

Angel In The House Vs Femme Fatale: A Contrastive Study Of The Two Female Protagonists In Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*

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I. Introduction

Since past the role played on the part of the 'patriarch' towards women is one of domination and subjugation which can be said to have been executed through various ways- oppression, exploitation, subordination, discrimination, inequality and exclusion, sexism, misogyny, chauvinism, patriarchy and phallism. Betty Frieden diagnosed such situation of women and brought forth the concept of 'equality feminism' which demands that "the freedoms of men's lives should be equally available to women, and that both men and women should have equal rights and responsibilities in all significant aspects of social life." [1]

Surprisingly enough women to a great extent perpetuate their attitudes and acts out the sex roles imposed upon them by patriarchy. She remains "the Angel in the House"- a popular Victorian image of the ideal wife or woman expected to be a devoted and submissive housewife. This so called popular concept comes from the title of Coventry Patmore's poem which presents the picture of an ideal woman as well as the male-female relationship ----

"Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time, she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms." [2]



Fig.-1. The Angel In The House By Julia Margaret

Contrary to this emerges the concept of “femme fatale” who is often described as having a power akin to an enchantress and seductress who overpowers men. The phrase is French for “fatal woman” who sexually allures her lovers by her beauty and charm. Apparently unacceptable to the society this female seductress is often treated as the “other”, the quintessential Eve who is always responsible for the fall of her Adam.



Fig.-2. Femme Fatale- Press Image.

My paper attempts to cultivate the two contrastive archetypal female figures, represented by the two ‘protagonists’- Laxmi and Champa in Vijay Tendulkar’s play- “Sakharam Binder” and to dig out the basic problems underneath a male-female relationship dominated mainly by the patriarchal system.

The play consists of three acts- the first act depicts the relationship of Laxmi-Sakharam, the second one, that of Champa-Sakharam, and the last one, that of Laxmi-Sakharam-Champa where Laxmi considers Champa to be her rival in love and thereby revenges upon her.

“Sakharam Binder” depicts the story of Sakharam a drunken lout, who shelters women isolated by their husbands and tames them by making a ‘housewife’ out of them without marriage. After giving shelter to Laxmi he confesses before his close friend Dawood-

“It’s a good thing I’m not a husband. Things are fine the way they are. You get everything you want and yet you’re not tied down...And on top of it, the woman stays docile. She works well, she behaves herself. She knows that one wrong move and out she goes.” [3]

[Act-I, pg-129]

Sakharam thus thinks that he has the system by the tail and he can disregard the culture and societal values as long as he is truthful; and the system is to enslave women taking them in as domestic servants and sex partners.

After entering in his life as well as in the house, Laxmi, a cast-off wife started considering everything including Sakharam to be her own. Now, for her, Sakharam is her husband. She is like *Savitri* in the mythological story, an ideal Indian woman who is calm, generous, tender-hearted and submissive towards her lord. She performs all the household activities like a dedicated housewife and simultaneously satisfies the physical appetite of Sakharam like a mistress. American feminist theorists and activists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine Mackinnon, as Bowden stated, “contend that pornography and prostitution construct women ‘as things for sexual use’ and their consumers as ‘desperately’ wanting the possession of women”. [1] Sakharam says to Laxmi---

“There’s no strength left in you with all that fasting. But I’m warning you, you won’t last long in this house if you go around looking like a corpse. Mine is no ordinary appetite. And I won’t hear any complaints later”. [3]

[Act-I, pg-135]

He also comments about his previous mistress-

“Well, she wasn’t much in bed. She just seemed to dry up...But very devoted. She never raised her eyes, not once”. [3]

[Act-I, pg-134]

Surprisingly enough, in spite of knowing Sakharam to be a womanizer, Laxmi never dares to protest against the voluptuous activities done to her. Even Sakharam prohibits her sleeping at night to satisfy his own hunger and uses her as a puppet-

“No, you can sleep later. Get up and laugh. Laugh or I’ll choke the life out of you. Laugh! Laugh! Go on, Laugh!” [3]

[Act-I, pg-141]

Eventually Laxmi “forces herself to laugh”, and her laughter is “punctuated with agonized moans” [3] [Act-I, pg-146]. Laxmi in fact is a typical Hindu housewife who looks down upon Sakharam’s Muslim friend Dawood and desperately prevents him from performing the Hindu rituals at her home, but never voices her protest against Sakharam’s inhuman tortures.

Champa, on the contrary, is like a bewitching personality capable of attracting men like Sakharam and Dawood. In fact, she exercises her strong influence so much that he fails to dominate her. He is so much physically attracted towards her that he could not concentrate on his day’s work and fulfills all her demands like an obeyed servant. He brings tea for her and runs to make arrangements for dinner. Even Dawood is bewildered when “she smiles bewitchingly at him”. [3] [Act-II, pg-160] and later on makes love to her at his friend’s back. Even the respect which he gives to Laxmi by calling her *bhabhi* is absent here as he treats Champa as a ‘sexual commodity’. Champa’s deserted husband follows her to Sakharam’s house with a hope to take her back not because he wanted her in his life as a devoted wife but as a body of flesh and blood who is capable of satisfying his carnal desire. Champa’s sex appeal is such intoxicating that in spite of her aggressive attitude towards her husband, the latter appeals to her---

“Kill me Champa...open the door. I’m here. Why don’t you beat me, Champa?” [3]

[Act-III, pg-198]

His perversion is clearly revealed in his description of her physical appearance---

“But what a woman! Buttocks this size...Breasts so big...” [3]

[Act-II, pg-165]

Even Sakharam too cannot escape her seduction. Like a *femme fatale* she ensnares him and seems to cast a hypnotic spell upon him. He returns back early from his work only to re-enjoy her, remembering of the fun he had last night ---

“It was great fun. All day I could think of nothing else. So I came home”. [3]

[Act-II, pg-170]

When Sakharam comes to know about her faithlessness, he cannot bear this. His male ego forbids him to pardon his ‘taken-for-granted mistress’ and hence he kills her in a fit of frenzy.

But the question remains- Does this mean Champa epitomizes the feminine evil responsible for the ultimate destruction of her husband as well as Sakharam?

Kate Millett observes---

“Patriarchal religion and ethics tend to lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma it attaches to sex were the fault of the female alone. Thereby sex, which is known to be unclean, sinful, and debilitating, pertains to the female, and the male identity is preserved as a human, rather than a sexual one”. [4]

If we judge the character of Champa in this light, we will perhaps be able to realize the depth of her agony which has left a deep scar on her soul since her adolescence. Married at a very early age, she was inhumanly tortured by her husband, a sexually perverted man---

“He brought me from my mother even before I’d become a woman. He married me when I didn’t even know what marriage meant. He’d torture me at night. He branded me and stuck needles into me...What’s left of my heart now? He tore lumps out of it, he did. He drank my blood.” [3]

[Act-II, pg-167]

Thus we see that she is deprived of all the happiness of a married life and hence becomes a ‘mechanical puppet’, a playful thing capable of satisfying her male partners and without a desire of her own self. Incapable of exerting her own will before Sakharam who shelters her in distress and hence utilizes her to the fullest, she helplessly tries to satisfy him every time by making herself drunk in order to oblivate the moments of love-making and thereby escape from her own ‘mystique’ self ---

“You’ll have your fun...Wait, I’ll give it to you.[keeps on drinking and making him drink. Laughs uncontrollably.] Fun for anyone who comes along. A dog, a corpse even...” [3]

[Act-II, pg-171]

Simone de Beauvoir rightly states---

“And even when her effort at seduction succeeds, the victory is still ambiguous; the fact is that in common opinion it is the man who conquers, who has the woman. It is not admitted that she, like a man, can have desires of her own: she is the prey of desire”. [5]

Perhaps in order to escape from this claustrophobia, and to have her own will, she entangles with Dawood and thereby finds a temporary relief from her pains. Thus inspite of her bewitching personality, Champa becomes a victim of the perverted patriarchal society and pays for her ‘sin’ of licentiousness. She is brutally murdered by Sakharam out of suspicion.

That appearance is sometimes misleading is not a wrong notion which can be proved by the transformation of Laxmi who re-enters into the life of Sakharam only to upheaval it. Initially she appears to be meek, docile, timid and helpless woman, a typical ‘angel in the house’ who never dares to exert her will before Sakharam. Her returning back to Sakharam also indicates her love and devotion towards him besides her helplessness of being shelterless. She is even ready to compromise with Champa when the later says---

“Stay. You look after the house, I’ll look after him.” [3]

[Act-III, pg-181]

But what the actual fact seems to be is that Laxmi had already in her a hidden ambition of manipulating others and to enjoy an independent life- a life which will flow according to her own will and of which she is always deprived. Her yielding to the Patriarchal society made her submissive so far. And now she finds it intolerable to share her mate with the ‘other’ woman who, she thinks has intruded into their ‘happy’ life. Her opportunity comes when she happens to know about Champa’s entanglement with Dawood.

Beauvoir observes---

“It is one of the curses afflicting the passionate woman that her generosity is soon converted into exigence. Having become identified with another, she wants to make up for her loss; she must take possession of that other person who has captured her. She gives herself to him entirely; but he must be completely available to receive this gift”. [5]

Thus out of sheer jealousy and a wish to possess her mate and thereby regain her ‘throne’, she avenges upon Laxmi who once sheltered her, by planting the seed of suspicion within Sakharam and instigating him to ‘punish’ her for her ‘sins’. And once her desire is fulfilled, she overpowers him completely as the later seems to loose all his courage and masculine power. She now becomes the all-in-all and justifies the act of murder by consoling Sakharam---

“Anyway she was a sinner. She’ll go to hell. Not you. I’ve been a virtuous woman.

My virtuous deeds will see both of us through. I’ll stay with you. I’ll look after you.” [3]

[Act-III, pg-196]

It is Laxmi who now guides him to hide his crime by burying Champa's dead body. While Sakharam is still in a state of mental shock, she masters the whole situation calmly almost like *Lady Macbeth* by exerting her physical and mental powers. She thus no longer remains the 'angel in the house' but transforms into a mystery or rather a 'femme fatale' who regains her lost throne and her master.

Vijay Tendulkar thus seems to present the two female protagonists in a new light which compels us to dig out the hidden secrets of a feminine heart and soul and also makes us realize their predicaments in the male-dominated society. Besides, he seems to highlight the *Darwinian* concept of *the struggle for existence* which enabled Laxmi to fight for her rights and thereby become *the fittest to survive*.

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