful critique of liberal idealism by exposing its limitations when confronted with the harsh realities of caste hierarchies and gender violence in Indian society. The play revolves around an upper-caste, progressive family that believes in equality, social reform, and the annihilation of caste, as envisioned in liberal-humanist thought. However, when their daughter Jyoti marries Arun, a Dalit poet, their idealistic convictions are severely tested.

Tendulkar interrogates the gap between theory and lived experience, revealing how deeply entrenched caste structures and patriarchal violence resist simplistic notions of social harmony. Through the unfolding of Jyoti's abusive marriage, the play challenges the assumption that education, empathy, and liberal values alone can dismantle systemic oppression. Instead, *Kanyadaan* exposes the contradictions within liberal idealism, highlighting how caste identity and gendered power dynamics continue to shape personal relationships, often with devastating consequences.

PLOT AND CHARACTERS: THE SETUP FOR IDEOLOGICAL COLLISION

Kanyadaan unfolds primarily in the home of Nath Devalikar, a socialist MLA and ardent Gandhian idealist committed to eradicating caste discrimination. Nath, along with his wife Seva a women's rights activist and their children Jyoti (an educated, idealistic daughter) and Jaiprakash (a pragmatic son), represents the urban, upper-caste liberal elite. The catalyst for conflict arrives in Arun Athavale, a young Dalit poet from a scavenger family background, whom Jyoti meets and falls in love with.

Nath enthusiastically supports the inter-caste marriage, viewing it as a personal “experiment” in social reform a practical enactment of his beliefs in equality and caste annihilation. He sees Arun as a symbol of Dalit aspiration: talented, educated, and articulate despite his oppressed origins. Jyoti, influenced by her father’s ideals, embraces the union with fervor, determined to prove that love and commitment can transcend caste barriers. Seva and Jaiprakash, however, express reservations, citing practical incompatibilities like class differences and lifestyle mismatches, though their objections subtly reveal lingering caste prejudices.

Post-marriage, the play shifts to the harsh realities of the couple’s life. Arun, plagued by inferiority complexes rooted in his caste experiences and impoverished upbringing, descends into alcoholism, laziness, and verbal and physical abuse toward Jyoti. He fails to hold jobs, exploits her financially, and justifies his violence as a reversal of historical upper-caste oppression. Jyoti endures beatings, bears children, and transforms from a vibrant idealist into a hardened, resilient woman who ultimately severs ties with her parents, choosing to suffer alongside Arun as her self-imposed penance.

In the climax, a broken Nath confronts his shattered illusions, admitting the failure of his liberal vision. The play ends on a note of disillusionment, with Jyoti declaring her independence from her family’s “comfortable values” and Nath grappling with the human cost of his ideology.

LIBERAL IDEALISM AND ITS HYPOCRISY

At the heart of *Kanyadaan* is a scathing critique of upper-caste liberal idealism, embodied in Nath Devalikar a character Tendulkar himself identified with, stating that Nath represents “me and many other liberals of my generation” whose “fundamental confusion and naivety” led to defeat. Nath’s support for the marriage stems not from genuine equality but from a paternalistic, almost messianic desire to “uplift” Dalits through personal sacrifice offering his daughter as a “kanyadaan” to the cause.

This idealism is exposed as superficial and hypocritical. Nath romanticizes Arun as a “raw” talent from the oppressed classes, ignoring the deep psychological scars of caste oppression. When the marriage fails, Nath’s liberalism crumbles; he feels “impure” after interacting with the abusive Arun, revealing subconscious caste revulsion. Critics like Ania Loomba have noted how the play highlights the “hypocrisy of liberal reforms,” where upper-caste progressives advocate change without confronting their own ingrained privileges or the structural violence of caste.

Seva’s character further underscores this hypocrisy. As a women’s rights advocate who works with the downtrodden, she opposes the marriage on “practical” grounds, but her arguments mask caste bias. Even Jaiprakash, the younger generation, voices pragmatic concerns that echo traditional endogamy. Tendulkar illustrates how liberal rhetoric often serves as a veneer for maintaining class and caste boundaries, failing to address the power imbalances that perpetuate inequality.

Tendulkar’s own influences the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s and interactions with Ambedkarite thought inform this critique. Unlike Gandhi’s harmonious vision of caste reform, which Nath echoes, the play aligns more with B.R. Ambedkar’s radical call for caste annihilation, showing that superficial gestures like inter-caste marriage cannot dismantle centuries of oppression without deeper systemic change.

CASTE DYNAMICS AND POWER STRUCTURES

Kanyadaan decodes caste not as a relic but as a dynamic power structure embedded in social relations. Arun’s character embodies the internalized violence of caste oppression. His aggression toward Jyoti is portrayed as a reprisal against historical upper-caste dominance a way to reclaim power in the domestic sphere. Arun articulates this explicitly, viewing his dominance over a Brahmin woman as vengeance for Dalit subjugation.

Yet, this portrayal has sparked controversy. Many Dalit critics accuse Tendulkar of stereotyping Dalit masculinity as inherently violent, alcoholic, and abusive, reinforcing savarna prejudices. Arun becomes the first major Dalit character on the Marathi stage, carrying an “extraordinary burden of representation,” as Loomba argues. His flaws laziness, deceit, and brutality are attributed to caste trauma, but the play offers no broader Dalit community context, flattening Arun into a symbol of “raw” primitiveness that justifies upper-caste fears.

Tendulkar counters that Arun's violence stems from disillusionment and poverty, not innate traits, highlighting how caste breeds psychological deformity across classes. Nath's initial idealization of Arun as a "pure" representative of the oppressed mirrors colonial exoticization, ignoring individual agency. The play thus exposes caste as a cycle of power reversal: the oppressed, when empowered in micro-spaces like marriage, replicate oppressive patterns.

Inter-caste marriage, often touted as a tool for caste abolition, is shown as devastating without mutual understanding. Statistics from the era (and persisting today) underscore societal resistance: low rates of such unions reflect honor killings and social ostracism. Tendulkar suggests that liberal experiments like Nath's treat marriage as a political statement, disregarding emotional and cultural incompatibilities.

GENDER VIOLENCE: THE DOUBLE BURDEN ON WOMEN

Gender violence forms the play's most visceral element, with onstage depictions of Arun's abuse shocking audiences. Jyoti's suffering illustrates how women in inter-caste marriages become "double victims" of caste and patriarchy, as noted by scholars like Janaki Abraham. She endures physical beatings, verbal humiliation, and emotional isolation, yet refuses to leave, viewing her endurance as a commitment to change.

Jyoti's arc from soft-spoken Brahmin idealist to hardened survivor highlights women's agency amid oppression. She rejects her parents' rescue attempts, declaring, "Fly from my shadow, otherwise my fire will scorch your comfortable values." Her choice to stay is ambiguous: empowerment or internalized victimhood? Tendulkar portrays domestic violence as rooted in class/caste disparities, where Arun's inferiority complex manifests as patriarchal control.

The play critiques how liberal idealism sacrifices women on the altar of social reform. Nath's "gift" of his daughter mirrors traditional kanyadaan, commodifying Jyoti for ideological gains. Seva's activism rings hollow when she cannot protect her daughter. Thus, gender violence intersects with caste, exposing patriarchy's universality: upper-caste liberals and Dalit men both perpetuate it in different forms.

CONTROVERSIES AND ENDURING RELEVANCE

Kanyadaan's reception reflects India's polarized caste discourse. Upper-caste audiences often praise it for exposing liberal naivety, while Dalit critics decry Arun's portrayal as anti-Dalit propaganda. Tendulkar defended it as a personal reflection on liberal defeat, influenced by real-life inter-caste marriages he observed.

In contemporary India, where inter-caste marriages remain rare and violence against them persists, the play retains urgency. It challenges simplistic narratives of progress, urging interrogation of privilege in reformist movements. As caste assertions rise through movements like the Dalit Panthers' legacy or recent protests Tendulkar's work reminds us that true equality demands confronting internalized hierarchies, not symbolic gestures.

II. CONCLUSION: FROM IDEALISM TO REALISM

Kanyadaan is a masterful deconstruction of liberal idealism's encounter with caste realities. Through Nath's disillusionment, Arun's rage, and Jyoti's suffering, Tendulkar reveals the chasm between progressive rhetoric and lived oppression. Inter-caste marriage, far from a panacea, becomes a site of intensified conflict, where gender violence amplifies caste wounds. The play's power lies in its refusal of easy resolutions: no redemption for Nath, no villainization of Arun alone, and no escape for Jyoti.

Ultimately, Tendulkar compels us to question: Can liberalism bridge caste divides without self-interrogation? His answer a resounding no urges a shift from naive idealism to gritty realism. In an era of performative allyship, Kanyadaan remains a provocative mirror, exposing the human costs of unfinished social revolutions.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Annotated Critical Edition, Navayana, 2014.

- [2]. As cited in Somwanshi, Gaurav D. "Play and Prejudice: Inter-Caste Marriages and Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan." *Nirmukta*, 2014.
- [3]. As discussed in various critiques, e.g., Wadikar, Shailja B. "The Theme of Casteism in Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan." In *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Amar Nath Prasad and Satish Barbuddhe, Sarup and Sons, 2008.
- [4]. Loomba, Ania. "Inter-Caste Marriage and the Liberal Imagination: Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 43, 2013, pp. 101-111.
- [5]. Loomba, Ania. *Ibid.*
- [6]. Mirza, Aliya Saba. "Stereotyping Dalit Masculinity in Vijay Tendulkar's Play Kanyadaan (1983)." *SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics*, 2024.
- [7]. *Primary Text: Tendulkar, Vijay. Kanyadaan. Translated by Gowri Ramnarayan, Oxford University Press, 1996.*
- [8]. Ray, Tridip, et al. "Inter-Caste Marriages and Household Outcomes." (Based on IHDS data indicating ~5.82% in 2011); also see Pew Research Center reports on low rates persisting.
- [9]. Recent reports from Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network and media on honor killings