

## **A Queer Tale : Re-reading of Vijay Tendulkar's *A Friend's Story***

**Anshoo Sharma**

Associate Professor, English, Government College, Chaksu  
Email: anshoosharma19@yahoo.co.in

### **ABSTRACT**

The past, present and of course the future of Homosexuals and other similar marginalized sections of society are hugely impacted by the historic judgment of section 377. The marginalized, ignored, sidelined, and persecuted section of society has finally found a foothold to come out in the forefront. It has found some of the most powerful and impactful voices in the process of fighting against a prejudice that not only scarred the psyche but made the expression of freedom curtailed and curtailed. It is to explore the reflection of such a seminal issue that the present paper revisits *A Friend's Story*, a play written by Vijay Tendulkar. In *A Friend's Story*, which interestingly happens to be the first Indian play about homosexuality written in 1982, the body of the woman, her alternate inclination and understanding of gender and the institutional body of social power structures come into collision with the strictly prohibiting strictures of the society around her sparking thereby the inherent controversy between individual rights and societal pressures. The present paper intends to focus on this seminal play and tries to trace the impact that the ruling of 377 has on a re-reading of the same. Did the dramatist succeed in writing ahead of his times? Did he become a voice of individual liberty? And finally did the play have that desired effect on the audience / readers that the playwrights intended? These will be some of the key areas that the paper aims to explore.

### **KEYWORDS**

Alternate Sexuality, Liberty, Law v/s Freedom of Expression, Marginalization, Inclusion

It was the year 1996 when the Indian Canadian director Deepa Mehta released her film *Fire* that triggered off what can perhaps be considered as the very first national debate on homosexuality. There was a heightened public awareness in its wake that went a long way in helping to persuade the historic judgment of 2009 by the Delhi High Court decriminalizing consenting same sex relationships by striking down certain portions of the Section 377 of The Indian Penal Code. But this was the first step indeed which went on to face many up and downs when this judgment was overturned by the SC on 11th Dec.

2013 on grounds that this matter should be left to the Parliament and not the judiciary till it was picked up again in 2016 and in 2017 the SC upheld the right to privacy as a fundamental right under the constitution and called for equality condemning discrimination, stating that the protection of sexual orientation is the core of the fundamental rights and that the rights of the LGBT population are real and founded on constitutional doctrine. This judgment was believed to imply the unconstitutionality of Section 377. It was only in the year of 2018 that the court finally ruled unanimously that Section 377 was unconstitutional "in

so far as it criminalizes consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex" (Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code).

This historic judgment finally overruled the act that had been introduced by the British way back in 1864. It took a full 150 years to finally gain freedom to express one's sexual orientation without the fear of persecution or discrimination.

With this turning point in the history of the LGBT struggle, that the re-reading of the queer texts of Tendulkar and Dattani become imperative. They gain a validation and claim a position of veneration in the number of literary voices that spoke up for the LGBT community from time to time. In the field of playwriting, it was perhaps Vijay Tendulkar who was the first one to speak up specifically about female sexual orientation in his seminal and surprisingly very infrequently talked about play – MITRACHI GOSHITA – A Friend's Story where his female protagonist Mitra has been drawn with extraordinarily strong and bold strokes. Staged in 1981 and published in 1982, it was written somewhere in the early or mid-1970's. The body of the woman, her alternate inclination and understanding of gender and the institutional body of social power structures come into collision. Thus, sparking the inherent conflict between individual rights and critical reflection, against the abusive techniques of government and society which leads to subversion of liberty.

At the time when this play was staged it was projected as being new, different, bold-almost unpalatable – the central character of Sumitra being that of a Lesbian – a term which till date people find difficult to remark about casually or 'normally'. This reminds me of Nandita Das's words when she went to meet Deepa Mehta who was auditioning actresses for a very 'bold' film. Das recalls that,

'Nobody used the word lesbian or even homosexual at the time'. The film was always described through euphemisms like "bold" and "unconventional" (Ghosh 33). And this was the 1990's that we are talking about (1996) to be precise when the film was released in India.

The play was both a challenge and an attack intended by Tendulkar on his audience. Nothing like this had been attempted in India, on stage way back in 1980. In this context, Mitra or Sumitra to be precise is 'different' period and that is the essence of the play where each character is delineated as a contrast and as an equation vis-a-vis Mitra's difference. The relationship that she shares with people around her and their hostile reactions towards her are a representation of society as it existed then: as it exists even now!

Set in and around a college campus in Poona in the 1940's the play revolves around three students mainly – the diffident Bapu, the carefree Mitra and the (deceptive) Nama. A love triangle of sorts with a couple of ardent admirers thrown in for good measure, it reminds one of an understated Greek tragedy about obsession, jealousy, betrayal, and a search for redemption. Perhaps this is one of the plays that has been staged very infrequently despite the sheer quality of its writing, which in turn proves that it was written much ahead of its times. Its first staging was attempted with some trepidation and Vijay Tendulkar is known to have insisted on watching its first act after the initial rehearsals before giving it the green signal. The subject was new, daring and off the beaten track; it could easily be misinterpreted or misrepresented and end in a total debacle. But the fact remains that Tendulkar had portrayed Mitra's character so perfectly along with the characters of Bapu, Nama, Dalvi and Pande that it needed no further homework before being staged. All these characters – the people around

her – her friend (Bapu), her lover (Nama), her lover's boyfriend (Dalvi - her rival in the triangle) and her obvious admirer (Pande) become the representative characters of the society and through their reactions we are introduced to the level and severity of homophobia that exists both in the institutionalized and the internalized forms.

In the preface of the play Tendulkar has very clearly stated that the story of Mitra actually sat with him for many years before it took the present shape. He was inspired by a female lead who enacted the role of an over spoken, old man at a college performance, and he was struck by the fact that when she made her entry on stage, there was respectful silence among the audience, instead of the usual catcalls and lewd remarks. This sense of a strong presence went a long way in creating Mitra who is introduced as a carefree person with a masculine vigour in her stride and speech. She has eyes which meet people in straight combat. Her broad forehead suggests intelligence. Her entire personality has a natural, aggressive masculinity but with a figure irresistibly attractive (Tendulkar 419). She is an instant hit at college with the students vying for her attention and was all that which Bapu (Shikant Marathe) was not. And strangely the two of them bond from the word go. What they share is a special camaraderie and it is difficult to imagine one without the other. If Bapu is simple she is complex, if he is timid, she is daring, if he is 'normal', she is 'different'! While growing up, she looks around and realizes that she is different. There is a struggle within and later that struggle is visible when she tries to share her reality with Bapu. Her isolation and vulnerability are depicted in the very beginning of their interaction when she admits "Put up with me, that's all. I have no friends. It's not possible. Perhaps you too will leave me (Tendulkar 425). But after getting to know her better and the series of events that take place afterwards,

make their relationship solid and strong.

Tendulkar has drawn Mitra as a woman of stubborn nature, resilient and self-contained, who accepts her alternate sexuality. She allows herself to go with the stream and does what she wants to do unabashedly. Very candidly, she admits about her fatal attraction towards Nama to Bapu and he in turn accommodates their meetings by allowing her space within the privacy of his room. She places her trust on Bapu even more than what she places on her own family. It is to him that she discloses the reason of her attempted suicide, her experiment with the servant and her sexual frigidity towards the men chosen by her family for marriage.

In a society dictated by heteronormative precepts, to find a foothold and gather acceptance is next to impossible. Clearly, Mitra is up against everyone within her immediate sphere, whether it is her family who try to coerce her into a 'normal marriage', or Dalvi, Nama's boyfriend who rejects her outright and in one of the face offs calls her a "bloody lesbian bitch" - a devil, shames her and goes to the extent of threatening to kill her. Then there is Pande who feels strongly attracted towards her, professes his love and tries his best to persuade Bapu to convince Mitra to accept him but the moment he comes to know of her alternate preferences he leaves the city to join the army. And towards the end of the play his attitude towards Mitra's falling apart almost borders on cruelty. Then there is Nama whose involvement with Mitra is rather confusing. She likes Mitra, spends time with her, but at the same time there is a certain hint of discomfort as she finds it difficult to cope with Mitra's dominance over her and yet she cannot totally reject Mitra. But ultimately her rejection of Mitra is apparent when she instead of standing by her decides to quietly follow her overly abusive boyfriend Dalvi. Mitra's

helplessness, anger and hurt are apparent at this rejection. She turns violent not because Dalvi cursed her but because of Nama's quiet desertion. It is not the opposition and abuse of rivals that impact us but the silence of those who belong to us or to whom we belong, that sears us deeply.

In the last scene the exploitative inclination of a society towards its marginalized community is signified through the delineation of the two army officers who try to take advantage of an inebriated and completely broken Mitra. The ultimate final rejection, Mitra's ultimate undoing, is her split with Bapu who her lifeline and support throughout. It is over a misunderstanding that occurs when Mitra goes to Calcutta in her mad pursuit of Nama against Bapu's better judgment. The final denouement is heartbreakingly tragic when she fails in her attempt at a semblance of becoming a "normal woman" and in the process loses her identity of being Mitra. Her breaking away from Bapu is a breaking away from her own self. And she finally bursts forth reiterating what, society looks at her as: "No, I'm not a Good Girl. I'm a whore! A lesbian, A lesbian bitch! A freak!" (Tendulkar 492).

While referring to Bapu and her relationship she admits, "I lied to my mother but not to him. Told him what I didn't tell anyone. He was my mother. Mother Bapu, Mother Bapugone forever" (Tendulkar 492).

This clearly shows how helpless and desperate she felt at that time without the support of anyone especially Bapu in whom she placed her maximum trust, that she disintegrates before those very people who have persecuted her all her life. It is at this point that the playwright decides the ill fate of the protagonist leading to her suicide finally, and placing his hope in his reader or the audience to look for redemption – redemption not for Mitra

but redemption for those of us who are guilty of Mitra's suicide, guilty of silence.

I would like to point out here that much work has been done on the female characters in Tendulkar's plays and in one of the essays while discussing on the same lines Kalindi Deshpande claims that "Tendulkar seems to capitulate before the establishment and its reactionary value systems" (Madge 91). There is a hint that Tendulkar turns his back on the vital relationship between the value system and the social structures, individual liberty and the subversive reality of the world which leaves very slim chances for any kind of amelioration" (Madge 92).

My contention, on the other hand, is that it is not the culmination of the character into subversion that signals the end of the play, rather it is the impact the playwright targets at, over his readers or audiences of arousing a feeling of the unfairness and unjustness perpetrated towards the protagonist.

### **Conclusion**

A Friend's Story invites responses and readings from multiple location and vantage points. It has travelled a long way from the 1950's to the present and I can safely answer in affirmative the three questions that I had raised in the abstract.

Yes, it was written much ahead of its time. Yes, it did become the voice of individual liberty. And yes, it did have that deserved effect on the audience and readers that the playwright intended.

This play therefore deserves to be revisited in the light of the innumerable insights that are gained over the long period of the queer debate finally culminating with the historic judgment of Section 377.

One recalls the phenomenon

called pentimento where the old conception is replaced by a later choice, it is a way of seeing and then seeing again. It is time to resituate discussions over the queer plays and look upon them within discourses of non-heteronormative sexuality that are available to us after the historic day of September the 6th 2018.

#### **WORKS CITED**

- Ghosh, S. Fire. Orient Publishing, 2011, p. 33.
- Madge, V. M. Vijay Tendulkar's Plays : An Anthology of Recent Criticism. Pencraft International, 2007, p. 91.
- . Vijay Tendulkar's Plays : An Anthology of Recent Criticism. Pencraft International, 2007, p. 92.
- "Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code." Wikipedia, [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section\\_377\\_of\\_the\\_Indian\\_Penal\\_Code](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Section_377_of_the_Indian_Penal_Code). Accessed 13 Nov. 2018.
- Tendulkar, V. Collected Plays in translation. Oxford UP, 2003, p. 419.
- . Collected Plays in translation. Oxford UP, 2003, p. 425.
- . Collected Plays in translation. Oxford UP, 2003, p. 492.

**Dr. Anshoo Sharma**, Associate Professor, English is presently posted at Government College, Chaksu. She has been teaching for the past 22 years at both the Under Graduate and Post Graduate Levels. In 2006, she was awarded the Post Doctoral Fellowship by the U.G.C. Many of her articles have been published in various journals and edited books. She also has two books to her credit.