

## **Vijay Tendulkar's *a Friend's Story*: A Social-Psychological Perspective of a Lesbian in Homophobic World**

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### **Abstract**

Tendulkar has always shocked the society with his controversial themes and stark commentary on current burning issue. His works cover the strong ethical concern exploring and critiquing the relations of power in their entire complex ramification. His *A Friend's Story*, written on an experimental topic, also criticize this relations of power along with the complex struggle to achieve the dominant position. The different power—blocks keeps on changing their strategies to achieve what they want. His works have generally awakened people of their long sleeps. The publication of his *A Friend's Story* also brought a turning point in Indian theaters as they shocked the sensibility of the conventional audience by projecting the realities of life, human relationship and existence. The play depicted the tension between individual identity and social existence. Though he remains a detached observer and exposed vices and weakness of society and individuals, he has some compassion for the victim of circumstances. He is an individualist and presents individual versus society. He stands for individual freedom and his Mitra is also working hard for it. The play deals with a bold theme of lesbianism and peoples got surprised to witness a lesbian on stage that left her to flow with the stream and rebel with the society. The action of the play moves round the central character of Sumitra Dev, i.e. also Mitra in the play. Mitra is a carefree girl with a loud laughter and dares to see directly into eyes. She is quite careless of social norms and moral values but got trapped by society with its norms to dominate.

**Key Words: Lesbian, Hegemon, subaltern, homophobic world, struggle, society, psychological, moral values, revolt**

Vijay Tendulkar is a renowned Indian Dramatist who is well known for his stark commentary on various burning issues in society. His works possess multidimensional quality and present a new aspect whenever turned. They explore and critique the relationship of power in its entire complex ramification. His *A Friend's Story*, a drama with an experimental topic also criticizes this relation of power along with the complex struggle of society and individual to achieve a dominant position. The different power—blocks keeps on changing their strategies to achieve what they want. This desire to manipulate and direct the behavior of other is the crux in the play where society keeps on trying to crush its opponent.

The play is centered on a lesbian relationship and the crises in one's life out of it. It is social as well as psychological study of an individual who is struggling hard to retain its position. The concept is not new for India and has its historical relevance. But recently it is termed as abnormal, unnatural and unhealthy. The myth, that same-sex love is an imported disease for India, has created an atmosphere of ignorance which has proved dangerous for many Indians:

In such an atmosphere, homoerotically inclined people often hate themselves, live in shamed secrecy, try to "cure" themselves by resorting to quacks or forcing themselves into marriage, and even attempt suicide, individually or jointly. Their families frequently react with disgust born of ignorance and blame themselves as failures. (Ruth xxiv)

Unfortunately this oppression and suffering of these people are ignored completely by political parties' social activists and other people. For them such issues are not important since Indian face many other life and death issues. However for many homosexually inclined Indians, their sexuality does become a life and death issue as is for Mitra, the protagonist of the play *A Friend's Story*.

Even Tendulkar was afraid of taking this theme at first. His *Mitra* came first as a story of relationship between a boy who has just touched twenty and slightly older young woman who fascinates and frightens him at the same time. It was many years later a play with lesbianism as its central theme came into existence and played on a stage. The play has a fatal end with "only a few show; which were hated by women and sneered at by the men in the audience." (CP xvi)

The work awakened people of their long sleeps. It brings a turning point in Indian theaters as they shock the sensibility of the conventional audience by projecting the realities of life, human relationship and existence. He depicted the tension between individual identity

and social existence. Though he remains a detached observer and exposed vices and weakness of society and individuals, he has some compassion for the victim of circumstances. He is an individualist and presents individual versus society. He stands for individual freedom and his Mitra is also working hard for it.

Mitra is not a fictitious character; Tendulkar was in his teen when the character Mitra of *A Friend's Story* came to his life. He went with his sister to watch a melodrama in annual day celebration of her college. It is where he met Mitra. Tendulkar described her performance as:

To my amazement she looked like a man and an old man at that, though not as old as the character in the play. Her youth showed through. The face looked rugged with a white mustache and make-up. The gait and manner were unmistakable masculine. (xv)

Many years later Tendulkar again comes to know of her through her old friend. He also come to know of her character traits and, also that, “she had a craving for a girl, and has an affair with her which ended in a major crisis for Mitra. It practically finished her life” (Tendulkar CP xv).

It is with the comments of Bapu that Tendulkar’s Mitra develops and came into existence in the play, “This is Mitra’s love story Mitra—Sumitra Dev.... She was different from all the other girls, or so I thought. The other girls were the helpless, touch-me not kind. But there was a masculine vigor in Sumitra Dev’s stride and speech” (419).

Mitra is a carefree girl with a loud laughter. She dares to see directly into eyes. Though looks like an attractive lady she is masculine in her behavior. Bapu strengthen this trait of her behavior by giving a reference to an incident of a photograph. Bapu found a photograph of Sumitra Dev. He picks it up and hid it in his notebook. He was shocked to see a woman with, “hairy bare-chasted men with cigarettes in their mouths” (420). His reaction was, “chee... chee... very bad. What if it had fallen into a stranger’s hands?” (420), but he was more surprised to see that Mitra is not worried at all about the photograph. She casually offered him a cup of tea and tells Bapu that, “My mother used to say, I had hoodwinked God to be born a girl. I was always with the boys. Used to play all their games from marbles to gillidanda. Even kabaddi” (422).

She keeps surprising Bapu and audience by proposing for friendship and paying the bill. When enquired about the photograph, she plainly answered, “One of them is my cousin. He’s in the army. The other is some army friend of his. They had both come down on

holiday. Great fun” (423). With this meeting Bapu comes to know of Mitra differently. “Not entirely different, but more real. It was in this sense that Mitra began to seem more true and real to me” (423), said Bapu.

The play offer a study of a being who, “herself is conscious of the fact that she is distinct from other girls having a stubborn nature like that of a boy—always following her instincts. She is reckless in the sense of being quite careless of social norms and moral values” (28), but is continuously trapped by society with its norms to dominate. This struggle for power among society and Mitra to control can be properly seen when a girl who is very buoyant and carefree, hesitate to tell Bapu about her real self:

SUMITRA. (with intensity) Who makes us the way we are and sends us here?

Why are we what we are? Why do we become our own slaves?

SUMITRA. We have to search for our own answers. No one can help One is alone. (424)

She is aware of the social dominance and its power. She is aware of the fact that if society will exercise its power what will happen of her. She is continuously struggling with herself and is scared too. She says, “Don’t think it’s easy. You don’t know me. If you get to know me, you’ll just scream” (425). In spite of her efforts she fails to tell Bapu about herself. Society attains so much power and keep on pushing her so much hard that she swallowed poison. She is under the spell of complete emotional hegemony where, “The real difficulty is in staying alive.... You want to know why I did it. Even if I explain it, will you be able to understand?” (430), and it’s only when she realized that Bapu will not be among society to punish or blame her, she tells Bapu about her real self. Mitra told Bapu that though it is strange for her too but in company of boys she never feels any sort of excitement what a girl should have felt. For her men were good company but as they treat women is somewhat weird and unpleasant for her.

But the Homophobic society, who named women as *Devi*, mother-goddess etc. to highlight her as a sacrificing idol, a giver, could not accept her challenging the social norms. Mitra’s rebellious attitude towards this inculcation seems to be the reason of their anger. Thus seeing her carefree, they tried other ways of dominance:

They sought to stamp her mind with the fear of men, at a time she didn’t knows why men were dangerous. She followed their rules without protest. Then they fenced her in. she found it very difficult to live in that world of enclosed pens, but she did. (431)

Nobody was willing to understand her suffocation and help her out. She suffered because she dares to question. She suffered and concluded “that she was deficient in some way. Something had to be corrected...” (432) She is conditioned to a level in this social hegemonic discourse that she made an, “experiment” (432) with herself. Despite of her different attitude and rebellious behavior she is scared and took a promise from Bapu that he won’t stand with society to ruin her after knowing that she has broken social norms meant for girls in society. She tells Bapu that she tried to use herself as a thing for an experiment while trying to be in the main stream of society. The burden was so much on her 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 these who . . . It was impossible for her to go through . . . (423-433)

And she realized that, “she was different . . . she could never become a man’s partner in this . . . Never . . .” (433), and due to this realization she tried to end her life. She experienced a great upheaval and even while telling this to Bapu, she was in great pain.

Mitra, though seems to be of stubborn nature, rebellious and doing what she want to do but Mitra is a subaltern in social hegemonic discourse. The parents finding their daughter different, tried to marry her to some decent boy without caring for her natural strife and desires. Not only they but Sumitra herself also made experiment to settle down with the current of society though she knew the fact that she would not be able to handle it.

It is only Bapu who is sensitive towards Mitra. Pande is also part of the Homophobic world who maintain their hegemony, laid rules for others but is concerned for themselves only. When Bapu is worried for the pain of lesbians, Pande said: “it must be very difficult for a man caught up with such a dame. Poor bastard, he can neither chew nor swallow” (434), and also refused to talk about them as a, “dirty talk” (435). Not only this he claims to be madly in love with Mitra but when come to know of her real self, he just elope. Later when comes back he keeps abusing her without any reason. When she was played with by officers in drunken state, he suggested others, “keep drinking, drink while you watch. You will enjoy it more (492)”.

Nama is part of the society who is somewhat a boneless character and introduced to complicate the situations further. Mitra pursue and wins Nama and used Bapu’s room for their meetings. Dalvi when comes to know of their affair abused Mitra and took the Nama away. Mitra uses every weapon, including anonymous letters and blackmail to win Nama and

threw Dalvi out of her life. Nama continues her relationship with Dalvi as well as with Mitra. But when Dalvi left Nama, the lesbian relationship seems happy.

Mitra is a complex character of the play. In the beginning of the play she was abused and dominated but later she showed another aspect of her character. As the play grows she created a counter—voice and get ready to fight with dominance of society represented by Dalvi. She throws Dalvi out of Nama's life by writing false letter. Whenever Dalvi come back to abuse her she stands confident and ready to fight with him. In her aggression and hatred for social dominance, she resembles Arun Athavale of Kanyadaan, who to take revenge from society and exploited other weak character Jyoti. Mitra also tortured Nama as revenge from society.

Though Mitra's hunger for power keeps on trying hard to attain it but Dalvi and society have their own ways to snatch it out of anybody else hands. The newspaper published a story of two women similar to Mitra and Nama. Mitra's father withdraws her from college and Nama was sent to Calcutta to get married. Mitra follows her to Calcutta and get thrown out of her house too for this. Mitra came back defeated and Dalvi is very happy. He tells Bapu that he will not let that "lesbian bitch" to take admission in any college; I will dispatch letters to any college where she gets admission. I have already got the letter cyclostyled. I will make everything public" (480). With Dalvi's attitude Tendulkar succeed in showing how society keep things in order.

Dalvi is very happy at his revenge and compared her to beast when Bapu called her a "wounded sparrow" (481). Despite of Bapu's effort Mitra left for Calcutta and in his despair Bapu also break off relationship with her. Sometimes later he met triumphant Dalvi and Pandey and through them he comes to know that Mitra has become an alcoholic and drinks every evening at the army club, in the company of officers who exploits her sexually. Bapu cursed himself for leaving her in her testing time and later get the news of Mitra's committing suicide.

Mitra is quite bold and outspoken characters in the play but she does get defeated at the end. She presented herself confidently but like many Mitras of today, accepts social dominance at last. Though the play gives reference to sometimes during Second World War for time but Rohini Hattingady rightly says that:

While reading Mitrachi Goshta again today, one feels that if the references to the time in the play are deleted, the play is of 'today' because things have not changed much in the past few years for a 'different person'. (Hattingady 596)

Though it is already known that these attractions for same sex are of two kinds; one based on circumstances, and two, physical hormonal imbalance. But it is the person who is always blamed for. Mitra also belongs to the second category that comes to know of her real self while growing up only. She looks around and realized that she is different and can't live the way society or people want her to live. But it is always she who is humiliated, blamed, thrown out of society and destroyed for being a rebel in society.

Dalvi representing society did his best to ruin her. He is very much determined to do what he can do. He said, "I'll go to the hostel. I'll find her there. I will not rest till she's kicked out even from there" Tendulkar CP (489). He has nothing to do with Mitra as has already ditched Nama and many other girls. But calls Mitra, "very dangerous character" (489)

When Bapu asked him about Nama and other girls, he plainly said "That's my business" (489). If it's his business than why is Dalvi interrupting Mitra's life for nothing. Bapu aptly questions:

BAPU. So, what Mitra does is her business. Why do you butt in?

DALVI. Mitra is a worm, a termite, she's bitch.

BAPU. But no one has given you the exclusive right to hunt her down. (489)

There seems to be sadistic pleasure in what Dalvi did with Sumitra. He feels victorious on the news of Mitra's suicide and excitedly come to Bapu to tell that Bapu in frustration satirically comments, "You go to heaven now and tell everyone, drive out the lesbian. Drive out the bitch" (494).

This ironic comment is on society and its ways who to maintain its hegemony play every trick to outwit the subaltern who even dares to try to attain a voice. Mitra suffered due to her bold and open voice while raising her voice against predetermined norms of society. A "Dead silence" (494) at the end of the play suffocating Bapu symbolizes suffocating humanity. Humanity with Bapu, "slumps slowly to the ground with his hand between his knees" (494).

But this is just one aspect of Mitra's psychologically complex character. She tempts Nama and also forged Dalvi's handwriting to end Dalvi and Nama's affair. Her behavior raises many questions in one's mind. Like Bapu, audience/readers are also with their doubts for her behavior that why Mitra is using another human being as a plaything, strangling her by holding her tight in her hand. She closed all option for Nama to get out of her control. Different interpretations suggest that she is doing this because of her desire to take a

dominant role and also her insecurity and craving for Nama made her this much wild. But Mitra herself answers these doubts:

BAPU. . .there were reasons for what I did, then

SUMITRA. And there are no reasons for what I do? There's can't be reasons for the way I behave? (487)

Mitra is pathetic at this. Her difference from other human being is natural. She is not the one who is to blame for this but she is constantly hated, humiliated and alienated for her existence. Her craving for Nama is natural and if Mitra had been a boy she had not suffered the same lot. It is society and its hegemonic discourse which have killed her. Though she accept, "I blame myself I tried your patience" (486), But the doubt still remain that, is it Mitra or society who is responsible for her and Nama's sufferings.

She was left alone in the society. Nama ditched her twice first for Dalvi and then for some other Guy in Calcutta to whom she went away to marry with. Nama's acceptance to Mitra's love and friendship and later her refusal caused a great unrest in Mitra. She was continuously hit hard by Nama's cowardly behavior and Dalvi's arrogant and abusive treatment. She thus comes out to take revenge from them and society. She was abandoned by everybody. Her family throws her out, her college rusticates her. After this treatment she refused all the social and moral codes for which she at a time even risks for her life. Now she said, "This much is certain, I'm not going to die (433)". She refused to bend to social norms of the male dominated society and stand with a strong voice and answer Dalvi every time. She ruined herself only when Bapu, who is everything to her, left her.

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