CHAPTER IV
CRUELTY IN KINDNESS

Sakharam Binder is Tendulkar's "most intensely naturalistic play" as Arundhati Banerjee says and as such it is the most controversial play of Tendulkar. From the cruelty of the middle class society in his earlier two plays, The Vultures and Silence! the Court is in Session, Tendulkar moved on to the cruelty of the lower middle class society in this play Sakharam Binder. The play exposes "baser human instincts". Sakharam Binder, a worker in the press, picks up castaway women or women who walked out, each at a time on contractual cohabitation and treats them with aggressive cruelty. Laxmi is a castaway woman but with her obstinate religiosity and adamant adherence to tradition subjugates even over-powering Sakharam. Champa is a woman who walked out on her husband and with her unyielding nature boss; she over Sakharam Binder. The play revolves round the three major characters, who "are all abnormal and each is unique in his or her abnormality".

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Sakharam Binder is a man of tremendous energy. This energy has made him an extremely independent man. He ran away from home at the age of eleven for he could not withstand the merciless beating of his father. He informs Laxmi the ill-treatment that he suffered at the hands of his unloving parents:

Born in a Brahmin family, but I'm a Mahar, a dirty scavenger. I call that a bloody joke! I ran away from home when I was eleven. I got fed up with my father's beatings. Nothing I did ever seemed right. You'd think I was his enemy or something. The way he'd thrash me!

He grew up like "a cactus-out in the open" and became a social castaway, a Brahman turned press-worker. Alienated from his family he could never pardon his father and he never regarded him as his father. His bitter experiences have forced him "to work out an independent philosophy of life, with no sense of false obligations". He announces his philosophy and code of values with great gusto to the world. He tells his friend, Dawood, that as long as one manages to be happy without doing any harm to others, one need not
worry. He detests dishonesty. He believes "a whore can get to God much faster than all of us" because she hides nothing from God.

Sakharam follows some principles with regard to women. As soon as he brings Laxmi to his two room hovel in a slum in Bombay, he reveals both his kindness and cruelty to women:

Once a person crosses this threshold, she belongs here. When she leaves this house it's all over between us. After that I can't be bothered. But even when I send her away, I do it good and proper. I give her a 'sari', a 'choli' and fifty rupees. Plus a ticket to where she wants to go. (p.135)

His treatment of women as disposable commodities shows:
"There is latent in human psyche a taste for crime, sexuality and savageness". That is, he has no higher communion with women except a transitory overwhelming physical association. He rouses a feeling of awe in Laxmi with his introductory
speech which has become a set-piece with him since he has used it on many women in the past. He does not care if Laxmi agrees to live with him or not. But he is secretly sure that she has no one else to go to and is dependent on any man who is ready to provide her with shelter. That is, Sakharam exploits the helplessness of women. M. Sarat Babu says:

The cruel, prejudiced treatment of Sakharam by his parents has caused him to behave rebelliously in order to overcome his powerlessness and joylessness.

Sakharam is "a brutalized and aggressive bully who drinks, takes drugs and whores and is ready to turn violent at the least provocation". He himself acknowledges his savageness:

I am hot-headed. When I lose my temper. I beat the life out of the people. I've a foul mouth. There's always a bidi or an oath on my lips - that is what the whole town tells about me. (p.125)
And he continues:

May be I am a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper.
Why may be? I am all that. And I drink.

(p.126)

His savageness is the result of his feeling of isolation from society and his innate sadism. He is a monster of insolence. He prides himself on speaking frankly and bluntly and he rejoices in the fact that this open statement of his views hurts others' deepest sentiments. When Laxmi asks for the pictures of gods he replies arrogantly that he is more interested in his 'chillum' and 'Ganja' than in the gods. And when she expresses her faith that a husband is a god to a Hindu wife, he bursts out that husbands ought to be whipped in public for the way they treat their wives. "In fact Sakharam is a bitter critic of the institution of marriage and attacks husbands while pitying wives".

Even though he denounces tyrannical husbands, he himself behaves like one. He frames certain "rules" for his women companions. He orders Laxmi to cover her head and speak
only briefly with strangers. She must not allow anyone in his absence into the house. He must be respected in his house. She must prepare food as it is a "woman’s job". Above all, she must be a wife to him. Thus he goes on forcing the view that he is the master of the house, on Laxmi, a helpless woman, "steeped in traditional morality but compelled to submit to Sakaram". He scares her out of her wits and drives her to seek escape from the cruel world of man and his dominion, which has enjoined on woman faith, devotion and fasting - all feudal virtues. And alienated from real human beings, including other women Laxmi makes friends with an ant or a crow. She can talk freely to and laugh heartily with only a black ant as though he is her close companion. She gives him sugar and he crawls all over pawing her all the time. But here also she is not free. Sakharam learns her secret, and eggs her on to laugh as she did for the ant. Or, he warns, "I'll twist that foot of yours" and squeeze life out of her. Frightened by his warning she forces herself into a maniacal laughter. This is a kind of humility, absurd to the extreme, to which woman has been reduced by man. Laxmi's forced laughter, tragi-comically alternating with agonized moans, keeps rhythm with his intoxicated laughter. Her passive reserves of patience are thus drained off by his high-handed demands and behaviour. Later Laxmi remarks that
"men are sinful, cruel and mean". He is not less cruel than his father. Raving and ranting he tortures her both mentally and physically. Unable to bear the vulgarity of his language and the all-demanding nature of Sakharam she accuses him:

I’ve never heard a kind word here. Always barking orders. Curses, oaths. Threatening to throw me out, kicks and blows. ('Wipes her eyes with the end of the sari') There I was in agony after I’d been belted, and all you wanted me to do was laugh. Laugh and laugh again. Here I am on the point of death and I’m supposed to laugh. Hell must be a better place than this. ('Whimpers') If I die, I will be free of this once and for all. (p.148)

This is the cruelty of Sakharam to Laxmi and is the cruelty meted out to woman by man in general. But the woman cannot escape from that oppression because she finds no rescue outside.

Sakharam continues to beat Laxmi. He kicks her like her husband and after a domestic quarrel such as may be
typical of unloving husbands and wives, he throws her out of the house, presumably, the same cruel way she had been thrown out by her husband earlier. Though he denounces the conventional marriage, husbands and wives, he not only behaves like one but also sympathizes with him. Once he says to Laxmi: "you get kicked by your husbands and you go and fall at their feet" (p.135) and at another time he objects to Champa's ill-treatment of her morbid husband:

What kind of a woman are you? Look, what you've done to him! He's your husband. Haven't you a heart? (p.167)

He is cruel to Champa also and tries to horrify her. He dictates his set speech to her as soon as she enters his house. He doesn't allow her to speak to Dawood. He says: "But in this house, I won't allow too much talking to strangers". When she is about to change her sari in the living room, he remonstrates: "Not here. Go in. Suppose somebody drops in. What'll he say?". He compels her to have sex with him against her wishes. He ignores the pleasure or the pain of his partner. It is sheer animal aggression that is found in Sakharam.
Both the women, Laxmi and Champa, discuss their plight. Laxmi earnestly enquires Champa: "How are you getting along here?" Then Champa frankly confesses her lot:

Getting along? Once you drink, you get along fine. But your Sakharam, he really takes his money's worth out of a woman. I've managed to last out here. What else can I do? Go out in the streets? Face half a dozen animals every day? Easier to put up with this one. (p.181)

Sakharam is possessive in his infatuation for Champa. He becomes jealous of her as soon as he learns her affair with Dawood. Unable to control and calculate the consequences of his barbarious action, he strangles her to death. The murder of this lively energetic and dominating woman shudders the audience.

Tendulkar himself is accused of making his wife tuck away her talent to tend to his needs and to raise his children while exploiting on stage and screen the theme of the New Woman and her struggle to find a voice. His wife, Meena, explains of him:
Even when I used to be a working woman, soon after our marriage, he was very possessive and cautious .... He used to keep an eye on who I spoke with, moved about with ... it's only now with age, that he has become more understanding.

It is not surprising that this play was controversial. The custodians of the society labelled it as pornographic. The Censor Board of the Maharashtra Government banned its performance. The writer was drawn into many law suits. A lot of commotion was created but when ultimately the court annulled all the bans, members of the so called gentry who knitted their eyebrows against it, now vied with one another in booking seats in advance for viewing it. The main reason for the whole turmoil against it was that the chief character in the play, an ordinary man, Sakharam Binder, has exposed for the first time the hidden filth of society ruthlessly striking at its false value system to the shock of the custodians of the society.

Referring to this aspect of the play Tendulkar was asked:
This is a highly controversial play of yours. Some people say, sex and violence reign supreme in this play whereas there could be a balanced amalgam of both. Would you like to comment?

He replied:

No body would write a play to show sex and violence. For this purpose blue films and cabaret shows are enough. I have created three-four characters in this play and everybody is an individual with a distinct background. These characters are outcast. Such people have always pent up fury, a very strong grievance against the society. Their anger looks for an occasion to burst out, but it does not find an outlet and gets misdirected. All these characters particularly Sakharam Binder, are of this type.
Not only Sakharam is cruel and aggressive but Laxmi is also rudely religious, unkind and ungrateful. "Laxmi is obstinately conventional and her religiosity amounts to unrealistic and inhuman fundamentalism". Laxmi is not a Brahmin. But she finds pleasure in following Brahminical ways. When Sakharam slaps her hard for not allowing his friend, Dawood, to join a prayer to Lord Ganapati, she argues:

What's wrong with what I said? How can a Muslim join in a prayer to Ganapati? (p.144)

Her religiosity impinges upon Sakharam easily. He himself acknowledges how she has affected him in an uncanny and mysterious way. During a domestic quarrel between them he argues with her whether he has not minimized drinking over the past year. He totally stays away from alcohol on holy festivals. He smokes pot only twice in a month. He starts worshipping the household gods and takes bath every day before worship. He becomes even impotent in her presence, that is, when both Laxmi and Champa stay with him. When Mrs.Veena Noble Dass asked, "what is the relation between
You have to consider Sakharam's growing. He comes from a Brahman family. He virtually runs away from the house, he is an outcaste in his family. He leads a different life, his roots are in that culture, and then he is a god-fearing man. He keeps referring to God in a number of situations. He is very nonchalant as far as society is concerned. When it comes to something higher than human beings, he loses his confidence. He brings Laxmi to the house and then she leaves the house. Within that span she has established certain creeds in his mind. At one point he says, 'Look, because of you I started doing my puja', 'because of you I started taking bath everyday'. He has changed even though he doesn't want to change. He wants her to adjust, but he undergoes a change because of her existence in the house. Her religiosity, her personality is something that is telling for him. After she leaves, he feels that "Well, it is over"
because it appeals to him and then it becomes a burden. He feels that "no, this won't work". Then Champa comes, an entirely different person and he is, in fact, trying to have it his way when Laxmi turns. And Laxmi at this point of life in his relation with Champa, becomes a restrictive factor. And then he cannot perform the sex act.

Laxmi's presence makes Sakharam impotent. She makes friendship with ants. She is incapable of communion with human beings. She becomes ungrateful to Champa. She is allowed to stay in Sakharam's house by Champa. But she sympathizes with her husband in her absence. She becomes jealous of her for Sakharam is dominated by her. So without any scruples of conscience she tells to Sakharam about Champa's affair with Dawood and brings about the catastrophe of Champa's murder. She doesn't feel any remorse for her death.

Laxmi's cruelty and thirst for power is very clear in her mastery over the situation after the slaughter of Champa. When Sakharam stands perplexed, it is Laxmi who
draws his attention to the immediate action. She intercedes between him and god:

What Laxmi does to Sakharam, the bringing about of his spiritual regeneration, parallels Savitri's service to her husband and to his parents, the gifts she procures for them from Yama.

After Sakharam kills Champa, his life is forfeit to the law. If his crime is found out he will be subject to capital punishment. In this critical situation, Laxmi strikes upon a stratagem to save him. "Just as she proved the saviour of his spiritual life before, now she proves the saviour of his physical life". She makes a daring decision:

We'll - we'll bury her. Where do you think? Not out there - no. Somewhere here. Inside. And we'll say that she went away. No one will suspect. I'll swear by God. He knows everything. He knows I am virtuous. He'll stand by me. He won't judge you. I'll tell him to count my good deeds as yours. I'll do everything for you. (p.197)
Laxmi's attitude to Champa and her efforts to save Sakharam reveal that there is a desire latent in human psyche for crime, cruelty and power.

Champa is Sakharam's eighth woman. She is a full-blooded rebel like himself. And she turns all his mastery into slavery. She is a woman who left her husband because she could not bear his disgusting treatment of her. She tells Laxmi:

I put up with quite a lot. I can tell you that. But when I couldn't take it any longer, I turned my back on him and walked out. (p.181)

She barely listens to the frightening set-speech of Sakharam after she enters his house. She retorts: "Is this a school or a court or something?". She bosses over everyone she meets. She asks Dawood to bring a nice pan with tobacco. She asks Sakharam to find something for eating. She baffles Sakharam with her reckless behaviour and he meekly pleads for the recognition of his mastery over the house. He himself
realizes her domineering power. She allows Laxmi to stay in the house against his orders and argues with him:

SAKHARAM : How dare you boss over me?

CHAMPA : So? Are you going to beat me?

SAKHARAM : I will when the time comes.

CHAMPA : We will wait till the time comes.
Meanwhile drink your tea. It's getting cold. (p.185)

Her physical charms contribute to her cruelty and aggression. Sakharam is infatuated with her as he has never been with any other woman. This is a new emotion for him and he expresses it by fawning over her, losing his bluster and rhetoric, and finally he performs her commands instead of ordering her as he has done with Laxmi. And "there is always a note of savage despair in Sakharam's manner of making demands", after his association with her. After he becomes impotent, she objects to his approach: "I don't mind as long as you were a man. I won't take you now?" (p.193) and she takes recourse to Dawood. She is such an attractive,
bold and powerful woman that inspite of his "bravado", "she straightens all his curves" and he is found sometimes helpless before her.

In spite of their obstinacy and bossism they are victims of one another. Sakharam is tossed between two forces. One is the spiritual rejuvenation that Laxmi endeavours to bring about in him and the other is fulfilment of animal desire that Champa demands from him and discards him later for his failure. Arundhati Banerjee says:

The presence of Laxmi and Champa at the same time has a strange effect on Sakharam as if the two different strands in his character come into direct confrontation, creating a psychological turmoil in him and resulting in his temporary impotence.

And at the end of the play he stands stupified at the dead body of Champa because he has lost his wits due to the influence of these two forces. Laxmi bears the injustice done to her by her husband as well as Sakharam. Laxmi is unreasonably thrown out of the house by her husband because she could not bear children to him. And she is pushed out by Sakharam.
because she could not bear his brutality and in turn she becomes unkind to Champa. Champa is contemptuously treated by her impotent husband and so she is forced to leave him but only to seek shelter under another savage man. As the second man proves impotent she becomes unkind to him and turns to another man bringing a doom on herself.

Karpman, a Transactional Analyst, identifies three roles in this situation of oppression: Rescuer, Persecutor and Victim. According to him, these roles form Drama Triangle which is called Rescue Triangle by Steiner. He explains:

The Rescue triangle is an efficient training ground for the acceptance of hierarchies of power in which every person is one-up to some and one-down to other.

He further argues:

having been in a powerless position, we make ourselves feel better by taking and assuming power over others.
Sakharam Binder plays the role of the Rescuer by rescuing Laxmi, the victim of her husband. But in spite of his hatred of husbands and marriage, Sakharam himself behaves like a husband and persecutes Laxmi. So he turns to the role of the Persecutor. Laxmi, the Victim, shifts to the role of the Persecutor by confiding Champa's affair with Dawood to Sakharam. Champa rescues Laxmi from the wrath of Sakharam by permitting her to stay in the house but she is persecuted by Laxmi later. The Rescuer in the Rescue Triangle rejoices at the helplessness of the Victim and the Persecutor enjoys a power while persecuting the Victim. For instance, Sakharam feels happy while rescuing Laxmi from the cruelty of both her husband and society. He enjoys his cruelty to her while persecuting her. So both the Rescuer and the Persecutor enjoy a power over their Victims.

It is not only in the behaviour and attitude of the main characters in the play that the theme of cruelty pervades but it is explicit even in the minor characters. Laxmi's husband mercilessly throws her out of his house for she could not bear children to him. With all her piety she could not question him whether she alone is responsible for their lack of children as a modern woman could have done.
She meekly submits to his irrational behaviour and leaves the house. She has none to look after her except a distant nephew. The poor state of Laxmi makes her follow Sakharam to his house.

Fouzdar Shinde, Champa’s husband, tortures her by beating her, sticking needles into her and making her do awful things. He frightens her away from his house but brings her back and puts chilly powder in her genitals. He makes her detest sex and so she resists Sakharam later. She tells: "I don't like all that man-woman stuff" and she has to get drunk before she yields to Sakharam. Without any sense of propriety he finds a sadistic pleasure in torturing Champa. He describes his wife's beauty so vulgarly that Sakharam feels a contempt for him. Even after he is beaten with chappals by her he hankers upon her and finds a solace in the company of Laxmi who sympathizes with his plight. At the end of the play when Laxmi digs a grave for Champa he knocks on the door calling Champa. He gives:

'... an eerie howl for Champa, a feeble, terrifying and monotonous whimper. It goes on, and on and on. Night reigns'. (p.198)
The long monotonous moaning of Shinde reminds one of the screeching of vultures at the end of each scene in The Vultures and is in keeping with the tone of the play. Tendulkar is known for dealing with the untouched problems of society. The character-delineation of Shinde is an instance of Tendulkar's social consciousness.

None of the characters in the play is "good". We do not wish to be like any of them. We don't identify with them or suffer with them. We do not react to them with loathing and disgust. They seem to be, in fact, people for whom we may have compassion, but with whom we have no wish to identify ourselves. This is the "realism" of the play. It is said:

... 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 conformation with 'vulgar' reality was difficult for them to bear.
Thus Tendulkar, 'the angry young man' has ruthlessly exposed the cruelty of lower middle classes without sugar-coating it with sophisticated trappings and in the characters of Laxmi and Champa he touches on his pet subject of the down-trodden, hapless female as he did in Shantata and Gidhade.
REFERENCES:


12. Ibid., p.282.


16. Ibid., p.140.


20. Ibid., p.76.