CHAPTER VII

CRUELTY IN CASTE

Kanyadan is Tendulkar's most disturbing play. The play, it is rumoured, is based on Namdev Dhasal's life. Whether that is true or not, the play centres around the utter painful and chaotic task of reforming our terribly unjust and increasingly violent society.

A young woman from a socially and politically active family that regards itself as progressive decides to marry a socially inferior but talented man. Though the abyss between them is enormous - she is an educated, affluent Brahmin and he is from a desperately poor, rural, low-caste background - her father promotes the marriage with an ambition that it would set a progressive example, but it results in an agony for his daughter. Tendulkar explores the efficacy of modernity and social reform in India through the forces this marriage unleashes. The tense, gripping play, charged with an undercurrent of cruelty, uncertainties and agony, concerns itself with issues that are crucial to all societies which have to grapple with change and with social barriers.
Nath Devlalikar is a socialist father. He has a "Craze for speech-mongering". He goes to different places to give speeches on socialism, casteism and democracy for the uplift of backward classes. His wife, Seva, is also a social worker. She conducts women's camps at various places. Both the husband and wife lead such a bee-busy life that they rarely meet each other. Nath worries:

Two weeks have gone by, and this hide-and-seek continues. When she goes to Bombay for a women's camp, I stay here to lecture in Pune. If she comes to Pune, I go to Aurangabad to take part in a rally for people's rights.

Nath is a democrat in the true sense of the word. He maintains democracy in his house also. He assures:

We have 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. (p.4)
But he follows such a democracy in his house that his daughter, Jyoti, has been waiting for fifteen days to have his audience. He himself is conscious-stricken and grieves at his irresponsibility: "We do so much for the world and we don't have time for our own children! We should be ashamed to call ourselves your parents". (p.7) When he is asked for his audience he ruthlessly asks her how much time she requires:

How much time will you take? Half an hour?

JYOTI. Fifteen minutes.

NATH. That's all? Granted! You are responsible for your mother being here ... If she gets delayed then ...

JYOTI. For the last fifteen days I've been telling myself over and over again that I should speak to both of you, together. (p.4)

In spite of his upholding of democracy, he had blackmailed his wife into marriage. He had threatened her if she refused to marry him he would shave off his hair and journey to the
Himalayas. As a democrat and socialist he is excited at the prospect of his daughter's marriage with a dalit:

NATH. ('Wind out of his sails') A brahmin?

JYOTI. No, he is a dalit.

NATH. ('Excited') Marvellous! But the name sounded like a brahmin's.

JAYAPRAKASH. Why? What if he were a brahmin?

NATH. I know. I know it doesn't make a difference. 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. (p.8)

In his enthusiasm to experiment his Gandhian principles he snubs his wife when she goes on enquiring the whereabouts of the man chosen by Jyoti. He mocks at Jayaparakash for supporting his mother. He asks him whether he knows what it is to love at first sight and explains to him that it is a
"matter of plucking the heartstrings". Even though Jyoti confesses that she has no such heartbeats, he argues in favour of Jyoti's marriage with Arun Athavale:

SEVA. .... When a girl thinks of marriage, she has to look for some kind of stability. For some compatibility in life-styles. After all, it is a matter of a lifelong relationship.

NATH. If they decide to do so, lifestyles can certainly be changed. And the ideal of stability can be different for every man. After all, he is doing his B.A., why won't he be able to stand on his own feet? (p.12)

And he covertly approves and encourages the marriage by asking Jyoti: "You have made your decision. You have, haven't you?" (p.12). In his earnestness for the marriage he ignores Seva's analysis of the problem from a practical point of view that both Arun Athavale and Jyoti are brought up in different circumstances with particular convictions and that
they can not be changed overnight. When Arun comes to their house for the first time, he is proud of breaking the barriers of caste system. He expresses his exhilaration:

.... until today, ’Break the caste system’ was a mere slogan for us. I’ve attended many inter-caste marriages and made speeches. But today I have broken the caste 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 ... (p.23)

He becomes excited at the prospect of this marriage and phoo-phoos all the evidence of the cruel conduct of Arun. Jayaprakash tells him that Jyoti has been crying whereas Arun has been singing 'Ek baamaneen falsi!'. Jyoti herself admits that Arun has twisted her arm. Nath defends this violence done to Jyoti by Arun in the context of the latter’s brought up:

Not only is he not a middle class man, he is a 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. (p.27)

He lets his daughter to risk her life for social reform. He argues with Seva that society can not be transformed through words only. The social reformers in the past did not merely give speeches on widow-marriage or write articles on it but many of them married widows. They undertook a difficult task. Nath thus allows his daughter to immolate herself for the cause of social transformation, a daring experiment on her life itself. He closes all kinds of discussion on the subject. Giving importance to the fact that Arun has a high potential as a human being - he is a poet, a creative writer - he supports his daughter:

I am with you, Jyoti. What you are doing could be both wise and foolish. But one thing is certain. It upholds the norms of civilized humanity, and therefore, I stand by you. Go ahead my child, let us see what happens. (p.31)
Blinded by his ideal convictions, Nath little foresees the entanglements that Jyoti is getting involved.

Nath realizes his fatal mistake when the dalit poet turns terribly cruel soon after his marriage with his daughter. Even then he struggles hard to make this eventful marriage a success, not for his daughter's sake but for the sake of his high ideals. He pleads with Seva:

Seva, let not this wonderful experiment fail! This dream which is struggling to turn real, let it not crumble into dust before our eyes! We will have to do something. We must have this marriage. Not necessarily for our Jyoti's sake ... This is not just a question of our daughter's life, Seva, this has ... a far wider significance ... this experiment is a very precious experiment. (p.41)

However, he is all praise for a powerful autobiographical novel written by his son-in-law till he learns the "harrowing details" of the way the dalit poet treats his daughter. As Kumar Ketkar puts it:
The mild reformer is at last furious for a totally personal and immediate reason and against a man who represents for him a member of the social class he hopes to help uplift.

Nath seeks a fathom of difference between the dalit poet and the dalit son-in-law. He becomes disgusted with this hypocrisy and wonders at it:

Such behaviour towards a pregnant wife! What happens if she dies? Such heinous behaviour by someone who wrote this beautiful autobiography? How can he? Here in these pages he describes the humiliations he has undergone with extraordinary sensitivity ... and the same man kicks his pregnant wife on her belly? How ...? How dare he do it to her? How dare he? (p.47)

And in his consternation at this inhuman behaviour he refuses to preside over the inauguration of the novel when he is mockingly asked by his son-in-law and some of his friends.
But the gnawing realization brought to him by his wife that his refusal will augment the turmoil of his daughter compels him to do what he reprimands. He turns into a hypocrite and extolles the book and its author. Jyoti accuses him of his blasphemy:

JYOTI. You attended that meeting and made a speech only because you were afraid that if you didn't, Arun would torture me more. (p.66)

Living in a world of illusion he has been believing that he can isolate the beast from the man. He fails to comprehend that there is an innate savagery incipient in man. He has been confident that man's life can be made blissful by driving out the evil in him without perceiving the fact of human existence that evil co-exists with good. And he has been teaching wrong principles to his children.

NATH. .... I don't hate Arun, I hate only those tendencies - those tendencies.
JYOTI. Tendencies! I grew up listening to such talk day in and day out. 'Hatred not for the man, but for his tendencies. No man is fundamentally evil. They must be transformed. Completely uprooted and destroyed. And then, the earth will become heaven. It is essential to awaken the god slumbering within man ...' All false, vicious claptrap! (p 87)

She teaches him the truth about life:

The truth is, you knew very well that man and his inherent nature are never really two different things. Both are one, and inseparable. And either you accept it in totality, or you reject it if you can. Very often you don't have a choice. 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 would discover this. I had to learn it on the strength of my own
experience. I had to meet a man named Arun Athavale. Arun gave me what you had withheld from me. I must acknowledge my debt to him (p.67)

He has infused his children and his audience with false hopes. He says:

'I march with utter faith in the goal', 'I grow with rising hopes' and 'cowards stay ashore, every wave opens a path for me. (p.69)

Jyoti pokes fun at his unrealistic out-look on life:

'we' shall continue to recite 'March on, Oh soldier!' and continue to lose our lives as guinea pigs in the experiment, and you, Bhai ... you will go on safely rousing the god sleeping in man. (p.69)

Nath's attempt to uplift the dalits and effect socialism succumbs his daughter. Jyoti expresses her bitterness:

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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.

(p.70)

Jyoti's rejection of his values indicates the failure of Nath's experiment and the invalidity of his notions. Vijay Tendulkar himself accepted the play as a failure. When he was awarded "the Saraswati Samman" for Kanyadan he admitted the play as a story of failure. He said:

The work which has been selected for the Saraswati Samman is not the story of a victory; it is the admission of defeat and intellectual confusion. It gives expression to a deep-rooted malaise and its pains.

Thus Nath Devlalikar put his social commitments to the test. He told his daughter: "Well done, go ahead! This is also a
revolutionary method" and he closed the doors upon her return. His maniacal urge to uproot casteism and caste distinctions from the society pushed his daughter into a sea of irrevocable misery.

He realizes his blunder and acknowledges that he has sacrificed his precious daughter for his ideal. He accuses himself that the sin she has committed is: "She took her father's words for gospel truth. She adopted her father's values. She was guided by her father's humanism and liberalism".(p.62) This is the nemesis of taking over the responsibility for the society of a great country. Accepting his defeat he desperately begs his son to do him a favour:

Reject your father. Learn to see through his naiveté and idiocy. Don't ever rely on his wisdom. If you do, you too will ruin yourself. (p.63)

Nath becomes disillusioned and he hopes to save at least his son from the clutches of his perilous idealism.
The flop of Nath Devalalikar's socialism is owing to the two factors - the low-caste background of Arun Athavale and the cruelty inherent in Arun Athavale, himself.

Arun is a poor dalit. In a small hut of eight feet by ten feet, ten of them lived. The heat of their bodies kept them warm in winter. They had no clothes on their back. They had no food in their stomach but they felt safe in their small hut. The big houses of city people frighten him. He feels safe on the street. He says:

As for me I feel safe on the street. The bigger the crowds, the safer I feel. My heart shudders when walls of cement and concrete surround me. I feel I must get up, run, get lost in the crowd. (p.16)

He has scavenger's manners. His grandfathers and great grandfathers were scavengers. Their calls polluted the Brahmin's ears. Their stomachs were used to stale and stinking bread that they had begged. Their tongues relished the flesh of dead animals. He is sure that they won't fit into the "unwrinkled Tinopal World" of the upper classes and it will
be difficult for Jyoti to lead the life of his mother. He asks Jyoti:

"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!" (p.17).

Their life is not "the Socialists' service camp. It is hell, ... A hell named life" (p.18). The suffering and oppression that their generations were subjected to, inculcated a spirit of revenge, cruelty and violence in him. He lives a death in life. He explains himself:

At times a fire blazes - I want to set fire to the whole world, strangle throats, rape and kill. Drink up the blood of the beasts, your high caste society. Then I calm down like the tantric when he comes out of his trance. Like a corpse, I live on... (p.18)

Arun carries a curse of his race. As Nath Devlalikar admires him he is also a great man. In spite of his low class background Arun has raised to the level of an educated man. He
is studying B.A. He does a part-time job. He is a poet and writer. He has written an autobiographical novel. He is a talented man. He is tossed between the rude forces of his down-trodden race and the delicacies of his individual culture. He twists very hard Jyoti's arm and immediately he repents:

Sorry ... Don't know what came over me. So sorry. Give me any punishment you like ... I'll take it ... When any one throws a challenge at me, I lose all control ... Did it hurt so much? Let me see. (p.19)

He insults her in the presence of her mother, Seva, and her brother, Jayaprakash. When Jyoti tells them that she knows everything about him, he retorts abruptly: "You don't know a shit. Shut up". (p.21) He mocks even at Seva. He tells her that there are many ways of living. They can sell liquor and that will give employment to all the members of the family. Their children can wash glasses and plates and fetch 'pan' and cigarettes. It is highly profitable. And he feels happy because his straightforward fling hurts Seva. He enjoys the discomfiture of Seva:
I was telling her about this matter of brewing illicit liquor. ('With determined obstinacy')

So I was saying that this business is highly profitable. Secondly, it is fun for the man and wife. Can take it easy. If there are children, there's work for them also, to wash glasses and plates, to fetch 'paan' and cigarettes. And very good income in the tips. Many hands to work, and so many chances to work, and so many chances to rake in money. ('Arun is happy now seeing Seva's unrest').

Later Seva remarks: "He is not someone who can fit in among us". (p.25) Jayaprakash regards him as "rudeness itself", "a complete boor". He turns cruel and violent to Jyoti. He beats her when she becomes fed up with him and decides to leave him, his hypocrisy reveals itself. He tries to blackmail her by giving a show of false concern for her. He proposes to cut his hands with a knife for having beaten her:

Give my knife back - let me tear my hands out
- at least let me do this much for my Jyoti.
Let me die ... (Repeating Jyoti's name, he sobs loudly. I am a wretch Jyoti ... I am not fit to clean your shoes ... (p.43)

Nath at once perceives his hypocrisy which is not hidden even by his drunkenness and advises him that he should not put up a public show.

Arun deliberately behaves barbariously. He kicks his pregnant wife. He treats his wife so barbariously that even their neighbours come to know of it and advise Seva that Jyoti should be taken away from him. He tells Nath and Seva that he has never called himself a civilized man. From his childhood he has seen his father get "drunk and beat his mother half dead, seen her cry her heart out". He continues:

Even now I hear the echoes of her broken sobs. No one was there to wipe her tears. My poor mother! She didn't have a father like Bhai, nor a mother like you (Seva) ... (p.44)

He is sour because Jyoti, unlike his mother has her parents to console her. He confesses that they "don't know the non-violent ways of brahmins". Drinking and wife-beating is a
part and parcel of their lives. But they too love their wives. He sympathizes with their plight for the beating is what gets publicized "but not their love. He is "a barbarian by birth". He argues that Jyoti knows him before their marriage itself. Seva reprimands him:

She thought you would improve after marriage.

ARUN. If she thought so your Jyoti is a stupid fool. (p.44)

Arun's argument reveals his obstinacy and opportunism. He is both unable and unwilling to be reformed. He sees to be avenging the atrocities that his race had been suffering for ages at the hands of the upper classes through his torture of Jyoti. His revengeful behaviour shows that it is more his nature than the oppression that his great grandfathers suffered which tortures Jyoti both physically and psychologically. So it is mainly owing to the innate savagery in man. Nath is flabbergasted by Arun's repulsive cruelty. Seva accuses him that he is an idler. He lives like a parasite on the money of his wife. He doesn't know even the meaning of gratitude. He drinks and has a hell of a time with his
friends. For entertainment he kicks his wife in the belly. Seva scorns him that he is avenging on the high caste for its suppression of dalits:

 Doesn't his wife belong to the high caste? In this way he is returning all the kicks aimed at generations of his ancestors by men of high caste. It appears that this is the monumental mission he has set out to fulfil. (p.48)

The man who has written an exemplary book on the exploitation of the dalits himself is an exploiter. He exploits his wife. He doesn't stop at that. He raises scandals on her parents also. He calls Seva "a procuress who supplies girls from the Seva dal to the Socialist leaders". He calls Nath a eunuch. His vulgarity and wickedness are heinous. Jayaprakash taunts his father to understand the behaviour of Arun. He tells:

.... Hitler's Nazi troops had inhumanly decimated the Jews .... 'And today the Jews have become the murderers of Palestinian women and children ... this means the very victims of violence may go on to perpetrate the same
brutal violence upon others. Perhaps they get a peculiar enjoyment out of it. Perhaps those who are hunted derive great pleasure in hunting others when they get an opportunity to do so. The oppressed are overjoyed when they get a chance to oppress others". (p.51)

Jayaprakash continues his testimony on the behaviour of Arun:

... we don't feel, 'let others not endure oppression like we do, at least not because of us, and never by our hands'. On the contrary, the moment one gets the chance one becomes a greater tyrant ... one persecutes with a vengeance, because one exults in doing that ... Yesterday's victim is today's victimizer .... there is no hope of a man's gaining nobility through experience, he can only become a greater devil. (p.51)

Through this illustrious analysis of man's savage nature, Jayaprakash tries "to understand the behaviour of that bastard Arun". In spite of his education and creative faculty Arun remains barbarious to his very core. It is as if he is
not willing to reform himself. He seems to like the filthy and stinking life of his great grandfathers. So he perpetuates the same cruel and vulgar life by his wild revengeful instincts.

Arun is an insolent blackmailer. He boasts of himself and his book. He poses as a busy man. He tells that he receives a stream of invitations either asking him to give a speech or inviting him to dinner or tea. He prides in himself: "I am a celebrated writer now. And in high society, the celebrated writer is next in demand to the pet dog." (p.53) In the same vein he introduces his friends, Hameer Rao Kamle - "Noted essayist of dalit literature. An excellent but neglected writer" - and Vamanseth Nevargaonkar - "A critic of dalit literature, he spends his money in feeding dalit writers". Similarly he speaks highly of his book. He tells Nath:

... professors are shocked out of their wits by the experiences described in this book.... Such a writing has not appeared in the last ten decades - so buzz the insects in your field of criticism. It is said that the book
will get the Sahitya Akademi award. Let it come. Who cares? (To his friends). What do those bloody buggers know of life? All Maratha literature is stuffed with the petty bourgeois outlook and with soppy romanticism. I am the only one after the saint poets - who else is there? (p.55)

Arun is all praise for himself and tries to blackmail Nath as the latter refuses to preside over a discussion on his autobiographical novel. He tells Nath that his refusal will render room for many a gossip. People say that father-in-law and son-in-law are not on good terms and he tortures his daughter. Others say "the rise of son-in-law could not be endured by the father-in-law" and "The rise of the dalit son-in-law to literary heights caused heartburn in the upper caste, socialist father-in-law". (p.55) He accuses him of snobbery:

Your connections are with the elite. Our friends here belong to a low caste, brought up on the flesh of dead animals.... our ancestors trudged around with a load of shit on their heads. It is my good fortune which made
a fair and lovely bird from a well-to-do, high class background, fall to my lot .... (p.56)

After this fling at his father-in-law he leaves room like "a triumphant wrestler departing from the arena". Arun enjoys the fun. He has an upper caste girl in his pocket to pour out all his pent-up revolt against the upper classes and he also has her family, her father, her mother and her brother to attack. His "overweening arrogance" nauseates Nath. Nath tells Seva later that Aruna's visit has made everything "filthy, dirty and polluted" in his house.

Nath Devlalikar's unpracticable nobility of thought launches the whole family into a deep turmoil. He has instilled his idealism into his children. So Jyoti rather impulsively and thoughtlessly gives a word to Arun, a dalit. She is taken in by Arun's poems and autobiography. She expresses absolute confidence in him. "His poems and his autobiography have inspired me with complete faith in him." (p.10) She has not felt "rainbow" romantic feelings. It is as if he has asked her to take tea and she has accepted the proposal. She ignores the precautions sounded by her mother that "decisions about one's life must not be made so lightly". Obstinately like the daughter of her father she
goes ahead towards her impending destiny. Once she becomes disillusioned, she realizes that her father has been misleading her and accuses him for having kept her for years from the truth of life, from the fact that "man and his inherent nature are never really two different things. Both are one, and inseparable". (p. 67) This awareness of the commingling of good and evil dawns on her only after she marries Arun. She closes all the possibility of her relief from Arun's cruelty by resolving to live with him, by becoming herself 'an untouchable, a scavenger.' She flees from the high values of her socialist father, defies his idealism deliberately and succumbs to the devil that lurks in the opportunist named Arun.

Seva and Jayaprakash are antitheses to Nath Devlalikar and Jyoti. They oppose the marriage of Jyoti with Arun from practical point of view. She warns Jyoti that it will be difficult for her to adjust with Arun from the point of their different brought up. Jayaprakash tries to convince Nath that marriage is "a knot tied for a lifetime". So they have to foresee the pros and cons of their revolutionary decision. Their argument fades in the face of the aggressive idealism of Nath and the innocent obstinacy of his daughter.
to advance on the foot prints of her father. The culmination
of the play reveals the vulnerability of Nath's principles
and the validity of Seva's practical insight into the prob-
lem. It also raises a number of significant issues. As
Kumar Ketkar puts it:

There is some terrible truth in Tendulkar's
play about the violence between 'dalit' hus-
bands and brahmin or upper caste wives. The
violence is real. And does one excuse such
violence because it is a kind of revenge
against centuries of anti-'dalit' violence?
This is the most disturbing aspect of the
play .... It raises all kinds of questions,
including the correct paths of improvement of
the state of life of the oppressed. It raises
questions about violence and non-violence as
means of social change. Even the dimension of
male violence against women is not excluded.

According to Steiner's theory of Rescue Triangle, Arun stands
for all the dalits of the ages, the Victims who were harassed
by the upper classes, Persecutors. Then the roles shift
Jyoti, who represents the upper classes, is victimized by the
Persecutor, Arun. Thus Victim-Persecutor transaction is complete. The Persecutors, upper classes, could have enjoyed the rescuing of their Victims. Likewise Arun, the Persecutor of Jyoti, feels a demonic pleasure while victimizing his Victim, Jyoti. In human world as opportunity comes, a Victim turns into a Persecutor. The cruelty at the heart of man is everlasting. It is never completely annihilated. And the quintessence of the play lies in the poignant manner in which it brings out the agonies in the brutalization of human life and the pathetic manner with which fellow human beings look at such acts, impotently unable to solve the riddle of human psyche.
REFERENCES:

* Quoted from Kanyadan, Vijay Tendulkar, translated by Gowri Ramnarayan (Bombay : OUP, 1996), p.3. All further textual references are from this text parenthetically quoted.

