

Women and Family in Vijaya Tendulkar's *Sakhram Binder*

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Abstract:If civilization is the uniqueness of humanity and family is the main stay of civilization and joint action of men and women is the bedrock of a nation, it is imperative that without the help of women, no nation can survive. If there is one 'system' that governs any society and its institutions, it is family system. Various discourses like religion, history, psychology, philosophy, politics, epistemology, media, legal system, industry, commerce and trade, art and literature and score of other domains have taken biased stand against women and contributed their share in subordinating women. The paper studies how Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* (1977) portrays the image of women as the prominent theme by juxtaposing human relationships-especially man-woman relationships. Although almost everyone would agree that men and women are different, how different they are is still undefined for most of the people. By simply revealing how men and women are different in all areas of their lives, he shows the latent hierarchical relationship between both genders.

Keywords: patriarchy, domination, family, hierarchy, gender, subordination

Tendulkar as a responsible writer, perceives the realities of the human society without any preconceived notions, reacts to them as a sensitive human being and writes about them in his plays. In most of his plays he deals with gender inequality, social inequality, power games, self-alienation, false consciousness, sex and violence. In C. Coelho aptly observes,

In his portrayal of human relations and tensions, Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egotistical mass and equally self-centered society. There is nothing superficial or exaggerated in his depiction of the vital and other stages of man in our society today (1994:34).

The play was written originally in Marathi and was first performed in 1972, produced and directed by Kamlakar Sarang. The play since then has been adapted and translated into many Indian languages, including Hindi, Bengali and English. Kumaud Mehta and Shanta Gokhale translated it into English. Oxford India Published it in *Collected Plays In Translation*. There are five major characters in the play and the action takes place in the house of Sakharam. Even as many of his plays derived inspiration from real-life incidents or

social upheavals, which provide clear light on harsh realities, *Sakharam Binder* is also inspired by his friend who narrates an incident from a news paper. It's a story about a book binder who catches up other men's discarded women and homeless, destitute or murdered with impunity, and takes them in as domestic servants, sex partners and exploits them. With the use of his dramatic art, Tendulkar made him alive on the stage.

Sakharam gives a typical self introduction to Laxmi. He warns her not move anywhere without his permission and not to allow any one in his absence. She instructs her to cover her head if any stranger comes in and to be brief in her answers. Sakharam says that he would give her only two saris per a year and that too not any 'fancy' one. She will be provided only two square meals. Water is available from the well, if not she has to walk for one mile to fetch water from the river. She has to do all the house work including

“one last thing to be his wife. Anyone with a little sense will know what to make of that” [126].

Sakharam's attitude towards Laxmi speaks volumes about the status of women in Indian society. The patriarchy develops the mentality in men that turns them to believe and behave that cleaning, cooking, fetching water, obeying the orders, etc. are women's work. Violent dominating frame of mind of male dominant society coverts men's work into kicking, beating, torturing and harassing a woman.

Sakharam's interaction with his neighbor Dawood reveals the 'insider' in him. He doesn't allow Dawood to see her as he did previously and comments that, 'there is no spark left in her now'. [129] Though he advocates women's rebellion, Sakharam thinks that the suppressed wives should respect their husbands however inhuman and brutal their husbands may be. He is a very tactful person who attracts the discarded women, sheds crocodile tears at their miserable condition created by their husbands whom he appears to attack vehemently. For him, sexual activity is justifiable at anytime and any cost. He is more hypocritical than the 'husbands', without involving himself in marriage, he treats women in the same way as the 'husbands' treat them. He is a libertine appearing as a rebel and saviour.

“The myth of his working class secularism”, as Sumit Mitra says, “is also exploded as the sexual jealousy in him wells up only when Champa shares her bed with Dawood, a Muslim” (1998:19).

That image of a deserted women is palpable is clear in every word of Sakharam. It is not an exaggeration to say that no other character is as outspoken as Sakharam when it is about man -woman relationships on the Indian stage. He says that he is frank and he doesn't like double -talk. While comparing his *Mridanga* with women, he snares and shamelessly declares." Just now it's here on my lap. But I am quite capable of throwing it away in a garbage can. I'll hardly feel the loss. I won't even look at it twice"[130]. While projecting the hellish condition of a deserted woman who is trapped by a man, the playwright further discloses the ruthless logic of men in branding her a 'whore' after using her till the end. Sakharam compares women in the hands of men as *Ganja*. His discourse goes on like this,

Sakharam's sarcastic tone about women has some similarities with modern artists who project the predicament of modern women especially those who are in the profession of prostitution both in books and on the screen. "Hinduism in him" V.S. Naipaul observes — "has been reduced to belief in honesty and a rejection of all shaming action"(1980:81). Thus, Sakharam reminds us of Naranappa of U.R. Anantha Murthy's novel, *Samskara*. Naranappa also broke every known taboo, drank liquor, and moved closely with his Muslim friends, had cast off his lawfully-wedded Brahmin wife, and lived with a low caste woman. Laxmi's curiosity to know if Sakharam's previous wife had children contrastingly traces out the gender construction in studying the very image of women. Laxmi was abandoned by her husband because she was unable to bear a child; she is a victim of patriarchal gender stereo types constructed about "true womanhood" or femininity.

Image of Laxmi takes a sharp edge with *Ganesh Puja* scene in the play and in fact this incident provokes Sakharam to send her away . Laxmi's grip over Sakharam starts developing in the name of tradition and religion. In fact Laxmi tries to use this mechanism at least to control him against mental and physical violence. Interestingly, Tendulkar, is also 'confused' and 'has no scientific method of analysis'(Samant,1993:67). Ironically, in Meena Tendulkar's words, though he was very 'possessive and cautious' soon after marriage, with age 'he has become more understanding'(Samant,1993:67). Though, Tendulkar appears to be more interested in exposing through this play the hypocrisy found at a personal level in the man-woman relationship in the traditional Indian Society, he, in fact, tries to analyse the complex situations he has presented in the play.

Laxmi appears throughout the play as religious, obedient, soft, hard working, and sensitive. Laxmi as described in the play looks passive and her behaviour, her devotion, gesture, expressions, and the way she speaks attracts Sakharam. She appears submissive, docile but she is the woman who has internalized all the values of male-dominated society, she is capable of performing all the domestic works dictated by Sakharam. But later, Laxmi's physical torture along with Sakharam's favor to a Muslim turns her to be a turn coat to ideology of Sakharam's house and forces her to leave the house. Sakharam tries to convince Laxmi that she has somehow won him relatively. She has some substantial impact upon him. He drinks less of late, has *ganja* only twice in a month, does *puja* regularly, takes bath early in the morning and wears clean clothes. He also has heard a news about a new bird. He reveals his future woman,

Dawood: I mean, when are going to get a new bird?

Sakharam: (*Thinking*) Eh? Oh yes, of course. Actually I did hear something two days ago. A police *fouzdar* in Chimkhada has just been sacked. My guess is that his wife will leave him in another week or so. Nobody she can call her own. there's just a step mother. For all you know, something might happen in a day or two [154].

The first Act can be bioscopic to find various forms and dynamics of violence imbibed in the theme. The Act is presented in twelve scenes. Each Scene deals with gender stereo types and various forms of violence exercised by male domination either within existing social institutions like family, marriage, caste, religion or within the house or the “space” reconstructed by Sakharam which is claimed to be free from bondages of family, caste, religion and morality.

Projecting a good looking young woman like Champa between two sexists’ men with the same tones on the traditional stage of Marathi drama has raised a lot of heat and dust. This scene in the play consciously hurts the religious moralist sentiments and psyche of the society at large, including authority- Censor board. Analyzing the psychology of the men in the play, Dr. Veena Noble Dass applies the concepts of psychoanalysis and observes, “It was in essence a protest against exorbitant demands of society, especially in the sexual sphere, on the life of the individual”(1988:103). She also relates Freud's theory from his famous essay titled “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Man”(1988:103). According to him for men fall in love with women (1) the woman has to belong to some other man as there would be no attraction felt for her until she becomes engaged or married. (2) Her reputation must not be entirely chaste as this varies from a tendency of flirtation to the extremes of promiscuity. (3) A sense of preciousness and uniqueness is attached to her in a much higher degree than is usual and (4) The man should have a constant fantasy of saving her from various imaginary dangers.

As the play moves on, the Second Act witnesses a kind of radical change in Sakharam while Champa physically submits to Sakharam. Champa initially strongly opposes Sakharam’s sexual advances. She tells that she is not that type of woman. But Sakharam compels her. He says:“The woman I bring here has got to be a wife to me. That’s all fixed when I decide to keep her here. There were seven and not one said no” [168]. Laxmi exhibits an archetypal identity in her discussion. She is a modern Hindu woman, who struggles to establish the norms of the society at the cost of her self-respect. Laxmi is portrayed as a woman deserted by her husband and living with another man is suggestive of a type of Savitri by Mohan R Limaye (1977:2).

Laxmi’s reaction at this juncture reminds us what Kanva Muni advices Shakuntala in *Abignyana Shakuntala* about the role and function of an ideal house wife:

As a wife, you must serve the elders in the family; must treat your co-wives as friends; if your husband gets angry, you should not oppose him; you must never show pride over good fortunes; you must always be very modest and polite; a bride will be called a good wife only if she behaves so; otherwise she will be responsible for the downfall of her family name”(Maya Pandit,2007:64).

The horror of domestic violence is always accompanied by the very image of women in India. In *Sakharam Binder*, domestic violence is manifested mainly as domestic rape. This is clearly seen with the arrival of Champa. We rarely see her venturing into the outside world where there are even other kinds of violence against women like Champa (Gokhale,2001:109). The white in Champa's grey-black portrait comes the readiness with which she offers Laxmi shelter. Though she looks seductive, she is the one who has suffered most on account of her voluptuous body while the men have sought their selfish pleasures from it. Champa seems generous to Laxmi. Arundhati Banerjee observes that: "Champa shows kindness and generosity when she convinces Sakharam to give shelter to Laxmi, a potential rival" (2003:580).

Tendulkar mocks at the moralities of Indian family system. The sole culprit for the disintegration of all families in the play is the impotence or barrenness. Feminist's argument that biological factors can never be a base to define hierarchy between man and woman is proved true. From times immoral, patriarchy is justified primarily based on the physicality or potency of men and has become an eternal trap to the both genders.

There is great interpolation between the roles of Lakshmi and Champa. In fact they represent two different spheres of the female gender; and two forces; that are influenced by artificial codes of ethics and reactive codes of naturalist respectively. Her belief reminds one of great sayings of Indian thinkers who proposed mythical woman like Damayanti and Sita as role models to women(Abhlash and Sabina,1998). Lakshmi also curses Champa for not being loyal to her husband. She strongly believes that God will rescue her from the danger of evil Champa. She goes to the extent of praying to Gods to punish her. She is a assimilated personification of 'Hindu Wife'.

The final scene of the play is one of the master pieces of Tendulkar's plays as it opens a Pandora box of criticism. Tendulkar is highly successful in creating a tragic end to the play. Many world famous tragedies create sympathy for the characters and leaves the audience with a sense of catharsis. *Sakharam Binder* also leaves the audience with a sense of puzzlement accompanied by a question about the status of women. Laxmi gathers her courage from a belief that Therefore, when Sakharam forces Laxmi to leave the house, she reveals to him Champa's infidelity and degrades herself completely. She exemplifies with tone of familiar apostasy and loyalty according to Chanukhya's words, "good woman is the one who is pious, expert in household chores, true and faithful to her husband and who never speaks lie to him"([Pallavi](#),2014).

Though *Sakharam Binder* shocked the conservative society even more than *The Vultures* and was acclaimed as 'Tendulkar's most intensely naturalistic play', the play is not without faults. One reason is that Sakharam is very verbose and repetitive. Some of his repetitions could have been avoided without affecting his portrayal. Nadkarni feels that the play is not an artistic success since it acquires a tingle of melodrama. He says:

It is impossible to believe that a cold and calculating man like Sakharam would rush to throttle Champa on the nearest hint of her infidelity. To murder even when angered is not so easy a task, and it is only a Shakespeare who gradually builds up the climax of Othello in the fashion to make it fully convincing. However, even if it is a failure it is a glorious failure”(1972:23).

The play can be understood as a revelation of political meaning of the institution of family and man-woman relationships. All the romance and glamour of marriage evaporates under the terrible scrutiny of Tendulkar’s critical eye. The Censor Board had refused to issue the play a certificate on the ground that it lowered the sacredness of the institution of marriage, that it aroused the passion of dogs and pigs and even that it showed a Hindu wife who assaulted her husband in spite of his divine rights. Sakharam is a victim of the same fate for what he calls other husbands ‘impotent’ ‘swine’ and ‘gutless breed.’

V.M. Madge observes an unwitting deconstruction lies beneath the play as it purports to present the ‘shocking’ lifestyle of an unconditional Sakharam Binder. Sakharam is blissfully unaware of his exalted nature of himself and his love of showmanship (2007:64). Through the two ironical scenes Tendulkar and the protagonist seem to be lost in the desire of shocking the audience. Sakharam’s tirade against husbands and bringing the Ganesh idol home are too conventional to the audience. The change in him is not due to Laxmi as he is neither struck by her nor is stuck with her, as he is to become later on with Champa.

This is another dimension in man-woman relationships. The performance of *Sakharam Binder* in 2004 at the month long Tendulkar Festival in New York proved that Tendulkar was wholly accessible to a new audience across the Atlantic. One reviewer called it the “Spell Binder”(Ramnarayan,2008:90). The *Fifth Woman*, a play written in English as a prelude to *Sakharam Binder*, was premised at the festival. *The New York Times* wrote about *Sakharam Binder*.

Sakharam’s tragedy turns out to lineage on his budding social consciousness, his arrested enlightenment Like Brecht’s mother courage, he exploits a corrupt system for personal advantage, and then discovers that the price of playing the game is everything he hoped to protect. Unlike Brecht though, Mr. Tendulkar never judges his protagonists but concentrates instead and painting him with unsetting compassion, receptiveness and thoroughness. His play deserves to be much better known in the U.S than it is”(Ramnarayan, 2008:90).

Finally, Tendulkar is highly successful in locating major familial problems of Indian women and uniquely portrays the image of women through Champa and Laxmi. Although both are extraordinarily portrayed, they are identified to be with their human element each and every women in way or another. While representing Sakharam as a man of double standards that patriarchy sanctions and Champa and Laxmi symbolizing two crowds of women who react to this kind of men and product of patriarch in return, Tendulkar finally gives choice to women to either submit to or revolt against the patriarchal system. The play adds yet another dimension to what Tendulkar is saying about the man-woman relationship.

Apart from fulfillment of pleasure, the need for protecting one another is the base for the gender relationships and harmonious life.

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