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Domestic Space as a Site of Caste Conflict in Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan

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Abstract
Domestic space in India has long been perceived as a sanctuary of emotional intimacy, familial bonds, and cultural continuity. Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* (2010), however, disrupts this notion by transforming the home into a volatile arena in which caste hierarchies erupt into conflict. The marriage between Jyoti, an upper-caste Brahmin girl, and Arun Athawale, a Dalit poet, exposes how caste politics infiltrate and structure the most intimate spaces of domesticity. The marital household becomes a crucible of psychological and physical violence, reflecting Arun's internalized trauma and the failure of upper-caste liberalism embodied by Jyoti's father, Nath Devlalikar. Through Arun's cruelty and Jyoti's gradual subjugation, Tendulkar reveals how domesticity becomes an extension of public caste oppression, collapsing the boundary between personal life and political history. Using frameworks from Michel Foucault's theory of power, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, and Gayatri Spivak's subaltern studies, this paper demonstrates that the domestic sphere in *Kanyadaan* is profoundly political. It argues that caste violence, historical resentment, and ideological experimentation converge within the household, making domestic space the central site of caste conflict.

Keywords: Caste, domesticity, liberalism, subalternity, trauma, violence.

Introduction

The institution of the family has traditionally been regarded in Indian society as a protected domain, insulated from the hierarchical and often violent structures of public life. Yet, in a deeply caste-stratified culture, the boundaries between the public and the private cannot be maintained. Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* exposes this collapse by showing how caste enters and transforms the domestic sphere. The play revolves around Nath Devlalikar, an upper-caste social reformer devoted to creating an egalitarian society, who supports his daughter Jyoti's decision to marry Arun Athawale, a Dalit poet. While Nath perceives the union as an enactment of his lifelong ideology, the marriage soon reveals that caste cannot be eliminated simply by entering domestic alliances. Instead, the household becomes the very place where caste-based violence, trauma, and resentment are enacted.

The home—commonly idealized as a space of security and nurturing—becomes a battleground in *Kanyadaan*. The marital relationship between Arun and Jyoti deteriorates rapidly as Arun's internalized oppression manifests through physical violence, verbal abuse, and humiliation. The Brahminical household of the Devlalikars, too, becomes a space of ideological rupture when Nath's optimism collapses under the weight of Jyoti's suffering. Domesticity, therefore, does not erase caste; it amplifies

it. The home becomes the site where upper-caste liberalism fails, where Dalit trauma resurfaces, and where Jyoti's identity is dismantled.

This paper examines the domestic sphere in *Kanyadaan* as a symbolic and literal site of caste conflict, arguing that Tendulkar uses domesticity to demonstrate the futility of ideological reform without an understanding of lived caste experiences. Through a detailed theoretical and textual analysis, the study foregrounds the household as the primary arena where caste becomes embodied, negotiated, and violently performed. It also examines how domestic space in Vijay Tendulkar's Kanyadaan becomes a crucial site of caste conflict, reflecting deeper ideological and psychological tensions within Indian society.

Objectives

1. To analyze how the home turns into a political arena where caste identities clash.
2. To study how Arun's behaviour brings caste trauma into domestic life.
3. To trace Jyoti's changing identity within the household.
4. To examine the collapse of Nath and Seva's liberal ideology in private spaces.

Literature Review

In the study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*, scholars have examined the play through diverse critical lenses including caste consciousness, gender identity, political ideology, violence, and surveillance. Mithlesh Kumar Chaudhari foregrounds Dalit consciousness in the play, arguing that Tendulkar exposes the endurance of caste oppression even within self-proclaimed progressive upper-caste households. Vandana Bhartiya similarly emphasises the conflict between upper-caste liberal ideology and Dalit lived experience, showing how inter-caste marriage becomes a contested site where deeply ingrained social hierarchies erupt.

Smita Paul approaches the text from a feminist perspective, highlighting Jyoti's journey from idealistic innocence to realism and self-awareness as she experiences the psychological cost of caste and patriarchal domination within marriage. Expanding the debate, Umesh Kumar reads the play as a critique of liberal reformism, suggesting that Tendulkar exposes the hollowness of upper-caste attempts at 'social upliftment' while showing how caste trauma shapes Arun's identity and violence.

Dr. Nisha Thakur shifts the discussion toward power-politics, examining how caste, patriarchy, and class operate simultaneously through different ideological structures. In a complementary direction, Konwar and Buragohain deploy Foucauldian theory to argue that caste functions as an invisible surveillance mechanism, monitoring and regulating bodies within the domestic space. Mishra, aligning with this view, asserts that the play ultimately reveals the deep-rooted socio-political realities that persist beneath modern liberal discourse, exposing how caste remains embedded even beneath idealistic narratives of social progress.

Collectively, these studies reveal a scholarly consensus: *Kanyadaan* functions not simply as a story of an inter-caste marriage, but as a critical dramatic text exposing the fissures between ideology and lived reality, and illuminating the intersection of caste trauma, gendered suffering, and the failures of liberal reformist rhetoric.

Gap in Scholarship

Although existing criticism addresses caste, trauma, and ideology, there is a noticeable gap in analyses

focusing on domestic space as the central location of caste conflict. This paper fills that gap by examining how Tendulkar transforms the household into a volatile space where caste politics are enacted, negotiated, and violently experienced.

Discussion & Analysis

Dwelling on the domestic space as a site of caste conflict in *Kanyadaan*, Vijay Tendulkar powerfully collapses the boundary between private and public life, revealing how the home becomes the central arena where caste tensions are most visibly enacted. Rather than situating caste oppression in public institutions such as the judiciary, workplace, or political arena, Tendulkar brings caste directly into the home—where violence is most intimate and most inescapable. The household becomes the crucible in which the historical tension between Brahminical privilege and Dalit trauma plays out. This study explores, in detail, how the private domestic environment transforms into a volatile site of ideological confrontation, psychological breakdown, and embodied caste politics:

a. The Devlalikar Household: A Liberal Space Crumbling Under Caste Reality:

Nath Devlalikar's home initially appears as a space insulated from caste prejudice—a liberal sanctuary built upon equality, humanism, and Gandhian ideals. However, this domestic environment is only superficially egalitarian; it remains steeped in unacknowledged Brahmin privilege. Tendulkar exposes this when Nath proudly claims he would have been less pleased had Jyoti chosen a high-caste partner. Nath's "absolute truth" (Tendulkar 8) reveals that his home is not caste-neutral; rather, it is a space where caste is consciously performed through reformist rhetoric. The household's enthusiasm regarding Jyoti's marriage masks its inability to comprehend the lived reality of caste-based humiliation. When Nath declares, "Today I have broken the caste barrier in the real sense… Today I have changed" (23), his words reflect ideological excitement rather than an understanding of what domestic caste assimilation entails. The Devlalikar household celebrates an abstract idea of caste equality but is unprepared for the consequences of integrating real caste experiences into their domestic life.

This failure is evident in Seva's warnings. Unlike Nath, she is acutely aware of the potential destruction this domestic experiment invites. Her confrontation—"Does it mean that my daughter's life is to be used for an experiment?" (28)—exposes the arrogance underlying Nath's liberalism. Domesticity becomes the first site where their ideological divide surfaces. While Nath envisions his home expanding into a symbol of social justice, Seva recognizes that domestic space cannot sustain such theoretical commitments without rupturing. Thus, the Devlalikar home stands not as a stable refuge but as a fragile ideological construct that collapses when confronted by the lived trauma Arun brings with him.

b. Arun's Entry into the Devlalikar Household: Domesticity as Cultural Alienation:

Arun's first visit to the Devlalikar home marks a significant moment where domestic space becomes a site of discomfort and cultural clash. His admission—"I feel uncomfortable in big houses… they're like bellies of sharks and crocodiles" (16)—reveals that the home embodies upper-caste material culture that alienates him. Arun's sense of displacement in this household underscores how homes themselves are caste-coded spaces. Domestic architecture, furniture, mannerisms, speech patterns, and even hospitality practices are imbued with caste markers. Arun's defiance and aggression in the domestic setting arise not merely from personal temperament but from his acute awareness of caste-based spatial segregation.

The Devlalikar living room, which Nath imagines as a place of cultural openness, becomes for Arun a reminder of centuries of Brahminical privilege. His hostility—"Caught a Brahmin dame!" (18)—is an act of reclaiming power within a space that historically excludes Dalit bodies. Tendulkar thus

demonstrates how domestic space is never neutral; it is saturated with historical inequalities. Arun's alienation becomes the catalyst that triggers the transformation of this household into a battleground of caste resentment and symbolic revenge.

c. Arun and Jyoti's Marital Home: Domesticity, Violence, and Reenactment of Trauma:

The marital home of Jyoti and Arun becomes the most violent manifestation of caste conflict. It is within this domestic environment that Arun's historical trauma resurfaces through physical assault, verbal humiliation, and emotional manipulation. According to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, trauma manifests in repetitive, uncontrolled reenactments (Caruth 4). Arun embodies this pattern. His abuse of Jyoti—twisting her arm, kicking her pregnant belly, calling her "stupid" and telling her to "shut up" (21)—is not merely individual cruelty but an unconscious reenactment of caste humiliation he endured in the outside world.

The home becomes the stage upon which he relives and reverses the powerlessness of his childhood. The power he cannot exercise in public institutions due to caste discrimination is redirected toward the private sphere, where he holds complete control. In this sense, domestic violence becomes a political act. Arun weaponizes the marital home as a site to assert dominance over an upper-caste woman, thus symbolically reclaiming agency denied to him in the hierarchical public world.

Furthermore, Arun's explicit invocation of his Dalit identity—"If you see my father's hut you'll understand" (16)—reveals his desire to impose his cultural landscape onto the domestic space he shares with Jyoti. His violence becomes a tool to dismantle Brahminical notions of femininity, cleanliness, decency, and order that Jyoti unconsciously brings into the house. Thus, domestic space transforms into a site where caste identity is violently negotiated and reconfigured.

d. Jyoti's Subalternization: The Domestic Sphere as a Space of Gendered Caste Oppression:

Jyoti's psychological disintegration within the household illustrates how domestic space becomes a site of subaltern formation. Initially, Jyoti believes herself capable of transcending caste differences, imagining her marital home as a space of democratic equality. However, Arun's violence gradually strips her of voice, agency, and identity. Gayatri Spivak's theory that the subaltern "cannot speak" (Spivak 28) becomes evident in Jyoti's transformation. Despite being educated and articulate, she finds herself unable to assert selfhood within the domestic environment, where Arun's trauma-fueled domination suppresses her.

Her confession—"I have to accept him as he is, because I cannot reject him" (68)—is a chilling indicator of her subalternization. The marriage becomes a symbolic inversion of caste hierarchy: an upper-caste woman bows to the authority of a Dalit man who reinscribes power through violence. Tendulkar exposes the ironies of liberal feminism here. Jyoti, who once believed in equality and autonomy, becomes imprisoned within the patriarchal-casteist domestic structure. The home, far from being a refuge, becomes the site where she is turned into an object defined by her husband's trauma.

e. Domesticity as Carnivalesque Inversion: Arun's Mockery and Symbolic Revenge:

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque helps illuminate Arun's performative rebellion within the home. Arun's crude humor, mocking of Brahminical rituals, and ridicule of Jyoti's family are not random acts of insolence. Instead, they constitute a deliberate inversion of caste hierarchy within the domestic sphere. His taunts—"Caught a Brahmin dame!" (18)—are carnivalesque acts that rewrite caste superiority through parody and aggression.

Through this inversion, the home becomes a space where oppressive structures are momentarily reversed. Yet, as Bakhtin warns, carnival can produce chaos rather than liberation. Arun's carnivalesque

outbursts destabilize the foundations of marital harmony, turning domesticity into an arena of degradation rather than empowerment. The marital home thus becomes an unstable space where caste resentment expresses itself through grotesque laughter, violence, and irrationality.

f. Collapse of Nath's Liberalism: Domestic Consequences of Ideological Naïveté:

Nath Devlalikar's idealism collapses entirely within the domestic sphere. It is only when Jyoti returns home beaten, pregnant, and psychologically destroyed that Nath realizes the limits of his reformist vision. His repentance—"Reject your father. Learn to see through his naivete and idiocy. Don't ever rely on his wisdom. If you do, you will ruin yourself" (62)—exposes how domestic suffering forces ideological re-evaluation. Nath recognizes that caste cannot be reformed through symbolic gestures like inter-caste marriage alone; its violence must be confronted in the actual lived space of the home.

The Devlalikar household becomes a site of reflection, anguish, and guilt. Nath experiences what Caruth calls "belated understanding" of trauma (Caruth 7): he grasps the consequences of his actions only after Jyoti has endured immense suffering. Domesticity thus becomes not only a site of caste conflict but also the arena where ideological illusions shatter.

g. Domestic Space as the True Battlefield of Caste:

Through the interplay between the Devlalikar home and the marital home, Tendulkar reveals that caste conflict is most intensely experienced in domestic environments. Public spaces allow for ideological posturing, but the home exposes the raw truth of caste: its emotional violence, its psychological scars, its gendered consequences, and its intergenerational trauma. In *Kanyadaan*, domesticity becomes the ground on which caste reproduces itself even within supposedly progressive families. The home, intended as a site of love, becomes a site of historical revenge; intended as a sphere of protection, it becomes a sphere of violation.

Conclusion

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* reveals, with acute psychological and political insight, that caste is not merely an external social system or a public ideological debate—it is an intimate force that infiltrates and shapes domestic life. By foregrounding the home as the primary site where caste is enacted, negotiated, and violently reproduced, Tendulkar challenges the conventional notion of the household as a haven of emotional security. Instead, the play exposes domesticity as a volatile arena where historical injustices and ideological fantasies collide. The Devlalikar household embodies this contradiction. Although Nath Devlalikar advocates for equality and dreams of a casteless society, his understanding of caste remains abstract and untested. His liberal idealism collapses when confronted with the lived reality of caste trauma within the domestic sphere. The home becomes the space where Nath's progressive rhetoric disintegrates in the face of Jyoti's suffering, proving that caste cannot be eradicated through symbolic marriages or ideological ambition alone. Arun and Jyoti's marital home further underscores this point. It becomes a theatre of violence, humiliation, and psychological domination—a space where Arun's inherited trauma manifests as aggression and where Jyoti's identity is systematically dismantled. Tendulkar's representation of domestic life aligns with Foucault's theory of micro-power: the home is a site where power circulates most intensely because it is disguised beneath intimacy. Trauma resurfaces, as Cathy Caruth explains, through repetitive, uncontrolled actions—Arun's brutality is not isolated cruelty but a reenactment of caste history within the private sphere. The carnivalesque inversion of caste hierarchy, described by Bakhtin, gives Arun temporary power within the household, but it produces chaos rather than liberation. For Jyoti, this domestic space becomes the ground of subalternization,

where her voice, autonomy, and personhood are eroded, resonating with Gayatri Spivak's assertion that the subaltern is denied the ability to speak within structures that bind her. Ultimately, *Kanyadaan* demonstrates that domestic space is not separate from caste politics—it is where caste violence becomes most intimate and most devastating. Tendulkar's portrayal of the household as a battlefield dismantles the myth of the home as a private refuge and reveals it as a deeply political space structured by historical inequalities. The play compels readers to recognize that caste cannot be transcended without confronting its ingrained presence in familial structures, marital relationships, and everyday domestic interactions. In exposing the failure of both upper-caste liberalism and romantic idealism, *Kanyadaan* asserts that any attempt to reform society must begin within the home, where caste identity is both inherited and violently contested.

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