Class and Gender Conflicts In Tendulkar’s 
*Kanyadaan*: A New Historicist Perspective

C.G. Shyamala  
Research Scholar  
Dept. of Studies in English  
Kannur University  
Kerala

New Historicism delves into the meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the contemporary ideas and assumptions. New Historicists are interested in the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. According to Abrams, ‘… new historicists conceive of a literary text as “situated” within the totality of the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interact as both the product and a producer of cultural energies and codes’ (190-191). Therefore, the critics indulge in revealing the cultural construct exposed in a given work.

History, in this context is not a mere chronicle of facts and events, but a rather complex description of human reality and the evolution of preconceived notions. Literary works may reveal various factual aspects of the world from which they emerge. They would comment on the prevailing ways of thinking at the time—ideas of social organization, prejudices, taboos and the like, and hence raise questions pertaining to societal concerns. Globalization and increased upward mobility have fostered an egalitarian outlook, yet the stigma of class ostracism has impinged the depths of the Indian life.

Expressions and reflections on life are portrayed through literature. The theatre has often infused radical thoughts and succinctly exposed social hypocrisy, violence and inequalities, the onus being accorded to socially conscious playwrights as Vijay Tendulkar. Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Mahesh Elkunchwar and Girish Karnad to name a few. Vijay Tendulkar is a vociferous commentator on the Indian ethos, and his works cast the inedible ink of social maladies to effect a positive change. His plays unravel the playwright’s piercing focus on contemporary issues to unravel the truth behind the mask of falsity. There have been pressing demands for the extradition of caste and gender issues in the interest of the nation, and Tendulkar’s play *Kanyadaan* becomes a testimonial.

The play is centered in Maharashtra, the region that pronounced the cause of the dalits due to intense class consciousness. As Das’ ascription:

Maharashtra has been the site of the most radical dalit assertions. From the turn of the present century, dalits here have shown signs of awakening and protest.…. Under the leadership of B.R.Ambedkar, rights to dalits became an issue in Indian politics. (Introduction xviii)

B.R.Ambedkar, a dalit and the architect of the Indian Constitution vehemently criticized the social reformers of his time for the casual remarks to the issues of caste and untouchability. He believed that the progress of the nation is deterred due to the
prevalence of out-dated beliefs that hinder an egalitarian outlook. Inter-caste marriage, to him, was one of the solutions to end caste conflicts. Further, the Dalit Panther Movement launched in 1957 worked for the upliftment of the dalits. It is a fact, says Das that the state witnessed mass exodus of dalits to Buddhism and Christianity “in the hope of achieving human dignity and personal wellbeing.” (Introduction xix).

In *Kanyadaan*, Nath Devlalikar is an MLA with political inclinations. His wife Seva is a social worker, and their son Jayprakash is an MSc student. Nath regards himself to be a democrat, a reformer and a model for others. He cannot tolerate negligence of duty. A political and social activist who supports democracy, he is actively involved in improving the condition of the downtrodden and socially neglected people. At this juncture he does not show any discrimination between his ideals and his practical deeds. He tells his daughter, “We have a democracy in this house and we are proud of it. Democracy outside and dictatorship in the home, we don’t know these two timing tricks”(I.i.4). He further tells his wife, "The values I uphold in my public life are the values I live by in my personal life. I will never use compulsion on anyone who is capable of thinking" (II.i.37). He seems to have a reformative and progressive bent of mind.

As the play opens, the middle-class family is discussing the inter-caste marriage proposal of Jyoti, the daughter of the home, a twenty-year-old girl to the dalit poet and writer, Arun. Albeit Nath ecstatically condescends to the proposal, Seva and Jayprakash express their apprehensions. Jyoti introduces Arun to the family. After the initial discussion with Arun, Nath admits:

> NATH. Seva, until today 'Break the caste system' was merely a slogan for us. I've attended many inter-caste marriages and made speeches. But today, I have broken the barrier in the real sense. My home has become Indian in the real sense of the term. I am happy today, very happy. I have no need to change my clothes today. Today I have changed. I have become new. (I.ii.23)

Nath is satisfied that Jyoti has chosen a path of her own. He believes that Arun could be groomed into a fine young gentleman with the middle-class etiquettes. Arun, believes Nath, could be ‘cultured’ and ‘civilized’ as his family is. He says:

> NATH. Not only he is a middle class man, he is dalit. He has been brought up in the midst of poverty and hatred. These people’s psychological make-up is altogether different… We must try to understand him and that is extremely difficult. (I.ii.16)

Influenced by Arun's 'Autobiography', he believes that Arun is not bad by nature but the product of his adverse circumstances. He argues that if downtrodden people like Arun are provided with proper environment and opportunity they can amend themselves. But his wife appears inconsolable. Seva is a socialist and champion of women's rights. Yet, she does not allow her daughter to take the decisive step of marrying into a socially and economically backward community. She affirms:

> SEVA. If you like, I’m ready to attend your study circle on this. But I will never accept him as my Jyoti’s husband. Never. (I.ii.16)
Dalits are merely objects of study for her, not individuals worthy enough to be her son-in-law. Her bias against dalits, and hence Arun’s position in her family is evident in her conversation with her husband.

Nath’s mission is to achieve communal harmony. At his personal risk, he makes a social experiment to mitigate caste differences. He tries his best to make the marriage a successful realization of his principles not only because Jyoti is his daughter but also because he views this marriage as the reconciliation of his social perspectives and his personal life. He tells his wife:

NATH. Seva, let not this wonderful experiment fail! This dream which is struggling to turn real let it not crumble into dust before our own eyes! We will have to do something. We must save this marriage. Not necessarily for our Jyoti’s sake ... This is not just a question of our own daughter's life Seva, this has … a far wider significance … this experiment is very precious experiment. (I.ii.23)

Nath perceives that he has to make sincere efforts to the fruition of his goal in life. Yet, he says:

NATH. …but if my daughter had decided to marry into high caste, it wouldn't have pleased me as much. …Well, I'm telling you the absolute truth.

JAYPRAKASH. This is also a kind of casteism, isn't it? (I.i.8)

The issue of caste has remained the dominant issue in the family ever since the marriage of Jyoti and Arun has been finalized.

Arun, conscious of his caste, discusses pertinent sensitive issues with Jyoti. He asks:

ARUN.  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!... 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? Come on, tell me! (I.ii.17)

The questions posed by Arun depict the years of servitude under miserable conditions that the dalits have been exposed to. In “Movement for Dalit Identity”, Das opines:

In the past, these castes were called Ati-Shudras or Avarna, placed outside the Chaturvarna system. They were also called achchuta that is ‘untouchables’. Their touch, voice and even their shadow was believed to pollute caste Hindus. (58)

The fact that their marriage is more a challenge than out of love is revealed. Soon, Nath stumbles on the stark reality that Arun, the untouchable and the lowest working section of the society is crude and uncivilized. He is quite a different nature of person, highly critical of the sophisticated and high caste people. He calls the big houses of rich people “bellies of sharks and crocodiles” (I.ii.16). He believes that the civilized culture is a
“unwrinkled Tinopal world” of polish and outward appearances (I.ii.17). Contrary to cultured behavior, he often beats Jyoti and criticizes her class status. Arun’s attitude to his wife is clear when his family life is exposed:

SEVA. You can say that...But the bleeding has started again. She is in her sixth month now. I got her admitted to the nursing home avoid complications later....

He had come home drunk as usual.... There’s an internal wound in her stomach. The neighbors told me not to allow the girl to stay there. They said, take her away, he beats her and even kicks her. (II.ii.46-47)

Gender discrimination is yet another social detriment. Arun is aware of his inferior, low rank in society. Jyoti, the woman of the upper caste is now his wife. He exercises complete control over her. On account of gender differences, she occupies a further lower rank in the society and her husband is now ranked higher than her. The women, therefore suffers double marginalization. When Seva insists on reconsidering Arun’s stand, Nath thinks that he will be transformed with the passage of time. Unfortunately, things change for the worse.

Nath realizes that the dichotomy in Arun would never reconcile. His aspirations suffer a severe blow when he finds that he is being persuaded by Arun to speak for the rights of the dalits. Though Nath hesitates, he is forced to agree. Arun’s visit is personal, yet Nath says:

NATH. Seva, he ... his visit has polluted this drawing room, this house, and this day ...it stinks. Seva- you know- you see-I feel like taking a bath, like cleaning myself! Clean everything! This furniture, this floor... all this... he has made them filthy, dirty, polluted. (II.ii.57)

At the function organized to felicitate Arun on his achievement, Nath expresses his opinions, being matter-of-fact without sincerity in his approach. Jyoti realizes her father’s hypocrisy and breaks her relations from his family. She claims to be a member of the dalit community, to be a straightforward scavenger, an untouchable than an upper caste hypocrite. She thinks that her father's ideal notions and reforming principles are unreal. She has learnt the whole truth only after coming in contact with Arun. Until now, she has remained a mute spectator to her father’s ideal notions. As Das claims, “Understanding indignities and humiliation is only possible once we confront these experiences frontally” (Consciousness 43). Now she learns that one has to live amidst the problems and difficulties to understand the true nature of things. She also learns that no man can possess a double self. Both the genius and the cruel is one soul. She asserts:

JYOTI. Putting man's beastliness to sleep and awakening the godhead within is an absurd notion. You made me waste twenty years of my life before I could discover this. I had to learn it on my own experience. (II.ii.67)

Jyoti’s perception can be considered right, for now she has a better vision than her father. Though Nath is sincere in his reformative mission, he does all these things from a distance. He considers his daughter’s marriage a social experiment and sacrifices his daughter to its realization. On the other side, when he encounters the ugly reality and coarseness of Arun, he gets enraged:

NATH. Why did I have to come in with a man like this? A man like this...
Nath, it seems is not completely free from the bias against untouchable and lower class people. The play questions the authenticity of age-old practices and the sub-human treatment meted out to a certain sector of people. It exposes the psychological repercussions and fervid responses of the under-privileged and the upper-caste in their struggle to come into terms with the reality.

The playwright suggests that the inherent societal evils- casteism and gender discrimination have to be abolished. The reformist’s zeal in the playwright is obvious and the play has to be read from this perspective. A New- Historicist reading exposes the double standards and subversion rendering the play its social and contemporary relevance.

Works Cited