

Unheard Voices of Women Characters: A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala, Kanyadaan and Sakharam Binder

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to explore the unheard voices of women characters in Vijay Tendulkar's selected plays Kamala(1981), Kanyadaan(1992), and Sakharam Binder(1972). Vijay Tendulkar, renowned for his social critique and psychological exploration, often portrays the silent suffering and social marginalization of women in post-independence Indian society. This paper investigates the complex narratives surrounding women who, though central to the plot, are often relegated to the background, their struggles and emotions overshadowed by patriarchal norms.

In Kamala, Tendulkar gives voice to the victimization of women within the context of a corrupt media system, illustrating the transactional nature of human relationships. The play critiques the commodification of women and questions the ethical compromises made in the pursuit of power and truth. In Kanyadaan, Tendulkar addresses the intersection of caste, gender, and social expectations, wherein the protagonist's daughter becomes a symbol of the sacrifices demanded by traditional family values. Through the character of the daughter, the play critiques the gendered expectations placed upon women within a conservative social framework. Sakharam Binder portrays the complex dynamics between a man and his various female companions, where the women are treated as objects for emotional and physical exploitation, reflecting deeper societal failures.

Through these plays, Tendulkar crafts narratives that shed light on the silence and suppression of women, offering an opportunity to interrogate the larger sociocultural structures that continue to marginalize women's voices. This paper highlights how Tendulkar's portrayal of these women characters challenges traditional gender roles and opens avenues for a re-evaluation of power dynamics and social change in contemporary India.

Key Words: Unheard Voices, Exploitation, Silence, Marginalization, Patriarchy.

Introduction:

Post-independence Indian drama often reflects the patriarchal system where women are subjugated through societal norms, familial roles, and traditional values. Women are portrayed as victims of oppression, confined to subservient roles, and marginalized in both public and private spheres, reflecting the entrenched gender inequalities of the time. This paper explores the unheard voices of women characters in Vijay Tendulkar's plays Kamala, Kanyadaan, and Sakharam Binder. Renowned for his social critique and psychological insight, Tendulkar often portrays the silent suffering and social marginalization of women within post-independence Indian society. Through these selected plays, this study examines the complex narratives of women who, while central to the storyline, are frequently pushed to the margins, with their struggles and emotions overshadowed by entrenched patriarchal norms. The paper delves into how Tendulkar's portrayal of these women highlights their silenced voices and the broader societal forces that shape their experiences.

Kamala(1981)

In Vijay Tendulkar's play Kamala, the themes of exploitation, commodification, and patriarchal oppression of women are brought to the forefront through the characters of Kamala, Jaising, and

Sarita. The play vividly critiques the societal mechanisms that reduce women to mere objects in a market-driven world, where their worth is dictated by the desires and perceptions of men.

Kamala as a Silent Victim: Kamala represents the ultimate victim of patriarchal systems that commodify women. Throughout the play, she is portrayed as a silent figure, an object who is bought and sold in the marketplace. Her tragic fate is symbolic of the countless women trapped in such systems, where their agency and identity are stripped away. Kamala's silence is not just a lack of verbal expression; it is indicative of the systemic silencing imposed on women within oppressive environments. Her inability to voice her thoughts or desires renders her invisible in the larger narrative of human trafficking and exploitation. This silence contrasts sharply with Jaising's vocal, self-righteous behaviour. Jaising, a journalist who initially seeks to expose the truth about human trafficking, becomes complicit in the very system he wishes to condemn. His actions reflect the hypocrisy often found in society, where individuals may claim to fight for justice but end up perpetuating the same injustices they decry. Kamala's silence is not merely a passive state but an active reflection of how women are forced into submission and silenced by forces beyond their control. Her lack of voice highlights the marginalization that women like her face in a patriarchal society where their needs, emotions, and desires are disregarded or ignored.

Unheard Voices of Women: Kamala's voice, in its truest sense, is unheard throughout the play. She is allowed only to express herself through her body and physical gestures, which become the primary means of communication for her. However, this expression is not one of freedom, but of submission to the demands and desires of others. Her body becomes a commodity for Jaising to possess, rather than a vessel for her own expression. Kamala's dialogue is minimal, often resigned to the brief moments she speaks, but even then, her words carry no power. She is not asked what she wants or needs; instead, she is subjected to what is desired of her by men like Jaising.

Her silence, combined with the few words she utters, forces the audience to reflect on how society reduces women to their physicality, ignoring their inner worlds, emotions, and complex identities. Kamala is a living symbol of women who are silenced in real-life trafficking situations, where their needs and rights are overlooked in favour of their exploitation. Through Kamala, Tendulkar challenges the audience to recognize how society systematically erases the voices of vulnerable women, denying them the space to speak out and demand justice.

Sarita's Role and the Patriarchal Context : In contrast to Kamala's voicelessness, Sarita, Jaising's wife, represents another side of the patriarchal system, though she, too, is constrained in her own way. Sarita is a middle-class woman who, despite being more vocal than Kamala, still operates within the limitations of the societal norms of her time. Sarita's relationship with Jaising exposes the gender dynamics within marriage. While she is the wife of an educated and seemingly progressive man, she is still subjected to his decisions, even when they are questionable or unethical.

Jaising's acquisition of Kamala as part of his investigative journalism symbolizes a patriarchal disrespect for women's autonomy. Sarita, despite her emotional distress, becomes complicit by not fully challenging Jaising's actions. She embodies the difficulty many women face, where even in superficially equal or progressive marriages, they must silently bear the weight of patriarchal decisions. Sarita's role further emphasizes how women are often left to deal with the consequences of male actions, even when these actions go against their own values.

Together, the characters of Kamala, Sarita, and Jaising paint a complex picture of how women are commodified and silenced in a patriarchal society. Through Kamala's tragic silence and the quiet suffering of Sarita, Tendulkar critiques the ways in which women's voices are suppressed, their bodies exploited, and their agency stripped away, both within the oppressive systems of human trafficking and within the microcosm of domestic relationships.

Kanyadaan (1990)

The central theme of the play *Kanyadaan* revolves around the contradictions between progressive ideologies and the unchanging social prejudices that still pervade society, particularly with regard to caste. The key characters like Nath Devalikar, Seva Devalikar, Jyoti Devalikar, Jayaprakash Devalikar, and Arun Athawale, each represent different aspects of social and familial expectations, and their interactions illuminate the complexities of caste, gender, and social progress.

Jyoti's Tragic Subjugation: Jyoti Devalikar, Nath and Seva's daughter, is a symbol of sacrifice. Her marriage to Arun Athawale, a Dalit youth from a family of manual scavengers, is intended to be an act of social progress. Her father, Nath, a socialist MLA, believes in breaking the caste system, and his support for this marriage signifies his commitment to the idea of social equality. However, this progressive stance is not enough to protect Jyoti from the harsh realities of caste prejudice and personal suffering.

After marrying Arun, Jyoti becomes a victim of both personal and societal expectations. Although the marriage is meant to transcend caste barriers, Jyoti's life is soon shattered by her husband's violent tendencies and his deep-rooted insecurities stemming from his lower-caste identity. Her emotional and physical suffering exposes the fragility of social reform when faced with the harshness of entrenched societal norms. Jyoti's sacrifice, intended as a symbol of progress, becomes her downfall. She is unable to escape the oppressive nature of her marriage, nor can she challenge the expectations that her family and society have placed on her. Her tragic subjugation reflects the ways in which women, even in progressive contexts, are expected to endure for the sake of family honour and social change.

Unheard Voices in the Name of Progress : One of the most distressing aspects of *Kanyadaan* is the silence of Jyoti's voice throughout her suffering. Despite the progressive ideology espoused by her father Nath, her emotional turmoil is ignored by those around her. Nath, who believes he is challenging caste by supporting Jyoti's marriage, fails to see the human cost of his idealism. He cannot fully recognize his daughter's suffering because he is blinded by the righteousness of his political stance. Similarly, Arun, despite being in a lower caste and bearing the weight of that societal stigma, continues to impose his own violent behaviour on Jyoti, further silencing her.

Seva, Jyoti's mother, is also complicit in the suppression of her daughter's needs. Although she may outwardly support the marriage as a progressive act, Seva's personal biases come to the surface when she expresses disapproval of the union, especially when her daughter's happiness is threatened. Seva represents the traditional mindset that clings to caste distinctions, even if it means sacrificing her daughter's well-being for the sake of familial reputation. Jayaprakash, Nath and Seva's son, sees the flaws in his father's thinking. He recognizes the emotional toll that Jyoti's marriage has taken on her and understands the unacknowledged gender dynamics at play. However, even he is largely powerless to intervene. Jayaprakash's awareness of his father's shortcomings highlights the generational conflict within the family, but like everyone else, he too remains helpless in alleviating Jyoti's suffering.

Jyoti's silence becomes a powerful allegory for countless women who endure suffering in the name of family honour, societal progress, or social ideals. Her inability to voice her distress or break free from the oppressive system encapsulates the harsh reality that, even within progressive frameworks, women are often expected to bear the burdens of societal change without being afforded the agency to live freely and authentically. The play underscores the paradox that, in the pursuit of progress, women's voices are still relegated to the background, and their suffering remains overlooked.

Sakharam Binder (1972)

The playwright delves into the complex and often disturbing dynamics of human relationships, particularly those between men and women, within a patriarchal society. The protagonist, Sakharam, is a man who takes in women who have been abandoned by their husbands, but rather than offering them refuge, he subjugates them to his abusive and controlling nature. The play presents a stark exploration of gender, power, and silence, revealing the emotional and psychological toll of these interactions on the female characters, who are trapped in cycles of abuse and exploitation.

The Silence of Women: One of the most striking elements of Sakharam Binder is the way Tendulkar portrays the silence of women in the play. The female characters, such as Laxmi and Champa, while physically present, are emotionally and psychologically controlled by Sakharam. Their voices are suppressed under the weight of his dominance. Sakharam's treatment of these women reflects the societal norms that prioritize male authority and reduce women to mere objects of desire or tools for fulfilling a man's needs. His manipulative and abusive behaviour keeps the women in a state of submission, denying them the autonomy to speak their truths or express their desires. This silence is not just a result of Sakharam's personal cruelty but is also an indictment of the larger patriarchal structures that perpetuate such subjugation.

The women's silence is a key element in understanding their oppression. Laxmi, for example, enters Sakharam's life after being abandoned by her husband, and while she initially shows signs of resistance, her efforts are quickly quelled by the oppressive atmosphere Sakharam creates. She becomes resigned to her fate, unable to challenge the authority he imposes over her life. In this way, the silence of the women is both a personal experience of trauma and a collective reflection of the oppressive patriarchal system they inhabit. Tendulkar skilfully uses this silence to emphasize the deep-rooted power imbalances that prevent women from exercising agency or escaping cycles of abuse.

Unheard Suffering and Resistance: Though the women in Sakharam Binder seem passive and resigned, the play subtly suggests that they are not without inner resistance. Their suffering, while apparent, is not always passive. Laxmi's eventual attempt to break free from Sakharam's control and Champa's brief moments of defiance indicate that there is a hidden resilience beneath the surface. However, this resistance remains unheard and unacknowledged, not only because of the social conditioning that compels women to accept their fate but also because the male characters, particularly Sakharam, overpower them physically and emotionally.

This unspoken resistance reveals the complexity of the women's experiences. They are not simply victims but also individuals who possess a sense of agency that is continually suppressed. Tendulkar critiques the way society conditions women to internalize their oppression, making them believe that resistance is futile. The patriarchal structures that surround them do not allow for

genuine freedom or self-expression. The men, like Sakharam, serve as enforcers of these structures, using violence, control, and manipulation to maintain their dominance.

Tendulkar uses the women's experiences to critique the larger social and political systems that perpetuate gender inequality. He shows how these systems silence the voices of women and deny them the opportunity to shape their own destinies. In doing so, he emphasizes the devastating consequences of a society that values male power over female agency.

Themes of Unheard Voices in Tendulkar's Works: Common Grounds

All three plays expose the oppressive patriarchal structures that dictate how women should behave and what roles they should fulfil. In each of these plays, women are either victims of violence or are placed in situations where they are forced to suppress their voices to maintain the balance of family, caste, or society. Tendulkar highlights the invisibility of women's suffering in such systems. In "Kamala," women are literally bought and sold, symbolizing the commodification of women in a patriarchal society. In both "Kanyadaan" and "Sakharam Binder," women are similarly objectified—either as symbols of social reform or as means of satisfying male desires. Tendulkar critiques how women's autonomy is stripped away in these structures.

The unspoken pain of women in these plays reveals a broader societal tendency to ignore or undermine women's voices. Women's suffering becomes a silent backdrop to the narrative, and only through their suffering do the inherent inequalities in the social and familial order become visible. Although the female characters in these plays face silencing, there are glimpses of resistance and individual agency. The plays do not entirely portray women as passive victims; they also showcase the complexities of their emotions, choices, and attempts at asserting themselves. However, these voices are often suppressed by the oppressive systems around them.

Conclusion:

In the plays like Kamala, Kanyadaan, and Sakharam Binder, Vijay Tendulkar masterfully brings to light the silenced voices of women who suffer under patriarchy, exploitation, and societal expectations. By focusing on the muted or repressed emotions of his female characters, Tendulkar underscores the importance of giving a platform to the unheard voices of women in a society that often disregards their agency. His works demand that we listen to the silenced, question societal norms, and recognize the profound psychological and emotional toll of patriarchy on women.