
SLAVEHOOD TO WOMANHOOD

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Abstract

The paper probes into human relationships, since the present problem is closely concerned with mind and heart and the crusade is against age-old established systems. He discovers the pattern of human relationship emerging under the weight of multi-dimensional pressures and tensions. The novelty of the play lies in the theme of the struggle and consequently the sufferings, that the 'drop outs' of the family and society, have to undergo in order to stay alive and come to terms with life. He questions on the status of Lakshmi and Champa in the male-dominated feudal society where all the consequences of maladjustment are thrust by the breadwinner on the bread-dependent female.

Keywords: Human relationship, Struggle, Suffering, Male-domination

Tendulkar affirms that every individual desires to establish a permanent relationship with someone. Usha Pathania opines that "no one grows in a vacuum; one's life intersects the lives of others" (3). *Sakharam Binder* is a testimony to Tendulkar's wonderful insight into the inter-relationship between the human mind, psyche and body which are the tripods making up a personality. He says that "I have drifted to the middle of the current of life. I now feel its unfathomable depths. Like the sea-birds, I am soaring aimlessly, casually and calmly . . . I have only one desire – How deep would be the bottom? How would it appear?" (qtd.in Barve 25).

The two women are trapped by the male protagonist Sakharam, a bookbinder who gets hold of such women, and promises them shelter, food and clothes. In return it is their duty to please, entertain, gratify, flatter, satisfy and tolerate his sexual advances whenever he wishes. He brings down the man-woman relationship to the status of a shelter-providing contract. When he gets tired of a particular woman, he throws her out. In the words of Sakharam, Tendulkar expresses that the man-woman relationship is like "a link based on a need. The need ended, the link snapped" (182).

The writer is troubled by the helpless position of such women in society and the existence of men like Sakharam who does not possess a moral value in the society. They vividly exemplify the dilemma stemming from the contemporary chaos created by crumbling values. The play presents symbolic cannibalism of men and how it takes a

long time for a meek woman to overthrow her weakness and susceptibilities. For Sakharam the man-woman relationship is something absolutely commercial. He doesn't believe in the institution of marriage. He is a totally agnostic character who wants to enjoy life to the maximum extent possible.

The womanizer adopts the policy of enjoying life without cheating or telling lie to others. His words are "as long as one manages to be happy, without doing anyone any harm . . . no dishonesty allowed" (130). He strictly adheres to what he preaches. ". . . I've done every kind of thing. But never a dishonest act in my whole life" (126). Tendulkar squibs at Sakharam who carries himself with an impression that he is a lucky man to come across society's castaway woman. In the words of Dawood, "you are a lucky chap, aren't you? She belonged to another and she just walked into your arms" (156). His world is an entirely different kind of world. He is an autocratic ruler of his little house in a lower middle class locality.

Six women have passed through his life and now it is Lakshmi's turn. She is a traditional woman but her matrimony goes incomplete without her attaining motherhood. In Indian society, it is the woman who is subjected to humiliation for her impotency. After discarding her former role as an impotent wife, she determines to take a different and responsible role to play as a mistress, feeling uprooted and abandoned in the society.

Lakshmi takes her flight to Sakharam, which is like jumping into fire from the pan. She hopes to find some kind of safety and shelter at the place of Sakharam and becomes a helpless victim of his lust. She appears to have been transplanted in the wrong soil. Her problems encompassing physical, emotional and economic spheres are many and varied. In spite of all these problems, the courage with which she tries to adjust herself to the aftermath of the separation is astonishing.

As per the agreement between Sakharam and Lakshmi, the former has all kinds of rights over her, conjugal or otherwise, but poor Lakshmi has hardly any choice and very limited rights in Sakharam's house. He expects his chosen women to slave for him and satisfy his animal instincts. His friend Dawood refers Lakshmi to be his new catch "You've caught a new bird?" (129). Tendulkar creates awareness that their relationship is to stunt and hamper Lakshmi's individuality; for it is a 'trap' and not a 'bond' and that the home where the binder and his mistress are housed is a cage. She is a jail-bird in the house of her master. He has exploitative and debased views that women should be locked in cages. He does not consider woman to have individuality and a life of her own. She is a mere object of sex. One would call his treatment as reification of the female or simply chattel status. She is made to lose contact with the outside world and is confined to the house. Sakharam poses himself to be a saviour, but he presents the picture of brutal perpetrator and wretched victim of all that is bad in society regarding the man-woman relationship.

Sakharam is a dehumanized brutal wretch and it is he who tries to expose the hypocrisy of the institution of marriage. He never attempts to elevate the man-woman relationship by projecting on to it higher moral values and tenderness but is prepared to throw out women when 'there's no spark left' in them. It makes him out to be a downright beast. He enjoys overpowering her sexuality with such prescriptions:

I womanize . . . All the women I've been to, the number of times I've visited them . . . Men . . . don't have the guts to do a thing, openly! I ask you what's wrong with it? . . . the body has its appetites! . . . We're not saints. We're men. I tell you, worship and prayer can't satisfy the itch. (126-127)

The dramatist says that it is rare for one to come across persons like Sakharam who, remaining unmarried, live with women who deserted by their husbands. Though his kind of life is a different one he feels happy and satisfied claiming it to be a cheap way of fixing to fulfill his carnal desires. Sakharam advises her that her religious fasts should be stopped and reasons out: "you'll need all your strength, if you are going to serve me" (134). It is a warning to Lakshmi. ". . . I'm warning you, you won't last long in this house if you go around looking like a corpse. Mine is no ordinary appetite" (135). There is a streak of sadism in his love. His predatory desire prefers body contacts that include bondage and sadism.

Sakharam creates an impression when he exclaims to Lakshmi that for all women "The fellow who's out to kill them – he's a god! The Chap who saves them – he's just a man!" (127-128). He is strictly against the institution of marriage and attacks the husbands, calls them as the 'impotent lot', who can't father a brat but beat and kick their wives. He being a critic of the institution of marriage quite often says "it's good thing I'm not a husband" (129). He repeats time and again that "he's no husband to forget common decency" (135). Despite Sakharam's perpetual criticism about husbands, Lakshmi never opens her mouth to criticise as it might damage the relationship. She endures everything, tolerates all kinds of masculine oppression silently.

Lakshmi's passive reserves of patience are drained by his high-handed demands and behaviour. She is left with no option but to tolerate everything for nearly a year and on a fine day she gets tired of him and the agreement gets cancelled. Her life appears to be endless tedium with nothing significant taking place at any time. She decides to free herself from the bondage. Tendulkar asserts that a man's healthy relationship with a virtuous woman exerts a positive influence. Her presence has transformed a criminal into a respectable householder. This is evident in the case of Sakharam.

Lakshmi, the god fearing simpleton, who pathetically affirms the beliefs and values which she like millions of her type and in similar circumstances holds. She was religious and believes that "my faith is what gave me strength when life was hard" (178). It is savage irony that a husband of such a woman hounded her out of his home into an unfriendly world. She has of necessity to accept the terms of the first man who offers refuge and be reconciled to him. She stops her psyche from decaying with the belief

that a healthy emotional and sexual life would give her security. Yet it is shattered. She understands that he would pack her up when he no longer needs her. However on her part, she wants to live with him keeping her options open. Lakshmi suffers from the shock of impotency, for which her womanhood is defiled and later her selfhood is insulted by the binder. Thakurdas remarks:

Here indeed is a sample of the 'slice of life' of a section – the majority, . . . who everyone takes for granted and turns a blind complacent eye on their individual trials, sorrows and sufferings and who look up to fate or fortune for succour or redemption. The playwright's business is to present a dilemma – social or moral – and not to offer or seek remedies. (55)

Lakshmi had been bullied and dominated, but when Champa her successor appears, Sakham is dominated. By Champa, who barely listens to what he says. Champa is considered a real woman as she is tough and ready to fight. She ridicules the 'rules' imposed by Sakham "Rule! Is this a school or a court or something?" (161)

Tendulkar ventures into the outside world where there are even other kinds of violence against women in our country and other ways of fighting them that women of Champa's class adopt. Champa is a total contrast to Lakshmi; she refuses to work and doesn't like Sakham's house at all. She is more than a match for Sakham. She talks in derogatory terms about her husband, and even beats him. She is disgusted and even the very sight of him arouses anger in her. It is due to the bitter experiences she had. Champa reveals the kind of woman she is by beating her husband when he comes to Sakham's place begging her to kill him. Sakham is shocked the way she behaves. She exhibits her emotional bankruptcy.

Lakshmi is compelled to seek the help of the binder once again after being accused of theft. Her 'home-coming' is ironical, since the home that she had discarded becomes the place of refuge, of solace and consolation. She comes out of her emotional upheaval, to lead a meaningful life with Sakham.

Champa and Lakshmi, in a fit of comradeship, come to an understanding to deal with Sakham, since "he really takes his money's worth out of a woman . . . Go out in the streets? Face half a dozen animals everyday! Easier to put up with this one" (181). Champa will cater to Sakham's wants and Lakshmi will do all the household work. Champa feels relieved when Lakshmi returns. She says "I can't cope with the house and with you. She'll look after the house" (184).

Tendulkar comforts Lakshmi dwarfing the relation between women to man, by a sudden understanding of the relation of woman to woman, as their relationship emerges as one. Champa saves Lakshmi from Sakham's merciless beatings and warns him that he has to go to jail. Lakshmi is to be admired, who despite all odds stacked against her, has managed to carve a niche for herself in Sakham's life and now he will never be able to get rid of her. The beastly figure is slowly transformed from a rogue to a God fearing man under the influence of Lakshmi. From a rapist, he turns into a grovelling old

man. Tendulkar has managed to cage the lion. The weakness in Lakshmi appears as strength. Without an affectionate, understanding mother to look after him, he has been a victim of emotional deprivation in his childhood and "He grow up like a cactus - out in the open" (172).

Tendulkar, by virtue of his understanding of human nature, discusses how men destroy women's individuality in subtle and invisible manner with the help of cultural codes. He points out the abuse of woman which indicates the depths of human depravity and cruelty. Tendulkar portrays the image of Lakshmi as a different individual, who has a vision of a changing woman. She has paved a way for a liberated woman of a contemporary society. The writer makes a mention about women who once maintained their silence throughout their life in the face of hardships and advocates that they should no more be the same. He affirms that the economic independence of a woman might help, but it certainly has not helped them to lead a complete life.

Through his plays, Tendulkar gives a new image of the Indian women who try to assert their individuality and seek to break the age old silence by refusing to be what their men want them to be. The play is effective and crystallized projection of the prevalent attitudes, vague feelings and undefined frustrations, growing at the hearts of the educated urban middle class. The much spoken about freedom and identity of women are only delusions. To him, women's liberation continues to be a distant dream and a lot has to be done to realize the desired goals. To him life is too chaotic and fragmentary to cohere into a dramatic mould and too mechanical to have any meaning. His primary concern is with the predicament of modern life.

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