



VIJAY TENDULKAR'S "A FRIEND'S STORY": A PROBLEM PLAY OF 'GAYS' AND 'LESBIANS'

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ABSTRACT

The present paper titled Vijay Tendulkar's "A Friend's Story": A Problem play of "Gays and Lesbians". It projects a powerful discussion on homosexuality in heterosexual society. Tendulkar through the protagonist Mitra/Sumitra explores how heterosexual society is ruthless towards homosexuals. They are not accepted in the Indian society. So they suffer psychological insecurity and guilt. He has raised an untouched issue in this play. Tendulkar wrote this play twelve years ago. But the situation has changed. The play would be accepted even though 'Mitra', the protagonist was a lesbian.

Keywords: Gay, heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, procreation, psychic and rehearsal.



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Article Info:

Article Received: 16/08/2013

Revised on: 26/08/2013

Accepted on: 28/08/2013



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INTRODUCTION

Vijay Tendulkar was a leading modern Indian Playwright, Screen and Television Writer, Literary Essayist, Political Journalist and Social Commentator. He was born on January 7, 1928 in a lower middle-class community. He was brought up by in the heart of Bombay city, in Kandevadi, a small lane in Gurgaon. His father, Dhandopant Tendulkar was an enthusiastic writer, director and actor of amateur plays in their mother tongue, Marathi. He took young Tendulkar to the rehearsals of his plays. When he was going up into a boy, his brother Raghunath used to take him to English movies. Tendulkar developed an interest in watching English

films. It enriched his English language knowledge. At that time women-roles were played by men and young Tendulkar was greatly amazed to see men and actors suddenly changing their voice and movements to become women. All these had abiding influence in his career as a playwright, especially writing "A Friend's Story". He worked as the executive editor of Marathi magazines. He began his career as a Journalist and gradually changed over to the playwright. He had written thirty full-length plays and Twenty three one-act plays, and eleven children's plays, many of which had been translated into English. His contribution to modern Indian drama is unique. He has brought revolutionary

change on the Marathi stage. His plays are depictions of his keen observation of people around him. He has created vital commentaries on the Indian Political, socio- Economic and moral degeneration and on the plight of the suffering individual, especially the female in his plays. Once such modern play is Tendulkar's 'A Friend's Story' published by OUP in 2001.

Idea behind the Play

"A Friend's Story" is based on Tendulkar's story 'Mitra'. That was written in the mid-50s. It was based on the life of a girl who lived in Pune and whom Tendulkar had seen on the stage performing a male role. She had a craving for a girl and had an affair with her which ended in a major crisis for Mitra. Then Tendulkar was confused at the idea of Sex-relationship with a 'Lesbian'. This was an unusual mode of relationship. It made him to write his modern play 'A Friend's Story'. It is a discussion on homosexuality in heterosexual Indian society. The play is focussed around the struggle of a young girl, Sumitra who defies the traditional feminine roles and maintains masculine ways of living. She suffers from physical imbalance and her main appearance shadows her femininity. Her masculinity reflects in her dress code, thinking, feeling and behaviour. When her family members' conscious that she is 'homo' instead of having a realisation of her problem, they try to fix her marriage but the companionship of life-partner failed to stir her feminine sensibility. On the conscious realization of the fact that her being 'homo' would not permit her to maintain normal human relationship, makes her restless and it subsequently transforms into a psychic disorder of her personality. She is a reckless in the sense of being quite careless of social norms and moral values. The reasons for this are her stubborn nature, her desire to do what she wants to do, social conflict and then her rebellion. Heterosexual society is ruthless towards such homosexuals. They are not accepted in the Indian society. These untouched and unsolved issues have raised by Tendulkar in the play 'A Friend's Story'.

Plot-Review and Structure of the Play

A Friend's Story (Mitrachi Goshta) was first performed on 15th August 1981 at Gadkar Rangayatan, Thane in Bombay. It has three acts.

The play begins with the monologue of Bapu, the Chief narrator of the story. He is in his first year degree class. The protagonist of the play Sumitra/ Mitra comes from somewhere and joins in the college as the second year B.A., student. She presents herself different from the other girls of the class. She maintains a masculine appearance with masculine vigour, indifferent to feminine delicacy and feminine sensibility. She is carefree. Her laughter comes in loud bursts. She has wild eyes. Her broad forehead suggests intelligence. Her entire personality has a natural and aggressive masculinity. Students call her 'Mitra Singh'. But Bapu is a man of shy and simple nature.

One day Bapu comes across Mitra's photograph smoking cigarette with bare chested men on the floor in the college corridor, observing it Bapu puzzles. He places it in his pocket. He follows her for the next two days. Finally he gives it to her in the narrow lane behind the cycle shed. He does not want the photograph to be made public. In contrast of his nervousness, Sumitra initiates to ask about his name and she invites him to have a cup of tea. In the canteen, she orders for the tea and starts smoking. She prefers to call him with his pen name 'Bapu' instead of his real name, Shrikant Marathi. All these actions of Sumitra extend the impression that she does not care for the social inhibitions. She prefers that she should be called 'Mitra' instead of Sumitra. She offers his friendship. She reveals her childhood and confirms that she has been brought up in an atmosphere that encouraged masculine traits in her personality. In Bapu's friendship, Mitra unconsciously seeks a compensation of the loss of personal relationship that she would have never been able to achieve as a lesbian. The realization that Mitra cannot make a sexual relationship with a man makes Bapu too nervous. In her second meeting with Bapu, she clutches his hand and presses it hard. Even she asks him the feel of his hand. It makes Bapu nervous. Without any reservation, Mitra discloses Bapu the secret that she cannot play the role of a fiancée or a wife. Then Bapu thinks that she is abnormal.

This part of the play "A Friend's Story" can be taken as prologue that helps to constitute the insight into the moves and motives of the characters

particularly psychopathic trauma of lesbians represented in the life and sensibility of Mitra.

By the end of Act One, we see another character, Pande. He is the secretary of drama in college. He makes an offer to Mitra to play a male role to which she responds positively. Nama, the delicated doll-like girl, plays as the heroine. In the actual performance of the play, particularly in the love scenes, Mitra looks commanding in her male role. The whistles, comments and claps from students have not impacted on her. After the performance, while Nama is about to leave, Mitra strides up to her, hugs her tight and kisses her. She is sexually drawn. She openly makes a revelation to Bapu about her experience.

As Mitra likes Nama, Pande likes Mitra. However, Pande cannot convey his feelings. Without Mitra, he finds life meaningless. He condemns Mitra as lesbian bitch. In utter desperateness, he joins the army and goes straight to the battle front.

The Second Act of the play, records the real crisis of Bapu because of his involvement with his unconventional relationship with Mitra. Bapu helps Mitra in her relationship with Nama through he is threatened and beaten by the former boyfriend, Dalvi. Bapu's room is used as a meeting place for Nama and Mitra. His own inner conscience makes him to interrogate "Is it right or wrong". Finally he expresses his anger, "It is a sin".

The plot starts getting complicated. In resisting the abnormal passion of different characters, Bapu is at the centre. Nama's character is a complex one. As a result, her involvement with Mitra seems quite confusing. She represents the class of the girls who enjoys a love - relationship but lacks the courage to face the ultimate consequences. She neither remains loyal to her relationship with Mitra nor accepts Dalvi as her life partner. Like Mitra, Dalvi also use to take the shelter of Bapu's room. In order to save his position, she reveals the whole secret to Sumitra. Then she cries out, "I want to tear Dalvi limb to limb".

In the Third Act of the play, the focus shifts on the personal relationship of Bapu and Mitra. Considering Mitra as his rival in his love affair with Nama, Dalvi resolves to ruin her. He has successfully tried to expose her deficiency through letters. Then

Mitra shares the whole experience with Bapu but she does not like to have his sympathy. She maintains her sublimity as a lesbian. She does not compromise with the situation. To escape such a critical situation, Nama makes her own plan of marriage. She prefers to go to Calcutta and gets married to a stranger stealthily. Nama remains faithful neither to Mitra nor Dalvi.

The Last Act of the play is carefully organised to affect the ultimate ruin of Mitra who ruins herself. She fails to secure her own spaces in traditional society. Even her family members remain indifferent. Instead of consulting a doctor or a psychiatrist, they leave her to suffer a lot. Dalvi, Nama and Pande are contended in their own private world and the conflict remains between Bapu and Mitra. Bapu is only her friend, guide and guardian. Knowing Nama's marriage in Calcutta, Mitra has gone to Calcutta to search Nama but in vain. She is not successful to find her. She finds Bapu starts drinking. It pains her. He leaves her and her friendship. They have not talked for days. Everyone has gone; Mitra has pricked by the thorns of loneliness. So she commits suicide. It is inevitable. The likelihood of suicide attempts is higher in the homosexuals as they suffer loneliness and cloister away from others.

To make the matter worse, the other two characters Nama and Dalvi also seem to suffer from mental deformity. Nama remains faithful to neither Mitra nor Dalvi. She just enjoys their company. Dalvi is indignant always. He uses abusive words. He is not sincere in his love with Nama. Towards the end of the play, a slight hint is given that Dalvi has an affair with a new girl.

The play is open-ended. The audience are left to find out their own remedies for the problem that remains burning at all times and climes. Character portrayal creates a lasting impression with audience. Dialogues are most-striking and apt.

Critique

Tendulkar has raised an untouched issue in the play, "A Friend's Story". He has dared to bring forth a deviant relationship that is homosexuality. The homosexuals are treated as sick and immoral in Indian society. Politically the community of Gays and Lesbians is marginalised, socially they are immoral and psychologically they are treated as 'Sick' or

'Abnormal'. They are destined to lead a secluded life in their claustrophobic spaces. It is a psychological phenomenon related to the undefined and irrational self of human consciousness.

According to Sigmund Freud, sexual desires are controlled by pleasure principle between man and woman, which is an instinctive human behaviour. It is for procreation. It comes in the form of matrimonialities. It controls and guides all human aspirations. It is the mechanism of the society. This is what we call heterosexuality. Human psyche sustains its own autonomy of perceptions but its exhibition beyond morally accepted code is immoral and anti-social. So homosexuality has been shunned as deviant and even criminal. Tendulkar's *Sumitra* is a reflection of Indian society who is victimised for being different, being non-traditional in her sexuality. It is not easy to live in the society being 'different' from others.

Tendulkar had written 'A Friend's Story' at a time when the play was not accepted but now the situation has changed. The play would be accepted and even 'Mitra' would be accepted. To make lesbianism socially acceptable, the reorientation of the whole Indian society is required. 'The Gay Liberation Movement' was started with 'The Stone Wall Riots' of 1969 in USA. The publication of Foucault's 'The History of Sexuality' and 'The Rise of Feminist theory' significantly contributed to the development of "Gay and Lesbian Theory". Gay and Lesbian literature seeks to challenge by depicting alternative forms of sexuality, love and commitment in the same sexual relationships. It is an intrinsic part of many South Asian Cultures. It is a relatively new one. Judith Butler in her famous studies, "Gender Trouble" and "Bodies that Matter" (1990) presents her arguments in defence of the identity of homo. She argues that lesbian sexuality is a process that re-inscribes the power domain in resists. In heterosexual relationship, there is an implicit tendency of domination, torture and empowerment of the other sex. This feminist discourse suggests that lesbianism is the true rebel of patriarchy with its "Woman identified Woman". Homosexuality is often deemed as 'sickness or the condition of mind'. The radical feminist formed a new category, the radical lesbians. They emphasize the need for accommodation of differences within a feminist

practice. Obama stands first who had publicly expressed his support for gay marriages. Recently, Obama said in an interview with ABC's Robin Roberts "It is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couple should be able to get married".

Even in India as Mina Kumar opines "Now in Modern India lesbianism is well received". India's first married couple Savita and Veena were given police protection and moved to a safe house. In a path-breaking judgement, the Delhi High Court on 2nd July, 2009 legalised gay sex among consenting adults. But, section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised homosexuality because of its non-consensual and non-vaginal sex.

CONCLUSION

Thus, "A Friend's Story" is a fine discussion on homosexuality in heterosexual society. The problem of Gays and Lesbians is a bold attempt by Tendulkar to expand the horizon of Indian drama. While reading this play again today, one feels that if the references to the time in the play are deleted, the play is of 'Avant-garde'. It is rebelled as a "bold subject" now-a-days in India.

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