



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

A Study of Sapphism and Social Ostracism in Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story*

Ms. Basanti Karmakar

Teacher, Department of English, Dhaniakhali Pankajini Devi Girls High School,
Hooghly, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

Mitrachi Goshta or *A Friend's Story* by veteran Marathi dramatist Vijay Tendulkar is about a lesbian girl, and her tragic demise of life. The play gradually becomes a stark commentary on both homosexuality and heterosexuality in the context of Indian society. The article presents not only a lesbian girl in her late adolescent period, but it shows the attitude of society towards such different persons. The protagonist of the play, Sumitra Dev, whose character is based on a real life lesbian girl, had attempted suicide twice in this play, with success at the second time. She first attempted when she came to know about her difference, about her inability to build up a 'normal' physical relationship with any male. Mitra's first willingly attempted of suicide. But her second suicidal attempt was forced though she found her love in life. Society strangled her to death, just because she was unable to abide by society's norms. *Mitrachi Ghoshta* though written in 1970's was staged first only on 15th August, 1981 and it is

much ahead of its time and represents the cultural relevance of its theme even today.

Keywords

Lesbianism; Psychological Complexity; Patriarchal Society; Vijay Tendulkar; *A Friend's Story*.



Vijay Tendulkar, the noted Indian dramatist is famous for presenting hard core realism in his plays, how much unpalatable it may be. He is a social commentator as well as a relentless critic of Indian society. Women as victims of violence and male-power have been highlighted in many of his plays. His plays like *Silence*, *the Court is in Session* and *Kanyadaan* contain 'a subtle critique of modern Indian society'.

Rohini Hattangady who played the role of Sumitra Dev in *A Friend's Story* for the first time in India, commented, "Sumitra , that is Mitra, being different is the core of the play. The reactions of the people around her, her friend, her lover, her lover's boyfriend-in fact Mitra's rival, and a boy who is fond of Mitra; show the reactions of the society through representative characters-and then the end which is inevitable" (CPT 592).

Mitra's life story starts with Bapu, the young person between eighteen to thirty years old, though he looks younger than he actually is. Bapu plays double role here -he is the narrator of the story who builds up a rapport with the audience and confides to them his experience of befriending an unusual girl and of her love-affair. Side by side, Bapu is a major character in this play except whom Mitra is incomplete. From the very beginning of this play, she achieves recognition because of her carefree, open-hearted attitude, because of her masculinity. "The other girls were the helpless, touch-me-not kind. But there was a masculine vigour in Sumitra Dev's stride and speech. She was carefree, her laughter came in loud bursts. She had eyes which met you in straight combat. Her broad forehead suggested intelligence. Her entire personality had a

natural, aggressive masculinity but with a figure irresistibly attractive to men” (CPT 419). There lies the seed of Mitra’s tragedy.

As the plot unravels Mitra, ‘the instant hit,’ the hot topic in the college suddenly chooses and befriends Bapu, a boy who is altogether a common boy. Bapu and Mitra talk to each other for the first time when Bapu returns Mitra’s photograph to her. What strikes Bapu first in the photograph ‘Is she a woman at all?’ What seems to Bapu a matter of great shame, is nothing to Mitra. This astonishes much Bapu but at the same time, he feels a sudden attraction towards Mitra. Sumitra meets Bapu and tries to tell him something, but she fumbles and hesitates. Later in a moment of restless agony, Sumitra confides to Bapu her dilemma of being a woman in body with an urge of a man in spirit. Sumitra in an intense voice asks the existential question, “Who makes us the way we are and sends us here? Why are we what we are? Why do we become our own slaves” (CPT 424)? Sumitra checks her emotion and leaves the place, resisting herself. Sumitra’s sudden gripping of Bapu’s hands in a restless way suggests her thirst for true friendship, her need of emotional shelter. But very soon Bapu is informed by Pande, his roommate in the mess and a senior student of the same college that Mitra is in hospital because of her attempted suicide by swallowing sleeping pills. Bapu who is shocked and baffled rushes to hospital after mental hesitation with the intention of finding out the true cause behind the whole incident. After Mitra’s recovery, they meet again and Sumitra in a state of feverish anguish discloses to Bapu her sense of being different, ‘female in appearance but not feminine’. She discloses to Bapu how the members of her family had tried to make her ‘feminine’, acceptable to society. They even had arranged her marriage with a boy but Sumitra has found it impossible to build up any physical intimacy with that boy. Mitra has sensed her being different, her coldness in physical relationship with any man. To become doubly assured, she even experimented with the male-servant in her house. She confesses to Bapu that,

she...decided to meet him...(swallows hard)...decided ...resolved ...got ready...and he got to know...and she got to know...this is not for her...she's not among those who...it was impossible for her to go through ...she was different...she could never become a man's partner in this...never...(A turbulent storm racks her within. It passes, she stubs out cigarette and flings it away. Now the tone is dry.) the girl resolved to die. (CPT 432)

Mitra has attempted suicide when she came to know about her sexual identity. But one attempt of suicide and its tremendous pain has brought in her the resolve not to die. Sumitra Dev, the 'aggressive, masculine' girl turned her face towards life. Like Tendulkar's another protagonist Leela Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Sumitra wanted to live according to her own. Mitra, a girl belonging to middle class Marathi surroundings begins to shed her layers from then and comes out different and stronger.

Though Sumitra feels no thrill in heterosexual relationships, but men feel irresistibly attracted towards her physical charm. Bapu confesses this to audience and Bapu's roommate cum self-professed local guardian feels irrevocably drawn towards Mitra, when he sees her in a male attire. Pande fervently requests Bapu to make his own case settle with Mitra, "If she says no...Bapu, I can't face life after that. I'll throw myself under a train. I'll drown myself in the river. I'll take rat poison...I can't live without her" (CPT 438) When Bapu is about to reveal Pande's love for Mitra, she discloses to him that she has found her love and it is not any male, but it is Nama Deshmukh, the girl who played heroine in the college play. "That night, while the love-scene was on, things came to a head. I lost control. Her touch...her very desirable body in my arms...That night, I saw myself in a flash of lightning. I know I did not want a man. I need a woman. I'm different, different" (CPT 440). Act I of the play thus ends with Mitra discovering her true identity. She declares herself a lesbian.

The Act II of *A Friend's Story* is crucial because it presents Mitra's urge to live happily after finding her love. The relationship between Mitra and Bapu goes

to the point of indispensability. Mitra can unhesitantly open herself up only to Bapu and Bapu arranges his room for Mitra and Nama to meet. When Nama does not come, Bapu understands Mitra's restlessness behind her dare-devil, desperate attitude. Complications arise in the play when on one side, Pande, Bapu's friend hankers after Mitra and on the other side, Manya Dalvi accuses and beats Bapu in the library for writing anonymous letters full of disgusting, shameful and disparaging remarks to Nama's father about Nama's friends and associates in college, having signed in the name of 'X'. Though Bapu clearly understands that Mitra has done this, he does not accuse her savagely. Rather he forbids Mitra to do it again. From mere friendship, their relationship develops into one of mother-child relationship. Mitra is assured of the fact that Bapu will never misinterpret her, as Sumitra acknowledges, "Sorry Bapu! I know I have bothered you too much. But what can I do? Except for you, I have no one to call my own. And I can't live without Nama. I must possess her"(CPT 451). Bapu plays the role of a helpless mother who is apprehensive of the disastrous destiny of her stubborn child. Time and again he tries to prevent Mitra to stop her relationship with Nama Deshmukh and of not making any dispute with Dalvi, Nama's boyfriend Dalvi once caught Nama and Mitra in Bapu's room and forcibly took Nama away after unleashing hell on Sumitra, "You bloody lesbian bitch, you! I'll kill you! Aren't you ashamed? (Rage blocks his words) You do such things here" (CPT 456)? When they disappear, Sumitra bursts into uncontrollable rage because of her own helplessness in not securing her love, her meaning of life.

Pande knows that it is very tough for a man to live with such a girl having homosexual tendency and he advises Bapu not to maintain any relationship with such 'different' person. Manya Dalvi addresses Sumitra as 'lesbian bitch'. Nama Deshmukh likes Mitra's company, but she is not sure about her liking as she says, "Well, I like Mitra as a friend. I...like many things about her. But Manya Dalvi is a different matter altogether. I mean, there is no comparison" (CPT 456). And Bapu is always the strong support who knows that all of Mitra's works are not praiseworthy, but he cannot stop the urge to live fully of this otherwise

spontaneous girl. Though he forbids Mitra time and again but he can never sever himself from Mitra. Bapu's attitude to Mitra is one of awe and fear.

Act III of the play begins with Bapu's address to audience to whom he confesses that out of sheer disgust with the whole matter he changes his room and snaps all ties with Mitra. But the relationship between Bapu and Mitra is deeper in significance than what Bapu thinks. Again they meet and no sooner Bapu sees Sumitra 'has obviously given up caring for herself'. He melts. Sumitra, the restless, 'headstrong', 'short-tempered', 'hyper-girl' knows that Bapu is the only one person to whom she can show her anger. Sumitra demands money from him and without any query, Bapu gives it to her. Borrowing of money from Bapu continues. One day from Nama Deshmukh Bapu comes to know that Mitra has nearly 'strangled' her when Nama talked about her marriage. Nama represents that type of girl who is fascinated as well scared of Mitra. Nama is also a very shallow girl who never thinks of the depth and seriousness of Mitra's deep love. Bapu apprehends this and gets tensed "What will happen if one day, Nama breaks off from Mitra..." (CPT 470)?

Like a mother-figure, Mitra is always Bapu's first concern. The dramatist here stresses on the inter-relationship of various characters. At the same time his characters become mouth-pieces of society and social authority. Bapu also plays the dual role. Sometimes he becomes a cautious guardian who forbids Mitra to be rebellious, forbids her not to go beyond the rules of the society. But Bapu also has a very soft, touchy corner in his heart who indulges Mitra. He does not like Mitra's over possessiveness, her freakish attitude. Even once, he speaks about disliking Mitra but when he hears about the publication of a scandalous story about Mitra and Nama, he meets her.

Pande who rejected Mitra belongs to that category of people who gets pleasure when a 'different' person is being haunted, harassed and humiliated. He rebukes Bapu for having contact with such a girl. But more aggressive is Manya Dalvi, Nama's boyfriend who tries to stigmatize Sumitra by exposing her through letters and tells everybody about her rustication with sadistic pleasure.

He declares, “Her name has been scratched out from the register. It has all been worked out to seem as if she herself left college. I knew this would happen the management is worried about losing face” (CPT 480). To some extent, Manya Dalvi represents society as a whole. Bapu feels a spiritual kinship with Mitra, gives her advice to behave normally, not to destroy herself. Mitra, being hopeless and helpless tries to become ‘feminine’, sells herself in open market to get rid of her loneliness. Mitra becomes a tragic figure who is rebellious against the rule of the society, tried to live according to her will, tried to love seriously. Though Nama betrayed her when Mitra needed her most, still she never exposed Nama because she confessed, “I can expose her, with proofs! She’ll have nowhere to hide. But I won’t do it. Why? Don’t know. May be I still written a soft corner for her. I still love her” (CPT 475).

Tendulkar presents a girl who from the outset is a jovial and has tremendous courage and self-respect. But she ultimately cries out in extreme agony,

No, I’m not a good little girl. I’m a whore! a lesbian bitch, do you know that? A lesbian bitch! A freak. He says-don’t lie, don’t depend on me...wrote off the money, wrote off! Friendship is over, he said. All right, let it be over. Who lied? I lied? I didn’t lie-not to him. I lied to my mother, but not to him. You that? Told him what I didn’t tell anyone. He-he was my mother. Mother-Bapu. Mother –Bapu, Mother-Bapu. (continues to laugh lipsily,suddenly stops) Gone. Friendship is over. Nama is over. No dependence...no dependence...Bapu gone. Bapu is dead-dead-dead (Bang the tables with knuckles.) (CPT 492)

Mitra’s monologue at the end of the play becomes a clarion call to the society. Bapu’s conventional morality makes him a bit aloof from Mitra’s condition. But Bapu is torn between his social consciousness and his inner conscience. Inwardly, he feels sorry for Sumitra who depended completely on him.

To audience. Had a wretched night. Couldn't eat or sleep. All hell broke loose. Couldn't decide whether I had done right or wrong. Was it wrong to have cut out Mitra from my life? How much was my ego responsible for what she became then? Who is responsible for what happened to her? (CPT 495)

Bapu asks the questions apparently to himself, but in actuality it is a question thrown towards the audience. Like Benare, The unwed mother in his another drama *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Sumitra too becomes desperate to live according to her own will, but society does not allow her transgression. Dalvi brought home the news of Mitra's suicide very casually as if it is very common and an expected end from a lesbian girl like Mitra. But this very news makes Bapu petrified, 'as if all life has drained out of him.' The play ends in Bapu's restlessness, his tremendous mental agony and amid 'dead silence'. As if it will not break unless it consumes Bapu. Bapu slumps slowly to the ground with his head torn between his knees. Dalvi's ecstatic gesture of triumph and revenge, his devilish pleasure in Sumitra's suicide stands in sharp contrast against Bapu's final posture of defeat and helplessness. Bapu who is known as 'softie', 'baby' manifests 'uncontrollable rage' at the end. His anger is not on himself, but on all who have failed to comprehend this 'different' person and who have denied Mitra her due honour. Tendulkar remembers that the play was staged by a group of youngstars. It did not have a run. Only a few shows, which were hated by the women and sneered at by the men in the audience. To talk about its contemporaneity, *A Friend's Story* is an avant-garde play and it will remain so for eternity.

References:

Tendulkar, Vijay. *Five Plays: Kamala, Silence! The Court is in Session, Sakharam Binder, The Vultures, Encounter in Umbugland*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.

Tendulkar, Vijay. *A Friend's Story (Mitrachi Goshta): A Play in Three Acts*. New

Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.

Tendulkar, Vijay. *Collected Plays in Translation*. Trans. Samik Bandyopadhyay.
New Delhi; Oxford University Press. 2001. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Karmakar, Basanti. "A Study of Sapphism and Social Ostracism in Vijay
Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story*." *Literary Quest* 1.6 (2014): 168-176. Web.
DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.