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IRONY AS MODE OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S SAKHARAM BINDER

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ABSTRACT :

As a playwright, Vijay Tendulkar dramatizes the lop-sided nature of man-woman relationships in Indian society. In his dramatic world, man-woman relationships are far from being harmonious, cordial and compatible within wedlock as well as live-in-relationships. The present paper seeks to examine the factors responsible for the lopsidedness of man-woman relationships in Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*. The play dramatizes how women suffer at the hands of males owing to ignorance and economic dependence on their male counterparts. The playwright employs the technique of irony to depict the social reality in more comprehensive terms. The ironical mode that he uses in this play in respect of creation of his characters signifies ironical situation of Indian society at large. Women in Indian society are given the names of goddesses but are treated as slaves and subordinate to males. By using the technique of irony as a mode of social representation, the playwright lays bare the hypocritical and hideous face of the male-dominated Indian society which privileges males over females through institutions in every walk of life.



KEYWORDS : Irony, Representation, Lop-sided, Economic Dependence, Goddess, Hypercritical

INTRODUCTION

In simple words, Irony means to say one thing and convey another. In broader terms, irony does mean contradiction between the real meaning and literal meaning of spoken or written words or incongruity between what is expected and what actually happens or the real meaning is concealed or contradicted by the literal meaning. Alan Culpepper explains: "Irony is a two-story phenomena. Below is the appearance or apparent meaning. Above there is a meaning, perspective, or belief that is contradictory, incongruous, or incompatible with the lower level" (167). In literature, irony as an artistic device is employed to reveal the comprehensive and multiple views of reality concealed under the façade of surface. Writers use irony to make the audience know the difference between what is said and what is normal or expected, to provide the audience with more information than what is given by the characters and to reveal the implicit meaning different from the literal or surface one.

As a playwright, Vijay Tendulkar employs irony as mode of social representation in entirety in his plays. In *Sakharam Binder*, the playwright uses the technique of irony to reveal the reality hidden behind the façade of surface reality. The role or position of his characters is radically different from what they literally suggest. Almost

all the dramatis personae, in this play, are named ironically as they do entirely opposite to what they are supposed to do. Characters like Sakharam, Laxmi, Champa, Fauzdar and Dawood suggest what is different from the literal meanings of their names. We find contradictions and incongruities in what they profess or preach and what they do in real situation (s). On larger scale, they reveal hypocritical, self-contradictory and incongruent character of Indian society in respect of women.

The character of Sakharam Binder is created in an ironical way. The word 'Sakha,' Sanskrit word, means a friend or companion or a well-wisher and the word 'Ram' in Hindi stands for God. In Hindu epic of *Ramayana*, The lord Ram abandons his wife Sita but in this play, Sakharam welcomes the abandoned women but to abandon them when they cease to be useful for him. He offers them shelter, food and clothes but with certain restricting conditions. By profession he is a binder in a press but he is not bound to his duty. In somewhat the same way, he is bound to none in his personal and social relationships. He lays down strict rules for the women who seek shelter and security in his house. On the one hand, on an ideal plane, he strikes a deal with the homeless women on the basis of give-and-take norm, but in day-to-day practical life, he himself flouts the norm, becoming more demanding as far as his needs from the women are concerned. In the same dialogue, he talks of giving them liberty but restricts their choice and freedom. Sakharam instructs Laxmi, "You must always ask for what you want. But if you don't get it, don't complain. Remember, this is not a king's, but Sakharam Binder's palace" (127).

As a social rebel, Sakharam shuns marriage and family life and poses to be a bachelor but carries casual and exploitative sexual relations with unfortunate and helpless women as if they were his wives. As a great bargainer, he expects many things from the women in lieu of the basic needs like shelter, food and clothes that he offers to them. He poses to be a *Sakha* but he becomes an enemy. He tries to bind the women while he himself, in a way, remains unbounded to them. His double character suggests the double standard of the male-dominated Indian society in respect of women. He talks of modernity but adopts traditional ways to deprive them of the right to dignified and independent life.

Sakharam poses to be honest in his dealings with women and declares that he is against males who exploit their wives. He picks up the women abandoned by their families and exploits them sexually and economically. He gives them freedom to leave him whenever they want, but they have to obey him as long as they stay with him. In the beginning, he seems to be frank in his announcement of his character to the abandoned women, "I've done every kind of thing. But never a dishonest act in my life. I told you. I womanize. I'm a drunkard and I'm ready to announce that to the whole world" (126). But behind the façade of these words his ill-intentions are concealed. In real life, he ceases to be honest with the women he keeps one after another.

Sakharam, frustrated in personal life, does contrary to what he speaks and professes. In the beginning, he seems to be dispenser of social justice. He keeps the abandoned women in his house seemingly with a purpose to provide them with the basic needs like food, shelter, solace and security but his offering to the women conceals the needs that he wants to satiate. In fact, he keeps them to look after his needs and carnal desires. Ironically, in the name of giving them freedom from all the constraints of marriage, he comes to forfeit their freedom and proves worse than males within marriage. Through the character of Sakharam, the playwright reveals the bitter truth that live-in-relationships like marriage are also dominated by males. The playwright shows that man is after all man with possessive inclinations and dominating instincts whether he is in the traditional marriage or new forms of man-woman relationships.

In Indian society, women are either elevated to the position of goddess or downgraded to the level of a maid or slave. In most of the Indian families, girls are given the names of goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati, Savitri, Durga, etc. but they are treated as if they were sub-humans or slaves. In *Sakharam Binder*, the name of Laxmi is ironical one in the sense she lives a life of poverty and helplessness. The word 'Lakshmi' is derived from the Sanskrit word *lakṣ* and *lakṣa* that means to perceive, know, understand and goal. In Hindu mythology, Lakshmi is a goddess of wealth associated with "fortune and prosperity" (Lochtefeld 386). In Mahabharata, Lakshmi is symbolic of wealth, beauty, contentment, exquisiteness, elegance, magnetism and majesty. She stands for fertility, marital bliss and what is auspicious and pure in one's home. "Laxmi is portrayed as an ideal Indian woman like Savitri in the mythological story" (Dass 12). But Laxmi in this play is presented entirely different from what is suggested in myths, scriptures and epics. As weak, poor and homeless, she seeks shelter in

the house of the seemingly benevolent Sakharam. The very name of Laxmi suggests that she is a goddess but she is treated as an ordinary human and is expected to bear and rear children. When she fails to produce children, she is thrown outside the house as a useless commodity. Her position in the house of her husband or in the house of Sakharam is no more than a slave or maid. Through the character of Laxmi, the playwright highlights the dependent or subordinate position of Indian women both in marriage and live-in-relationships.

In the tradition-bound Indian society, husband's house is supposed to be the new house of a woman when she leaves the house of her birth. But ironically enough she is treated as an outsider in the new house and not received back in the house which she leaves for better. In the play, Laxmi is not only maltreated but also thrown outside both the houses under one pretext or another. Laxmi says, "Who? I? Where can I go? Can't go back to my nephew. Or to my husband either. Their doors are now closed to me!" (180). In the male-dominated Indian society, woman's dignity or identity is associated with husband and children. If she fails to bear children and pleases her husband, she is considered unwomanly.

The word '*Champa*' in Hinduism means a fragrant flower which is offered to placate the gods and goddesses and worn as garlands at festivities and ceremonies. In simple words, *Champa* is symbolic of fragrance, religiosity and piousness. But in this play *Champa* is the woman who is corrupted and abused by the so-called custodians of society. She is forced to live a hellish life as prostitute. To escape this short of life, she marries a policeman named Fauzdar but finds him as abusive and brutal as other males. She abandons him realizing that he is averse to her biological, emotional and spiritual needs. Champa tells Laxmi, "Impotent husband! And he was a lot of bother. I walked out on him. Who wants a husband just for the sake of his name!" (180). But the same Champa in all senses hates sexual act with Sakharam. Champa tells Sakharam, "Yeah. Can't take it any more –not even with all that drink inside me. If you can't make it, go and lie down quietly... I won't. I didn't mind it as long as you were a man. I won't take you now" ((193).

Champa becomes a victim of circumstances and takes to drinking to satisfy Sakharam's degraded desires. She is depicted as having manly qualities like drinking, beating her husband and behaves as if she were the master of the house oblivious of the fact that she is just a servant. In retaliation to man's excesses, she poses to be mannish in her habits and temperament to ward off the exploitation at the hands of Sakharam. But the facade of masculinity conceals her feminine self. With the time, she readies herself to live with the man who declares that he is a drunkard. Sakharam tells Champa, "Sakharam Binder is not like your previous man" (155). But the fact is that he proves worse than her husband with the passage of time. Excessive drinking and whoring make him impotent as her husband Fauzdar is. Often he fails to perform sexual act with her. In many ways, he becomes like her husband. At one place Sakharam tells Champa, "You don't need to be scared of anybody. Sakharam Binder is here to deal..." (157). But the fact is that he himself becomes a source of fear for her. In the house of Sakharam, Champa becomes what she has detested in the house of her husband. Now she becomes alcoholic and quarrelsome. Unless and until in drunken mood, she never lets Sakharam to have sex with her.

In the conventional society like ours, woman is held responsible for the weakness or fault of her husband. If her husband becomes impotent, she is blamed for this weakness and is considered a bad woman or a sorceress. Sakharam tells Dawood, "I tell you, Miyan, those fellows-they can't father a brat and they take it all out on their wives. Beat her, kick her every single minute of the day. They're an impotent lot! For them the woman's just dirt, that's all" (129). They themselves know the very fact that they are impotent but to cover up their manly weakness they accuse their wives of barrenness. What an irony is that they are biologically weak, but pose to be potent. On the other hand, though women, in general, are not barren, they accept the label of barrenness to defend the pseudo-masculinity of their husbands fearing the social disgrace.

In the patriarchal Indian society, a young girl is taught that husband is God or *Pati Premeshwar* despite his flaws or weaknesses and it becomes imperative for her to worship him or the things stand for masculinity. Sakharam makes fun of one of the former women he has kept with him, saying "She used to worship her husband's shirt. The man was out to kill her, but, as far as she was concerned, he was God! The fellow who's out to kill them –he's a god! The chap who saves them-he's just a man!" (127-28). A woman thinks that her husband is God but the way he treats her is no better than a beast. Laxmi, like a traditional Indian woman, worships Sakharam as if he were a husband. "For me this one was my husband. I worshipped him. Even when I was away,

I'd worship him in silence every day...If I have to be kicked, let him kick me; if I have to die, let me die on his lap—in full glory like a married woman” (187). The audience perceives that Sakharam is a man with certain ungodly attributes and vices but she accepts him as if he were a god. Laxmi identifies herself with the legendary figure Savitri but in the real life the former is almost different from the latter. Like a traditional Hindu woman, she wishes to die in the lap of Sakharam whom she considers her husband but the irony is that he does not recognize her as his wife.

Sakharam is depicted as revolting against the social traditions and institutions like marriage and family. But the fact is that he follows the rules of social relations where it suits to his life-style or temperament or revolts where they go against his wishes and dictates. Thus he lays down his own rules contrary to the social ones. In fourteen years, six women have already left him. Sakharam tells every woman that he keeps, “This house is like me....This is not a royal palace. It's Sakharam Binder's house....I'm the master here....But a house must be a home, you understand? ...Maybe I'm a rascal, a womanizer, a pauper. Why maybe? *I am* all that. And I drink. But I must be respected in my own house ...you'll have to be a wife to me” (125-126). Sakharam acquaints these women with the rules of relation and reciprocity. As Renuka comments:

Though Sakharam keeps on repeating time and again in the play that he is no husband to forget common decency, he wants that the woman who lives with him shall have to be a wife to him. So, while he poses to be a saviour, he presents the picture of a brutal perpetrator and wretched victim of all that is bad in society regarding the man-woman relationship.(34)

Sakharam preaches that he hates the husbands in family. “I've yet to meet a more gutless breed than these husbands. We're a whole lot better than those swine” (129). But in reality he behaves or acts no less than what a husband does or acts with his wife.

Sakharam declares himself as an atheist but does not follow the path of atheism. An atheist does not believe in the existence of God or the institutions which propagate the view that God is the supreme. In the play, Sakharam abandons godly ways but himself becomes a god to be worshipped. His character seems to underlie humanistic approach to life but his real face is hidden under the surface or behind the façade of humanitarianism. He himself does not know when he becomes a Satan in the name of God. The way he dictates the abandoned women suggests that in no way he believes in relations on equalitarian terms. He is binder in the true sense of word which is reflected in the way he lays the binding conditions before the unfortunate and hapless women in his house.

Sakharam though professes to be a bachelor; he keeps women in a contractual arrangement to satiate his sexual desires. He establishes a unique kind of husband-wife relation with the women he brings home. He is the master of his house and the woman has to obey him like a slave. His person betrays the same violent behaviour as he perceived in his father in childhood. He declares, “Oh, yes. Everything good and proper, where Sakharam Binder is concerned. He's no husband to forget common decency” (135). As Arundhati Banerjee remarks, “He is a man who is primarily honest and frank. His straight forwardness in dealing with helpless women...demands certain admiration” (xiv). But the critic fails to look at his real nature and motive concealed under the façade of frankness and honesty. He is frank and honest in the name only. He puts on the mask of honesty to trap the women to satiate his degraded and dishonest needs.

Sakharam's relations with the abandoned women are purely need-based, utilitarian and mechanical ones. He keeps them as long as long as they have spark in their bodies. His true nature or character is reflected in his own words, “A link based on a need. The need ended, the link snapped” (182). When they become useless for him, he forces them to leave his house under one pretext or another. He tells Laxmi, “We're not married. There's nothing to bind us. We don't need to remain tied to each other. You can go your way. I can go mine. You don't owe me anything. I owe you nothing either. Let's be free of each other” (151). It is obvious that women in Indian society are considered sex-object and dispensable commodity whether they are within or outside wedlock. They are not treated as human beings with emotions and aspirations.

Throughout the play, time and again, the abandoned women are described as 'bird' by Sakharam and Dawood but they are birds without wings to fly away from the sight of suffocation and servitude. The restricting conditions laid down by Sakharam for the helpless women make them unable to escape the iron cage that he

builds around them in the name of giving them freedom from the cage of marriage. They are treated as if they were without feelings, emotions, desires, wishes and aspirations. For the sake of the basic needs in meagre amount they are supposed to lose their freedom and suppress their desires as human beings. When Laxmi talks to the ants to while away her time in the suffocated atmosphere of Sakharam's house, she is rebuked and laughed at. He asks her to laugh for nothing, "You laugh for the ant. But you won't laugh when I ask you to....Get up and laugh. Laugh or I'll choke the life out of you. Laugh! Laugh! Go on laugh, Laugh!" ((141). When she wants to laugh, he silences her, and when she is silent, he forces her to laugh. In the name of freedom from the stifling marital life, he restricts their movement to the four walls of the house. They are not allowed to have interaction with outsiders and strangers in his absence. If they are caught doing so, he chastises them badly. Sakharam tells Laxmi, "My orders must be obeyed in the house" (145). They cannot even weep or laugh without his permission. Sakharam maintains his relationship with different women like a professional contract but maintains his absolute autonomy in his household.

The foregoing discussion reveals the machination and design of male-dominated society where woman is considered sex-object sans emotions and aspirations. It also reveals how ignorant and economically dependent women suffer at the hands of males both within marriage and live-in-relationships. The play suggests that unless and until males change their mindset, no substitution for the institution of marriage can be effective and viable for women to lead a decent and dignified life on their own. The playwright underscores the view that self-reliance and education of women can go a long way to shape harmonious man-woman relationships.

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