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Brechtian Reflection in Vijay Tendulkar's work: A case study of Play 'Ghashiram Kotwal'

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Abstract

This study examines the presence of Brechtian theatrical techniques in Vijay Tendulkar's celebrated play 'Ghashiram Kotwal', positioning it as a significant example of epic theatre within the Indian dramatic tradition. Drawing upon the principles of Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theatre, the paper explores how Tendulkar employs devices such as alienation (Verfremdungseffekt), episodic narrative structure, stylised performance, and the use of chorus to disrupt emotional identification and encourage critical engagement among the audience. The play's historical setting, combined with its satirical portrayal of power, corruption, and moral decay in the Peshwa regime, reflects Brecht's emphasis on exposing socio-political realities rather than merely entertaining audiences. The integration of music, dance, and performative commentary further reinforces the distancing effect, preventing passive consumption and promoting analytical reflection. Through a close textual and performative analysis, this study argues that Tendulkar successfully indigenizes Brechtian dramaturgy, adapting it to the cultural and theatrical traditions of India. The paper concludes that Ghashiram Kotwal not only exemplifies Brechtian influence but also reinterprets it within a localised context, thereby contributing to the evolution of modern Indian theatre as a medium of social critique and political consciousness.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht, Epic Theatre, Ghashiram Kotwal, Vijay Tendulkar.

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1. Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar was born in 1928 in Maharashtra. His literary journey started very early at his home, as his father ran a small publishing house and he encouraged him to write. This environment led him to write a play at a tender age of six. He watched a lot of Western plays while growing up, which gave him the

motivation to write himself. "As a child, I grew up watching some wonderful western plays. It instilled in me a passion to create such plays. I like to watch and learn from people who have excelled in their field." (Tendulkar 1997:5)¹

¹ Shodhganga "Plays of Vijay Tendulkar" chapter 3, pp-123.

At the early age of only 14 years, Tendulkar took part in the Freedom Movement of 1942. His participation cost him alienation from his friends and family. He also had to leave his studies behind. It is during this time that Tendulkar started focusing on writing as an outlet for his thoughts and feelings. His early works in first half of 20's, *Who Will Love us?* and *The Householder*, did not receive much recognition from the audience which made him vow to never write again. Later, he wrote *Srimant*, which established him as a good writer. *Śrīmant* shocked the conservative audience of the times through radical storyline of an unmarried young woman who decides to keep her unborn child parallelly her rich father tries to "buy" her a husband in an attempt to save his social prestige. The play dealt with a dilemma of a 'modern' woman who makes her own choice and does not make any sacrifice as per the requirements of society.

Tendulkar's experience of living in chawal in Mumbai, provided him with first-hand experience about the life of urban lower middle class. This experience gave him the insight and the motivation that helped in his later works. He came closer to reality during this time. His works gained the charm and authenticity that made his approach unique to the problems of ordinary people. Govind Nihalani, who produced some of the most remarkable political films, commented on Tendulkar's work saying, "Tendulkar gave a certain direction to new cinema when we were

starting out. His vision and his engagement with the reality of the period gave a direction not just in terms of content but also form. That would be his contribution to Indian cinema." (cited in Ramnarayan 1992: 34)²

In the beginning of the 60's, Tendulkar wrote the play that *Gidhāde* (The Vultures) that established him as potential writer with a unique style of writing. The play was based on the various forms of exploitation: 'political', 'domestic' and 'sexual'. It was not until 1970 that it came out through production. Later in the '60s, he penned another play, which was another hit: *Silence! The Court Is in Session*. Set in India of the 1950s and does to some extent document the lives, mores and perspectives of people in this period. Necessarily, the play therefore draws upon situations that would be typical of the lives of men and women in the newly independent Indian state, undergoing rapid changes as it sought to assimilate modern ideas and incorporate these while trying to break free of the stranglehold of older constricting patterns and thought processes.

The rise of Tendulkar in the field of writing and theatre was the result of his strong radical political views and his capacity to present them in a clear manner. Unlike his many contemporaries, he was not afraid to explore and criticise social themes and causes. His courage became one of

² Gowri Ramnarayan. "Dialogue with Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad" *Express Magazine*. 8 Feb. 1998. Further cited in chap-3, *Shodhganga*.

the strongest weapons of his writing that brought him immense fame and appreciation. Tendulkar believed that the “writers have the gift to express their ideas clearly. It is a big responsibility. They should bring out what they feel, without forgetting their responsibility towards the readers” (Ram Narayan: 1992: 34-35)³

2. *Ghashiram Kotwal*: a story about politics of power

Ghashiram Kotwal was written in 1972. The play is written as a political satire with two historical connotations. First, it is based on the life of one of the prominent ministers of the Peshwa of Pune and Ghashiram Kotwal, the police chief of the city Nana Phadnavis (1741-1800). The second play is also a reference to the emergence of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. The play sheds light on various discourses – ‘class’, ‘caste’, ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘human tendencies’.

Dismissing any historical connection of his play to save it from any delayed publicization or to shut down the controversy around the play, Tendulkar says in his ‘Introduction’ of play that this his is no play of history. It is a story in prose, verse, music and dance in a historical period, he calls it. He says that ‘Ghashirams’ are a product of socio-political forces which has no barriers of time or place. He says that the play is based on a historical legend but he didn't intend to comment

³ Gowri Ramnarayan. “Dialogue with Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad” Express Magazine. 8 Feb. 1998. Further cited in chap-3, Shodhganga.

on the morals or lack of it of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis or Ghashiram. There’re some morals in this story if any, he tells the audience to find them elsewhere.

The play became an immediate success after its first performance in 1972. Tendulkar was awarded for the same at the Maharashtra State Drama Competition. But later, due to its content and its close connections with the historical characters, it was banned. People criticised the representation of various kinds of brahmins in a bad light by the playwright. They also lashed out at Tendulkar for depicting Nana Phadnavis, an influential minister and statesman of the Maratha Empire during the Peshwa administration in Pune, as main villain of the play. He was not only reputed but was called the Maratha Machiavelli by the Europeans.

The play opens with the prologue by twelve brahmins singing the prayer to Lord Ganesha with their ‘pagdi’(turban) in their hands. This prologue is followed by the performance of Ganpati with brahmins dancing on the stage. As the nandi proceeds, two Indian goddesses, Saraswati and Laxmi, of education and wealth, come on the stage to join Ganpati in dance, portraying that they both are loved equally by Lord Ganesha. The lyrics then just stop, and only the music plays in the background to make the spectators realise the happenings on the stage. At the end of the musical performance, the Brahmins who were present on the stage ask for the

blessings of Lord Ganesha.⁴ This prologue sheds light on the action of the play. The same brahmins who are depicted as devotees will be later shown as corrupted individuals who leave their wives at home to visit the house of local courtesan Gulabi while their wives stay shut behind the doors of their houses. They even lie to the Sutradhar, saying that they are going to the temple for chanting a prayer, while they go to enjoy the performance by Gulabi (the lavani dancer). The double standards of the brahmins and their projections are presented by the playwright through description.

Yet another brahmin *Ghashiram Kotwal*, has come to Poona in search of a livelihood and a place to live with his family. After finding no job and a roof for his wife and daughter, Ghashiram settles in the house of Gulabi as his worker. This job of Ghashiram becomes the meeting ground for the Nana and him. During one such evening, when Nana goes to visit Gulabi, he is saved by Ghashiram from falling. Impressed by Ghashiram's gesture Nana gives Ghashiram a pearl necklace for his service. Gulabi gets jealous of Ghashiram due to his new fame and throws him out of her house. Once again, Ghashiram is shown with no job and no roof over his head. After a lot of struggles, he hears about the event organised to honor the brahmins in Poona. He decides to go there and get some food and money

for his family, but he is insulted badly by the rest of the brahmins. Broken and humiliated, Ghashiram swears his revenge on the city: "You made me an animal; I will be a devil inside. I will come back like a boar and I will make pigs of all of you. I will make this Poona a kingdom of pigs" (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, 21).

After this, comes the scene where Nana happens to catch the glimpse of Ghashiram's young daughter Gauri and falls in love immediately. He announces the reward for anyone who can bring that girl to Nana as he will find no peace in his life without her in his life. Ghashiram uses this opportunity and entices Nana using his young daughter. But in return he demands to be appointed as the Kotwal (chief police officer) of Poona city. Nana in his lust for Gauri agrees to the demand of Ghashiram. Ghashiram wastes no time and prevails strict law and order as soon as he comes in the power. He orders for all the brahmins to stay inside their homes at night. No one will pay the visit to Gulabi and all men were strictly told to stay loyal to their wives. Soon he fills the cells of his jail with Brahmins. And the citizen of Poona gets angry at his actions and gets annoyed by the order prevailed by Ghashiram.

Angry people take their problems to Nana and request him to punish Ghashiram. Meanwhile Gauri gets pregnant and Nana kills her to clear any proof to his action. Before Ghashiram could find out his daughter, Nana buries her body in secret. When Ghashiram is unable to find his

⁴ Aishwarya Walvekar. "Performance analysis with Brecht's Epic theatre"

daughter, he threatens Nana that he will expose him. Worried Nana orders the dismissal of Ghashiram as kotwal and gives the instruction for his arrest. Tendulkar shows the power of politics that exist in the society. And the fall that power can bring. Ghashiram who once was an innocent Brahmin turns into a monster once he gets the power. He tries to show that the powerful people remains full of power even if people like Ghashiram gains some power. They are like pawn to the people like Nana.

Samik Bandhopadhyay in his introduction to the play, says that “In Ghashiram, power is defined ‘horizontally’, in term of individuals against individuals; from humiliation to revenge in assertion, to eventual victimization.... on strategies of power.” (Samik,3)⁵ At one level, it would appear that one person is being pitied and taken on and off the other, but at another it is quite clear that the state and society are the ones who are in charge and have the final say even after individual spirit.

Furthermore, the role of women in the play heightens the display of patriarchy and hegemony by its characters. There are two main women characters in the play Gauri and Gulabi, both of whom are shown as the victim of the male society around them. Gauri is an innocent young girl; whose own father puts her into the hands of awful person like Nana. Just for the want of some

⁵ Samik Bandyopadhyay 'Introduction', Collected Plays in Translation, (2004), Pg. 3.

power to get through his revenge Ghashiram trades his daughter. He never even once thinks about her pain and torture that she will have to undergo at Nana's place. Another woman character in the play is Gulabi. She is shown as a Brahmin woman who is taken from her house and into the prostitution by her family. Through the portrayal of two women, Tendulkar shows the sexual exploitation of the women in the society. The same society which punishes women for their adultery, plays them for power and sex. Tendulkar presents these women so a change can be bought in the way they are looked upon and treated. He says:

“Showing the struggle of a woman doesn't mean the struggle of that one woman. One must have name and identity, caste and background, to be believable, but not simply be a woman who takes to the stage in a certain play. In writing about her predicament, I am letting it be known that the potential for a battle against it is there. By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take. The people in my audience when they get home, may be able to visualize themselves in the woman's shoes and find a way to get my audience to view the situation from her perspective in order to help change it for her benefit” (Saran and Patil, 40)⁶

⁶ Satya saran and Vimal Patil. “An Interview with Vijay Tendulkar.”1984, pp.37. further quoted in Asha S. Kanwar, 'Ghashiram Kotwal: A Study Guide'.1993. pp.40.

Often women are blamed for the various vices present in the society. Tendulkar by this depiction exposes the very root cause of these vices. And presents the duality of male power functioning that structures the character of women to their use. Later when get trap into their own web their shifts the blame to woman around them. Here Nana blames Gauri for her pregnancy and makes an excuse that she should have been more careful around him. Ghashiram Kotwal the title character of the play stands for the corruption that enters into one's life after his defamation by the people in power. And how the same power which he cursed so much once leads to his doom. Tendulkar portrays the character of Ghashiram as man whose agony and anguish turns him into not only a bad person but a bad father. He gets disillusioned in the pursuit of power and brings down his own downfall. His miseries result from his own free-will. He chooses revenge over his family and gets punished by losing his dearest daughter Gauri.

'The possibility of Ghashiram's redemption lies in the self-realization and self-evaluation of his act of retaliation and vengeance. But his longing for a different kind of satisfaction persuades him to be a victim of brutal crimes and he in return silently accepts it in order to fulfill his aspirations. But the regression that he keeps psychologically in his mind for the same, outbursts an inflicting violence in return on the society or on his members and his surroundings. Ghashiram's attempt to hold the power position

seems in vain. Ghashiram being in league with blood and violence advances himself towards his self-destruction. Thus, his life-in-death returns to him in the form of his death warrant signed by Nana. His lack of self-assessment proves bane for him and causes his doom' (Violation of norms- *Ghashiram Kotwal*, 30).

On the other hand, the character of Nana is shown as of dead morals. The one that never becomes victim of his conscience because he is always aware of his crimes and is always trying to manipulate them into justification. People like him only become victim of their fate. As far as society is concerned, their rank in social order keeps them protected from any social or political justice. Tendulkar tries to project that one should save themselves from the people like Nana and should make amendments for their actions before their own morals die in the fight against injustice.

3. Use of folk form and elements of Brechtian theatre

The use of Sutradhar in the play is similar to the use of chorus made in both folk form and Brechtian theatre. The Sutradhar works as a connection between the audience and the actions of the play. The playwright uses sutradhar in the background of the play to comment on the actions of the play and on the nature of its characters. For example:

THE BRAHMINS. It's like Mathura!
Ho! Bavannakhani!
Ho! Bavannakhani!

It's like Mathura!
 SUTRADHAR. Night comes Pune Brahman go
 To Bavannakhani
 They go
 To Bavannakhani
 They go to cemetery
 They go to the kirtan
 They go to the temple --as they have done every
 day.
 The Brahmans go to Bavannakhani
 (*Ghashiram*,10).

The prayer sung by sutradhar at the very beginning of the play is another example of introducing the actions of the play. Reference to Lord Ganesh is given to show how the patriarchy allows more than one marriage of a man where as it is an act of shame for woman to even think about a man out of matrimony. The most important feature of Brecht's Epic theatre is his alienation effect, that shocks the audience out of the flow of the play by introducing the paradoxes in the characters and their actions. Similar kind of shock is produced by Tendulkar when he projects the Brahmans who are the symbols of pure and religion in contrast to their actions. For example: The Brahmans inform at home to their wives that they go 'to the temple', to give a sermon on 'Vishwamitra and Menaka', but in reality, they go to 'Bavannakhani 'to see the girls performing (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, 9-10).

The use of singing and dancing by the writers to mark the high points of the play is similar to the one made by Brecht to bring special attention to those particular moments. This was also used in the folk theatre to mark the rise or fall of the hero

with the help of background music. Music helps in expressing the emotions of the characters even more accurately. For example, 'after a fury by Ghashiram drum beats forcefully and Ghashiram dances a war dance'.⁷ Another important feature of Brecht's theatre is his use of 'Gestus'. It is most commonly for two reasons. First for the 'epic narration of character by actors'. Second is to unveil the 'transactions that underpin a dramatic exchange between the characters'. In this play the sound of laughter and body movement is used by the playwright. "For example, the scene with the Englishman and the Brahmans. The Brahmans are greedy for money from the Englishman. Even when he explains that Ghashiram did not steal, the Brahmans erupt into laughter. The exaggerated actions are used by each and every one of the Brahmin when they are standing in a group. This helps in making the expression more aggressive with the aid of the words."⁸

Tendulkar has used various folk forms like *lavani*, *yakshagana*, *dasha-avtar khel* and *kirtan*. He uses them all together simultaneously to bring the element of sarcasm and vulnerability. For example, 'when Nana Phadnavis enters the dancer's place in *Bavannakhani*, he is walking lustfully though exaggerated steps towards Gulabi and the singers chant a mantra - 'Radhe

⁷ Shodhganga. "A Violent Oppressive Transformation of Power: Ghashiram Kotwal" ch-6.

⁸ Aishwarya Walvekar. "Performance analysis with Brecht's Epic theatre"

Krishna Hari, Mukund Murari' from *kirtan*. It indicates that his corrupt, lustful act is somewhat overlooked and is purified by the mantra.' Another important element used by Tendulkar in the play is the Human-wall. He himself explain the use of this skill and the reason behind using it in the 'introduction' to the play. He says:

“The human wall is a great metaphor for the way of hiding and revealing things by human means, the way of secretiveness. It is the wall again that as the singing chorus uses the chant of saints' and Gods' names as yet another screen of complacence or consolation cast over the yawning horror of corruption and tyranny. As the tortured Brahmin moans and cries, the Brahman line intones the names of the Gods and shushes the Brahmin. The institutionalised sexuality and the institutionalised religiosity are joined in an unholy complicity in the repeating images of the red-light district, Bavannakhani, and of the avatarli of Krishna, Bavannakhani Mathura...Mathura comes to Bavannakhani.” (Tendulkar, Introduction,11)⁹

Tendulkar uses themes that will work as a catalyst for exposing power politics in the society. He exposes the corruption in human nature and the society. These kinds of themes are very recurring in the Brecht's work. Brecht believed the role of theatre was to generate

political awareness among the people. Similar was the belief of Tendulkar, Shanta Gokhale presents this notion of Tendulkar's concern by his play *Ghashiram Kotwal* in the following lines:

Tendulkar wanted to make a serious political statement in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. That was why he wrote the play, not to vent his spleen against Brahmins, as many Brahmins thought, nor to desecrate the sanctity of the stage with lurid depiction of lasciviousness, nor rake in money by entertaining audiences with song and dance and a scandalous legend about a historical figure. (Gokhale,81)¹⁰

4. Conclusion

Tendulkar in his criticism is more concerned with the social aspect of power structures in the society and their functioning, rather than the economical or the political aspect. These social power structures operate through sexuality, religion, politics, which Tendulkar explores in his play. 'In Modern India the political leaders in order to get their aims fulfilled depute on the top position their so called near ones. As long as their aims are served, the officials enjoy the life with all its charms but as soon as the aims are fulfilled, the officials become useless and even danger to the political leaders so they do not hesitate even

⁹ Vijay Tendulkar. 'Introduction' *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Trans. Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliott. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1984. 4. Print.

¹⁰ Shanta Gokhale. 'Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama from 1843 to the present.' (2009)

to eliminate them from life'¹¹. N.S. Dharan puts this concern regarding the issue of the play in the following lines:

“The inescapable reality is that as long as politics remains a power game Phadnavis, Ghashirams, and Lalita Gauris are bound to emerge. Not only in India but also the world over, we witness, Ghashiram being played on real political theatres. This universal political reality in fact accounts for the abiding popularity of the play”¹² (Dharan, 1999)

In the rise and fall of Ghashiram, Tendulkar has expressed a similar concern that Brecht also had from his plays, i.e. not to have ‘catharsis’. Both of them aimed their plays at activating the process of thinking in the minds of their audiences. They wanted their audience to analyse and think critically about the situations in the play. They want them to think about how these situations can be dissolved or corrected so that nothing like that happens in their future. Tendulkar wants to convey through the character of Ghashiram that such characters or disasters can be avoided if the present in these functions is shifted into the right hands.

“Tendulkar has underlined both the dark ambiguity of the cardboard figures of power which the male-dominated society holds in high

¹¹Shodhganga. “A Violent Oppressive Transformation of Power: Ghashiram Kotwal” ch-6.

¹² N.S. Dharan. “The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar”, (1999)

esteem and the dangers of this struggle for power in which gender has always played an important part. Meaning of gender in patriarchy is not just “difference” but division, oppression, inequity and inferiority for women and thus for all those without access to power. Tendulkar in ‘Ghashiram Kotwal’ suggests that the social construction of gender is effectively a useful tool in the hands of the powerful and will lead inevitably to the dehumanising of both the powerful and the powerless alike, the Nanas and the Ghashirams as much as the Gauris, and also brought the destruction of meaningful human relationships and social and moral values.”¹³The play has been attacked most of the time for showing Nana Phadnavis, a Maratha hero, in a bad light. But the play is not really about Nana or Ghashiram; it is about the evils of people with power in society and the exploitation.

Finally, Tendulkar makes use of the folk form and Brechtian elements of theatre to portray the story of an anti-hero Ghashiram whose rise and fall is shown through his choices. Realization comes to him at the very end, when he is left with no choice. His death becomes his fate and punishment for losing his morals, but he doesn't die without suffering. He is made to suffer the death of his child at the hands of Nana and the agony of not being able to save her. Tendulkar successfully executes the story of a once

¹³ Shodhganga. “A Violent Oppressive Transformation of Power: Ghashiram Kotwal” ch-6. pp.272.

powerless man who became very powerful suddenly, but this sudden rise corrupts him, leaving him even more powerless at the end. Tendulkar, through the painful projection, provides a hope for a change and better choices to be made by the audience or the readers.

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