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Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*: Psycho-Social Scrutiny of Male Domination and Violence

Dr. Rajneesh Pandey
Assistant Professor
Faculty of SVDV, BHU
Varanasi

When we talk about postcolonial Indian drama and theatre we cannot forget the name of Vijay Tendulkar who was one of India's most impactful and compelling playwrights such as Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, and Badal Sircar who flourished the Indian drama by providing a new literary vision of postcolonial Indian theatre which keeps the contemporary concerns and subjects at its focal point in a unique, innovative and creative manner. Tendulkar's prolific endeavor reigned over an extensive span of five decades. There are thirty plays, seven one act plays, four short stories, two novels, six collections of children's plays and seventeen film scripts to his credit. Without any misgiving he is a creative leviathan in postmodern Indian era of drama both in terms of quality and quantity. He is a subterranean observer of Indian socio-cultural reality, a humanist, a ground-breaking playwright who incessantly experimented with form and structure. He has got the reputation of an astute designer of multi dimensional and multi-layered characters whose angst is analyzed within the ambit social quandary of the society. The central part of his works is his profound concern for human life within socio-cultural reality of post-colonial India. His inexorable literary output and social activism was a human response of a highly sensitive artist to the festering, wretched and pathetic social conditions of India. Until his death, he was devoted to this human cause, seeking justice for the marginalized, deprived and afflicted section of society. Unlike the makers of the confrontational theater of the late 1980s, he did not believe that an evening at the theater would change the society, but he was always hopeful that a good play could raise public awareness. In an interview, Tendulkar once said, "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 can't do it, I have to speak the truth"¹.

His plays always bother about human relationships ever replete with abuse of authority and covert or overt aggression as he has pointed out "the basic urge (to write) has always been to let out my concerns vis à vis my reality: the human condition as I perceive it"². His characters are unique in their composition having incongruous and incompatible elements always plunged between emotion and intellect, desire and conscience, independence and submission. His female characters are largely from lower middle stratum of society including housewives, teachers, mistresses, daughters, slaves, and servants. Speaking about the multiplicity of emotions of his female characters Shanta Gokhle says "from the unbelievably gullible to the clever, from the malleable to the stubborn, from the conservative to the rebellious, from the self-sacrificing to the grasping."³ Tendulkar tended to minimize his personal influence on these characters and their personality development. They are in the play "with their own minds, ways and destiny"⁴. It is also a fact that his plays are mostly all about the dregs and debased persons who do not believe in the established socio-cultural norms and values as Tendulkar himself says: The character I

write about reflect my interest...Besides, it is one thing to be assured of your security and stage a fight against the accepted norms and values; and another to fight for the same when cornered altogether. It the latter that catches my eye"⁵.

My present paper is related to Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* which exposes the pretence, envy, covetousness, domination and masochism of Sakharam, a middle class male. Born in a Brahmin family, Sakharam grown up facing the ill treatment of his father and mother eventually left the house at the age of eleven and finds a job in press. He is very abusive and unpolished but honest as Tendulkar says "a coarse but impressive personality". He is frank and outspoken as Ashok.H. Desai states "his rough idiom sees to the right vehicle for the values he has evolved for himself. He tries to work out an independent philosophy of life, with no sense of false obligation"⁶. He discards the institution of marriage and spends 14 years with six women. The play starts when the sixth woman has left him and the seventh the typical Indian woman Laxmi enters to his house. He accepts no social embargo regarding wine, woman and vices. For him the hypocrisy and pretended actions are the real sins, and that is why he has no sense of guilt as V.S.Naipaul States "Hinduism in him has been reduced to a belief in honesty and a rejection of all shaming action"⁷.

We come across the aggressive behavior of Sakharam almost all everywhere in the play. He is a man whose ego always overcomes his superego. N.S. Dharan says: "He always talks of himself as a self-made man who has no respect even for Gods"⁸. When he sees Laxmi praying God he mocks:

We're not saints. We're men. I tell you, worship and prayer can't satisfy the itch. If you want a thing, well, you've got to have it: what's there to hide? And from whom?(127)

Sakharam's rough aesthetic outbreaks and his own consideration of himself as "terror" is sharply contrasted when he tells the scared Laxmi:

I know I'm foulmouthed. Bothers you, doesn't it, even to hear me talk? I've been like this right from birth. Born naked, I was. My mother used to say, the brat's shameless. He's a Mahar born in a Brahmin's home...(127)

We come to know from his conversation with his friend Dawood Miyan that he has brought Laxmi from a Dharmasala in Sonavane. He attacks the hypocrisy of so called respectable man who pretend to be innocent in day light eventually turns into nastiest sinners after the dusk in his observations about husbands to his friend Dawood:

I've yet to meet a more gutless breed than these husbands. We're a whole lot better than those swine.(129)

Sakharam is very fond of mridanga and chilum. When his heart is full of ganja he plays on mridanga and falls into a trance and then we see the wild beast in him capable enough to inflict his woman. Through the character of Sakharam, Tendulkar intends to show the inherent lust and domination of man which knows no precincts as it is called insatiable "appetite" by Sakharam. Nevertheless, he disparages marriage and husbands-wife relationship, he strictly directs to Laxmi not to host others in his absence right at the moment when she enters to his house:

... This house is like me...This is not a royal palace. It is Sakharam Binder's house. And Sakharam Binder is not like your previous man. ...I'm the master here...but a house must be a home you understand?... Maybe I'm a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper. Why maybe? I am all that.

And I drink. But I must be respected in my own house. I am the master here. You agree to all this? Or have something to say? If you have, you can clear out right away.... you'll have to be a wife to me. Anyone with a little sense will know what to make of it.(126)

Maybe due to some bitter childhood memories and outlandish reason, he has derision for husband as he tells Dawood:

It's a good thing I'm not a husband. Things are fine the way they are. You get everything you want and yet you're not tied down. If you've had enough, if she's had enough, you can always part. The game is over. Nothing to bother you after that...(129)

He goes further to scoff:

...But the husband –he's proper swine! He ties her down, he doesn't get tied down himself! He flits around again- a free bird! Now look! I'm being quite frank. As far as I'm concerned, I don't believe in double-talk. What I have to gain from that?(130)

Sakharam may be very coarse and foulmouthed but he is very candid and honest in his views when he compares whores with ganga/chillum in the following words:

Ganga. You think it is like a kept woman or what? Everything hush-hush and all that. Ganja is like a whore. There's nothing to hide. I tell you whore can get to God much faster than all of us... She'll go up to God with her head held high. She'll say to Him, 'I had a living to make. I had to eat. But I didn't cheat anybody... If I gave anything at all, I gave man joy. There are born with an itch. I satisfied them. Big and small, rich and poor, the healthy and the diseased-I treated them alike. As equals! O Lord! If anyone has sinned at all, it's the others, not me.(130)

Laxmi being very religious keeps fasting, loves crows, pets a black ant, performs aarati regularly at home. All these put Sakharam on fury. Warning Laxmi on the very first night he says to stop her fasting and serve him with all her strength because "Mine is no ordinary appetite". Gradually Laxmi becomes accustomed to the house of Sakharam and with the passage of time she regards Sakharam as her husband and comes to know that he is not a bad man in his heart of hearts particularly after hearing how he conducted the funeral rites of his last woman. The real Sakharam is entirely revealed in these words:

Oh, yes everything good and proper, where Sakharam Binder is concerned. He's no husband to forget common decency. Go, go and sleep... There's no strength left in you with all that fasting ...(135)

The problem of Sakharam regarding Laxmi is her religious temperament which stirs his anger in which he becomes crazy to the extent to see her squirming with agony. For instance when a burning charcoal of ganga falls on her feet he simply leaves her to undergo the tormenting woe. Furthermore he commands her to laugh the way she laughs to the black ant during their love making. Sakharam's friendship with Dawood also adds fuel to the fiery ambience of the house. Having the strong Hindu religious faith, Laxmi does not permit any involvement of Dawood in the aarati of Lord Ganpati. For this she is vehemently beaten, yet she does not yield. Surprisingly enough, we also observe some changes in Sakharam after the entry of Laxmi in his house. But his fury and masochism is not restrained at all. Ceaseless afflictions, excess of work and sex all come together to make Laxmi a scarecrow of a woman. Eventually a day comes when Sakharam burning with his fury decides to expel Laxmi out of house. Dawood makes a vain effort to stop him. Sakharam sends her away to her nephew. But very soon we are taken aback to listen his confession about Laxmi when he says to his friend: "There have been many women here, but this

one left a mark before she went away”(153). Yet he defends his decision of sending Laxmi from his house in the following words:

... And you know what I am like. Everything said and done, there's the body, the home of all our appetites. Try keeping them down-you can't. Impossible, so I decided, once and for all. No point in troubling her any further. She'll stay with her nephew for the rest of her life and worship those gods of her. (153)

With this averse exit of Laxmi there occurs a u-turn in the life of Sakharam. So far he has been the commander of his house and the woman was there only to obey his commands. But the entry of the next younger, a little chubbier and better built woman Champa, the wife of a police fouzdar who has just been sacked for drunken irresponsibility, turns the whole scenario. In his usual mode Sakharam starts his lecture on Champa, but she responds quite indifferently. Sakharam threatens her in his typical manner but the fact is that he cannot even raise a little finger to her because of his infatuation of her body. His friend Dawood is also tantalized by her overwhelming charm. It seems that men to Champa are flesh hungry. When she passes her comment 'he,s nice' about Dawood, this remark shows Sakharam's envy and his scratched image of himself as a indefatigable love-maker. Unlike to religious temperament of Laxmi, Champa drinks to satiate Sakharam's itch. Sakharam is also lost in the maze of her beauty and feels it as his mammoth duty to get drunk and extract maximum from the drunken and exhilarating body of Champa. Meanwhile Champa's husband fauzdar Shinde comes to the house of Sakharam and Champa badly beats him. Sakharam is stunned to see the awful behavior of Champa:

what kind of woman are you? Look what you've done to him: he is your husband. Haven't you a heart?(167)

His friend Dawood also warns:

(in a low voice) Packed him off. My God, she did give it to him! The very thought of it scares the life out of me! Watch out, this bird is different from the others. God, what a woman! (168).

Now the veracity of the warnings of Laxmi and Dawood in Sakharam-Champa relationship is obvious. The play is a psychosexual probing into man-woman relationship where male always assert his supremacy. Sakharam is a prey to his own appetite which leads him to cross all the boundaries. His inhumane torture of Laxmi and vulnerable surrender to Champa are the glaring evidences of it. He is a man with a disguise of hostile arrogance and beastly attitude to conceal his flaw, vulnerability and loneliness. Thereafter being expelled from her nephew's house due to the allegation of theft, she has no other option but return to Sakharam whom she has already accepted as her husband. Sakharam again abuses and beats her to turn out of his house but Champa intervenes and lets her stay and tells to Sakharam "I...She can help me in the house. Anyway, I can't cope with the house and with your...(184)". Then one day Sakharam plays on his mridanga and hearing the sound, Dawood comes to his house and the following revealing conversation follows:

Dawood: Heard the mridanga, and I felt as if the old days had returned.

Sakharam: What old days?

Dawood: When you had the other bird- Laxmi(185-86)

Again we see Laxmi quite unchanged in her religious faith. Now she lives in the kitchen and her religious chanting upsets Sakharam's drunken love-making. One day Laxmi suspects about the

arcane departure of Champa during the afternoons and follows her and shockingly enough comes to find the affair of Champa with Dowood. After this shocking discovery she prays to God to guide her way what to do:

The whole of last week. Where does she go every afternoon? I went for his sake. My misfortune, I couldn't keep the man I married. For me this one was my husband . I worshiped him. Even when I was away, I'd worship him in silence everyday...if I have to die, let me die in his lap- in full glory of a married man... What'll I do now?Oh, God he does not know. The thought it makes me sick (187-88).

The whole prayer shows her deep feelings for Sakharam, despite his beastly attitude, she determines to live and die for him. Laxmi being a typical Indian woman shows her sympathy to Champa,s husband and feeds him. When Champa comes to know, she loses her temper and reprimands Laxmi very spitefully:

(stands before her, hands on hips) Look here. Don't double cross me. I warn you. (Laxmi wants to say something, but the words don't leave her mouth)If you act straight, you can stay. You are here because I let you stay. I'm warning you, don't you dare to let that corpse enter this house again ...(191)

In the fifth scene of third Act when Champa declines to sleep with Sakharam we see the climax of conflict between Champa and Sakharam. The exasperated and frustrated Sakharam coerce her to yield before him but she overtly challenges his manhood and says she did not mind his behavior as long as he was a man and this is followed by a heated words of exchange:

Champa: Yeah, can't take it any more- not even with all that drink inside me. If you can't make it, go and lie down quietly. Haven't been able to make it these last few days. A sound from the kitchen and you go cold. That true or not?

Sakharam: Champ-

Champa: stop that 'Champa – Champa'- you're not a man- not since she came. She has made an impotent ninny of you. Don't have the guts to take me before her. You turn into a corpse-a worm(193).

The angry Sakharam beats Champa and takes more and more liquor. Thereafter when Champa is asleep, Sakharam goes to Laxmi when she discloses all about Champa,s affair. Her disclosure to Sakharam about Champa,s secret relationship with Dawood makes Dawood mad in fury. In his blind anger he runs out and returns quickly to throttle Champa to death. Then his act of slaying Champa makes him trembling with fear and making him totally out of his power. Laxmi comes to help him bury Champa in the kitchen. Since Sakharam is too astound to do anything, she herself managed the whole business with all her strength. At the same time fauzdar Shinde comes and knocks the door. Gradually knocking grows fainter whereas the digging grows more and more fierce. With this the play comes to an end as Indulekha Burmon points out: “ The play ends with Sakharam's pride shattered. The bitter critic of marriage as an institution is proved , at the end, to be a puny male Chauvinist”⁹.

If we scrutinize the play, we observe the angst and stress of middle class urban people to be the focal point around which he weaves the web of thematic action which always revolve around the socio-individual clash. In the words of Indulekha Burmon: “ Sakharam Binder is a fascinating study of the relationship between man and woman. It dissects the morbid, squalid aspects of human life against a bizarre backdrop of Plebeian society”¹⁰.¹⁶⁴ The protagonists of his plays are often the sufferers of callous realities of life in this so-called contemporary cultivated society, eventually leading the rejection of established socio-cultural values and norms. Therefore the spiteful behavior of some protagonists is a kind of psychological reaction, a

kind of retaliation against the festering structure of society as reflected in their perverted longing to inflict torment on others. Apparently they represent anti-cultural and anti-humane attitudes, however there is somewhere their earnest strife for existence.

Tendulkar succeeds in the apt and apposite dramatic portrayal of the rage of younger generation along with the genuine analysis of intricate human mind with all its profundity. Tendulkar examines the man-woman relationship from the point of view of sensuality and hostility rather than the delicate romantic passions of love and affection. If the treatment of love and sex is there, it is of perverted and degraded forms love and sex as he himself points out: "curiosity about violence— not as something that exists in isolation, but as a part of the human milieu, human behaviour, human mind. It has become an obsession. At a very sensitive level, violence can be described as consciously hurting someone, whether it is physical violence or psychological violence.... Violence is something which has to be accepted as fact. It's no use describing it as good or bad. Projections of it can be good or bad. And violence, when turned into something else, can certainly be defined as vitality, which can be very useful, very constructive. So, it depends on how you utilize it or curb it at times"¹¹.

Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* is a psychological study of the intricacies of human mind. There are three acts in the play representing the relationship of Laxmi-Sakharam, Champa-Sakharam, and Laxmi-Sakharam-Champa respectively. Sakharam's treatment of Laxmi and Champa as the one is a foil to other, is the nucleus of the whole play. It is with the publication of *The Vultures* that we find a new turn and emphasis in Tendulkar's treatment of sex and violence which represents the wrath of younger generation against the conventional and established values and norms of society. Commenting on *Sakharam Binder*, Arundhati Banerjee says: "In the portrayal of this lower strata (stratum) of society, Tendulkar's plays signified a definite departure from the main stream Marathi drama that mostly dealt with the more privileged section of society. One of the reasons why there was such a reaction against *Sakharam Binder* was its burning naturalism. Here was a raw chunk of life with all its ugliness and crudity which was more than a shock to refined and prudish middle-class audiences. Such a direct confrontation with 'vulgar' reality was difficult for them to bear"¹².

The depiction of masochist instincts of the lower middle class male is the real objective of the creation of a character like Sakharam who due to the ill treatment by his father flees away from the house with life-long soar experiences, enough to make him rough and tough and foul-mouthed. Sakharam has no respect for the institution of marriage, so he remains unmarried all through his life. His relationship with helpless, deserted woman is just to serve his sexual desire based on the rules of mutual convenience. His weakness is the game of wine and woman which he plays with special set of rules and moral conduct which he expects to be strictly followed by his makeshift mistress. *Sakharam Binder* is a probe into the intricacies of human disposition specially the troubles of vulnerable woman in all its depth. In the *New York Times* review of *Sakharam Binder* (*Sakharam, the Bookbinder*, 1972), staged by the Play Company in 2004, drama critic Jonathan Kalb described Tendulkar's characterization, which instead of demonizing the coarse bookbinder leaves the viewer with an understanding of his helplessness in a certain sense. Kalb noted that the *Bookbinder's* tragedy turned out "to hinge on his budding social consciousness, his arrested enlightenment. He can see -- almost -- an idea of equality and shared humanity that transcends individual appetite, but nothing in his life (including the women) ever encourages him to follow its logic. Like Brecht's *Mother Courage*, he exploits a corrupt system for personal advantage, then discovers that the price of playing the game is everything he hoped to protect. Unlike Brecht, though, Mr. Tendulkar never judges his protagonist but concentrates

instead on painting him with unsettling compassion, perceptiveness and thoroughness”¹³. Without any misgiving Sakharam is the protagonist of the play but the action of the play finds its meaning in the presence of Laxmi. Laxmi is a character of quite contradictory traits. All her submissive and polite appearance vanishes at the end of the play and Laxmi becomes a deliberate woman who in a very calculated manner provokes the rage of Shakharam to manage the murder of Champa. Thus Laxmi is a woman of latent ambition which comes to the realization when she is blessed with opportunity. Champa’s character stands for a violent and aggressive woman quite contrary to the Laxmi. But surprisingly enough she becomes the true irony of circumstances and the true prey in the hands of her mother, her husband fauzdar Shinde, her male companion Sakharama and at the end her female companion Laxmi. The excellence of Tendulkar lies in the fact that all his wicked, violent, and aggressive characters are entirely capable of creating a feeling of pathos in our hearts and herein lies the objectivity of his plays. All credit goes to Tendulkar who dexterously deals with the theme of male domination and violence with his penetrating eyes like a psychologist.

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- Note: All the lines of text are quoted from Vijay Tendulkar, *Five Plays*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1992.