



VIJAY TENDULKAR'S GHASHIRAM KOTWAL : THEME OF POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT



Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) is ranked as one of the three maestros of Indian theatre—Girish Karnad and Badal Sircar may be taken as the other two. Of them Tendulkar has been the most prolific and perhaps the most popular playwright among the general theatre-goers—an artist who dedicated himself completely to the cause of theater. Tendulkar has been persistent in incorporating new form and techniques in his theatre to make it both philosophically thought – provoking and aesthetically satisfying. His theatre is appealing both to the common audience and aesthetically satisfying. His theatre is appealing both to the common audience and intellectual theatre –critics. He uses folk forms in modern theatre made waves. He has experienced how in a hegemonic culture people exploit others through different strategies—social, economic and even cultural. It may be said that this knowledge of Tendulkar functioned as a stimulus for him to undertake such themes as love and betrayal, sex and violence, politics and revenge in course of his long career as a playwright. Again the subject of exploitation is so hauntingly present in his theatre that any sensitive reader might find some affinity with the theoretical propositions of 'power and knowledge' as enunciated by Foucault in his seminal work *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. There is enough contemporaneity between Tendulkar's theatricalisation and Foucault's proposition of power. The title of my article 'Theme of Power and knowledge: Vijay Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal' is therefore denotative of the divergent strategies of power in our society and how as a serious playwright Tendulkar has voiced forth those aspects in his play.

Keywords: *Subaltern, power, Foucauldian Theory, violence, sexuality.*

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**DISCUSSION**

The Foucauldian concept of power-relation runs through a large number of Tendulkar's plays. In *Ghasiram Kotwal* 'Power' seems to be functioning as a leit motif in the formation of human relationship, showing a sort of master-slave dialectics. But no such criticism has hitherto been done so penetratingly as to explore the underlying power structure in his theatre among his men and women. While judging these two plays from this perspective we may reasonably refer to the connection of Foucault in tracing the origin and direction of power:

No one, strictly speaking, has an official right to power; and yet it is always exerted in a particular direction with some people on one side and some on the other. (qtd. in Barry Smart 73)

Ghasiram Kotwal dramatises the greed and avarice of two power-seekers---Ghasiram and Nana Phadnavis. Placed in the historical perspective, the play shows how these two are also 'sexual politicians' in their own ways. Ghasiram the father 'sells' his daughter Gauri to the despotic ruler Nana who buys her as a commodity. He sexually exploits her till death. The theme of sexual exploitation showing an obnoxious power relation is presented through the help of visual stage props, rather than dialogues. The play is more visual than verbal. The visual is created out of such devices as music, song, kirtan, tamasha, and so on. The human wall on the stage has a tremendous visual impact upon the audience. It is used as a convenient screen for hiding human crime. All these have been effortlessly done by Tendulkar to bring the audience face to face with the stern reality of life which presents an all-pervading brutality and violence. They are helpful in projecting the concept of Theme of Power and Knowledge.

'Theme of Power and Knowledge' is a humble endeavour taking into account Foucault's concept of 'power/knowledge' as a theoretical framework. To explore the impact of power in these two plays the interlocking subjects of power-politics and sexual politics have been examined as a critique of Foucauldian and feminist discourse. Foucault considers power as ever-present. It is not necessarily repressive but inhibits all human

relationships and is closely bound up with knowledge. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), he develops a historical argument on this basis. What Foucault views regarding the socio-cultural-economic condition of the nineteenth century, society is hauntingly relevant in the present scenario of Indian culture. The panopticon⁴ of Foucault can be found operating to overpower the psychic world of the women characters of Tendulkar arresting them in a claustrophobic situation, in a 'wheel of fire'. Tendulkar shows how different agencies of the society are at work to subjugate human development. My work attempts to re-construct and de-construct Foucault's concept of power, relating it to vision of Tendulkar's theatre.

Foucault speaks of power as all-pervading and dynamic. In *Power/Knowledge* he insists that "power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation" (98). This is hauntingly true in respect of Tendulkar's theatre where the male characters from the 'net-like organisation' to make the women learn the patriarchal 'discipline' or to undergo 'punish' at their hands. The organised verdict in the play that marriage and child-birth should be accepted as the real destiny of a woman may be called an example of Foucauldian 'discipline' to place the women into a strict adherence to womanhood. So, Tendulkar's characters proudly voice forth: 'Janani janmabhumishcha svargadapi gariyasi'. Gauri is projected as entrapped in the labyrinth of male power. The Theme of Power and Knowledge makes us understand that "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (The History of Sexuality 93). Power is not possessed by a dominant agent not located in that agent not located in that agent's relations to those dominated, but is distributed throughout complex social networks. The characters of Tendulkar on the stage represent that social network and act accordingly. This is true of a power exercised through surveillance and documentation. In *Ghasiram Kotwal* the theme of power constitutes one of the major aspects of the play. Ghasiram comes to the city of Pune as an outsider. He is falsely accused of theft and mercilessly cornered by the Pune Brahmins. He swears revenge on the city. He uses Nana Phadnavis, the magistrate of the Peshwa,



offering his young daughter Lalita Gauri. In return he is given the power of a kotwal and wasting no time Ghasiram almost pounces on his former tormentors, rendering them to the position of slaves to his power. In the name of eradicating immorality and lasciviousness, he himself indulges in the misuse of power. Ghashiram becomes a despotic ruler. Finally, his death sentence is signed by Nana as quickly as he was given the role of a kotwal. The ending of the play is marked by violence and disturbance. Nana considers Ghashiram to be a threat to the city and thinks that his death will restore peace in the city. Hence his declaration:

Ladies and gentleman.
Citizens of Poona. A threat to
the great city of Poona has
been ended today. (The
crowd cheers.) A disease has
been controlled. (Act Two
415)

Based on the tradition of folk-theatre, the play enunciates the conflict between Ghasiram and Nana, as a result of the former's gradual ascension to power. Ghasiram symbolises persecution and tyranny, metaphorically representing the all-pervading force of power in a patriarchal society. The play opens with a sense of omnipotence that the Brahmins enjoy over the down-trodden people. It also refers to the relationship of power and its over-indulgence. Though the problem of casteism is a major one, the relationship is rooted in structures of power rather than in caste. This is something suggested at the very opening of the play with the spectacle of twelve men singing a song of God Ganesha. It incorporates both the Goddess of learning and wealth showing not only the socio-religious stance of the people but also Indian culture and its rootedness in the realm of power. Invocation to God may be called an invocation to power itself. This is what the dramatist wants to project. It also suggests the practice of utter debauchery and relentless cruelty behind the facade of ceremonies of religiosity.

Ghasiram is an outsider. The playwright's only statement, repeated so many times, was that he did not want to write a historical play. But although art is not a photographic representation of life in its

tatality, the socio-historical aspect of the Marathi reign is found to be transported to the stage itself where the dramatic figures represent some ethod or moral cores of conduct. It's a great attack on the political parties in power and also those who are its destructive agents. Thus, history and myth have been used to give the play a sence of contemporaneity which is marked by anarchy and futility. The play has undoubtedly a political message.

Ghasiram Kotwal has historical importance as it represents the two aspects of Marathi theatre--the traditional Sangeetnatak genre and the modern genre of realistic theatre . It is a fine example to show how folk theatre elements could be blended to achieve contemporary significance. Other motifs in songs and rhythmic dance are also integrated into the narrative to enhance the movement of the plot. The songs could not be separated from the context as most of them represent to the audience the conflicting modes of culture and tyranny prevalent in the society. Succeeding actions, movements and gestures have been so nicely synchronised and choreographed that they pass one after another in a cinematographic manner with an undercurrent note of satire, gross humour, brutality and pathos. Marathi folk form which is primarily regional is used to generate undoubtedly a universal appeal. The play is more effective in its visual appeal rather than the verbal one. The verbal elements constitute witty dialogues, smooth narratives against a broad dramatic scenario. In the theatre world of Tendulkar words and visual components are properly assimilated to carry the dramatic import of the play. The theme of exercise of power along with violence is communicated through two characters---in First Act through Nanna and in the Second through Ghasiram. The play projects that the root of power is all-pervasive. In introducing the play, Samik Bandyopadhyay pertinently writes: "Tendulkar, in his social criticism, is more concerned with the mechanism of power-operating within society." (X)

Ghasiram Kotwal is an exposure of corruption and pretension which is universal human situation. According to the playwright, it is a dramatisation of the decadence of the class in power. Ghasiram are the products of the society. They exercise power which is ensured through tyranny and



corruption. In the play, power is defined horizontally in which an individual is placed against other individuals for acquiring dominance over him. It also dramatises the form of humiliation, revenge, eventual victimisation all these are played out against a backdrop of political and moral decadence and degeneration, with sexuality impinging on strategies of power. The entire aura of hymns and religious ceremonies provide the ironic backcloth which is pierced through by the crudest exercise of power. All these are projected in course of the action of the play. Tendulkar creates a tremendous dramatic improvisation bringing into focus the victim and the victor. This is theatrically substantiated by him in making Nana approach Gauri with a lustful desire. Gauri is a commodity to him. It is so intensely dramatic and theatrical that a detailed exposition of the episode would establish the power-relation which is the underlying motif force of the play. Nana, the representative of the patriarchal power, appears to be the earthly representation of God. He is so bent on seduction that Gauri's warning of the presence of God seems to be futile.

NANA (voice of lust). Child, what do you want?

(She turns around, startled.)

All your dreams this Nana will fulfil.

(He puts a hand, on her shoulder. She pulls back.)

Oh, don't be shy. This is our house. This is a private hall.

No

One will see. No one in Poona today has the audacity to watch the great Nana Phadnavis!

GIRL He will see.

NANA He will see. Who?

GIRL (pointing to Ganapati). He.

NANA That idol of holiness? That all holy Ganapati? The maker of Good? Look, he has two wives. One on this side, one on that side. If you sit on our lap, he would not say anything! (Act One 378)

It is an instance of the devaluation of religious values done by a despotic ruler. Tendulkar show that power has made Nana so blind that he even breaks the ethos of cultural and religious values in using the girl for his carnal satisfaction. The episode has a naturalistic impact upon the audience. It is psychologically much patent also--a culmination of Nana's desire to use Gauri as a sexual object.

This episode has a far-reaching consequence. It connects the Nana - Ghasiram conflict into a new chord. These two male characters revolve round a female one. Their 'power' is also perpetrated on her in one way or the other. Nana exercises his power on Gauri to fulfill his sexual desire.

Ghasiram utilises Gauri as bait to acquire power from Nana. So the power structures pervade both the plays, resulting in the victimisation of either Benare or Gauri. On another level, Gulabi exercise her physical charm and 'power'; to dominate Gauri.

In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the Brahmins are shown as enjoying tremendous power and dominance in society. Since power and corruption are related issues, they indulge in material pleasures and sensuality. The red-light area Bavannakhani is a symbol of moral degradation. It means fifty one rooms. It has an ironic juxtaposition with the birth place of Lord Krishna. It shows how the sacredness of love is reduced into the vileness of debauchery and sexual promiscuity.

In course of the conversation between the Sutradhar and the Brahmins we have a foretaste of the kind of corruption practiced by Nana. When the ruler becomes a de-generate despot the fate of the subjects can be apprehended. Political power is related to the well-being and material supremacy which often lead to complete erosion of moral ethos. Nana is the incarnation of lasciviousness who abuses power for his sensual pleasure.

Tendulkar has presented him as an embodiment of brutality and lustfulness right from the start of the play. His physical infirmity is contrasted with his sensuous activity. Incidentally, he is to walk unsteadily--this heightens his decadence and importance; Tendulkar in naturalistic vein shows the sexual fantasy of this despotic ruler when he imagines Gauri as a target of his lustfulness.



Nana is given the attribute of a ruthless and lustful ruler right from the start of the play--a nocturnal expeditioner engaged in search of new woman to satisfy his lust. The Nana-Gauri encounter is the dramatisation of the fate of most of the Indian woman as marginalised subalterns whose choice or appeal is mercilessly rejected. Gauri is treated as a commodity in an explicit manner. One of the basic trends of the post-colonial writing--the unmasking of the brutal forces of power and authority--can be found adequately dramatised in both the plays.

The continuity of power and subsequent atrocity is found to be bestowed from Nana to Ghashiram. The Kanauj-born Brahmin Ghashiram comes to Poona as an outsider, and having initially suffered tortured and humiliation from the Poona Brahmins; he is given by Nana the authority as a 'kotwal' and becomes an insider. This he acquires in a most ignominious way--by 'selling' his daughter to Nana. It has a tremendous psychological impact. Since he gains power in a very loathsome way, he goes on abusing it abundantly unless and until he is made powerless by Nana. Ghashiram's career has a circular structure from an outsider he becomes the powerful Kotwal and finally goes back to the status of an outsider again. The perceptible injustices in the play are related to class discrimination and subjugation of the weaker gender. Ghashiram is abused in the First Act, he is the abuser in the next. Tendulkar questions the justification of such administrative device which could only produce misuse and malpractices. Ghashiram may not be a debauch like Nana but he directly encourages such a vice selling his daughter to gain Nana's favour. This erosion of moral values leads to subversion of filial bond into a means of aggrandisement of power.

Ghashiram is posited as the modern incarnation of Machiavelli. There is no discretion or rule of law in his administration. He ruthlessly captures the Brahmins, makes them admit their crime and bestows punishment on them with equal ruthlessness. This shows his intense desire of wishfulfilment. The socio-political condition as evident from the scene also reflects Ghashiram's psychic impulses when he becomes violent in punishing one of the Brahmins:

GHASIRAM

No? Then take the ball in your hands. Take the test. Pass the ordeal. Bring the ball over here. Grab his hands.

BRAHMAN

(in fear of his life). Don't! I did it! I confess that I stole. (Ghashiram laughs loudly.)

GHASIRAM

(to those around him). You should be so clever! See how a thief confesses. Go. Cut off his hands and drive him out of Poona. I'll see to it that no Brahman steals! [Act Two 397]

Ghashiram Kotwal is a play set in a historical frame of context with a plot dealing with the court circles and urban middle-class life in the eighteenth century. However, the play overleaps its frame of context and penetrates through different layers of extra-temporal and extra-spatial meaning. The most important aspect of its universality is its unique capacity to disturb the so-called facades of human culture and civilisation. It dramatises in one sense the death of humanity, right from the start of the play. The action is initiated with the mockery of sacrosanct family life where the sense of security and mutual trust between the husband and the wife is mercilessly shattered. Tendulkar has the courage to de-glamorise and de-idolise the upper class Brahmins who undertake nocturnal expedition to the red-light areas for erotic gratification, leaving their wives at home, to be embraced by their Marathi lovers. Men and women are reduced to the level of bestiality. They have less concern for any code of conduct. Marriage as an institution is mercilessly attacked by Tendulkar in both the plays. The fidelity between the husband and the wife is also doubted in an implicit manner in the relationship between Mr and Mrs Kashikar in *Silence!* But in Ghashiram Kotwal it is treated on a large scale. What is important to note is that because of the debauchery of Nana and Ghashiram, it is the common people suffer most. Ghashiram, during his reign as a Kotwal subverts and alters the existing



conventions and social practice. The fact that sexual indulgence was rampant in the society must not be controlled if he uses brute force to punish indiscriminately almost every Brahmin male member. He reduces them to a state of non-entity and misuses power in the name of ruling them. This he does as a means of taking revenge on people of this section for the injustice done to him. Tendulkar uses some elements of Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty.³

Ghashiram Kotwal is a practical application of the theoretical proposition of Foucault's concept of power and Artaud's dicta of cruelty. Foucault proposes that power is hierarchical. So the tenure of rule passes from Nana to Ghashiram. It is revealed that both these despotic rulers are made of the same clay. Their only concern is exercise of power through oppression--Nana's main motive is sexual gratification, whereas Ghashiram exercise his brutal force in retaliation. Both of them are guided by sadistic pleasure-principle. They create an atmosphere of the medieval world of darkness. All this is done in a most palpable way in this play. This is summed up by Foucault as 'relational character of power-relationship'. He further confirms to highlight this relational character and also the subsequent resistance:

Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversity, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. (The History of Sexuality 95)

The depiction of the all-pervading evil in the attitudes and activities of the Brahmins is so vividly done as to make the play to be stamped as anti-Brahmin and historically inaccurate. But nothing can make Tendulkar deviate from his mission of showing the evil result of patriarchal power-play. The playwright seems to be more concerned in showing how power operates within society rather than in examining the sources or implications of that power. Ghashiram sells his daughter by way of transaction of patriarchal power to the hands of another patriarch in order to gain political power. Ghashiram has a desire to be a

part of the corrupt court of Pune. This is evident right at the beginning when he arrives as an outsider. The Bavannakhani scene where Nana carouses with the courtesans shows the degeneration of Ghashiram also. As Nana dances, he suddenly sprains his ankle; the questioning of the Sutradhar is full of puns and overcharged with innuendos linking the sprained foot with a sexual metaphor of 'falling'. Interestingly, it is Ghashiram who literally conveys Nana's sexual follies on his back. Shanta Gokhale's remark on Nana's physical deformity and his sexual lapses is pertinent:

So Nana hopping around one leg becomes the visual incarnation of lechery. The image is transformed into one of power and patronage, with the idea of the patronage-seeker's 'bootlicking' bulging. (qtd. In Subhramanyam 111-12)

Both Nana and Ghashiram are corrupt and decadent, like almost all the characters of the play. Except Nana, Ghashiram and Glabi, most of the characters have no individual identity. They form 'society'. The Pune Brahmins are interchangeable characters representing the corrupt world of religious and female characters are seen as objects of sex and violence. They are meant only for subjugation and objectification. It is interesting to note that in most of the cases Gauri has no voice. But it is more pathetic to note that despite Benare's profound 'voice', her plight also remains the same. Perhaps the only difference is that Gauri is violated physically, Benare psychologically and emotionally. The hypocrisy of the patriarchy is best revealed in the traditional expression by Kashikar: Janani janmabhumihscha svargadapi gariyashi. (Act Two 79).

The first encounter between Nana and Guri characteristically brings together religiosity, sexuality and 'deputationist politics' as an ironic comment on the play. This view has expressed by Angelie Multani in the essay "Off-Centre: The Displacement of women Characters in Ghashiram Kotwal and Tara" (Subhramanyam 113). The plight of Gauri is bitterly commented upon by Nana when he tells her: "Look he has two wives. One on this side, one on that side. If you sit on our lap, he won't say anything!" (378). Gauri has to accept authority. Just as Nana loses his authority as a ruler, Ghashiram does the same as a father.



Nana is depicted as a despot, with the essential qualities of the typical politician whose professional success depends on amorality and indifference to the people. The cruelty of this power-seeker is revealed in one of his speeches to Ghashiram: "This time there are two bullets in this gun. With the first one, we'll fell your luscious daughter. But with the second we will make the city of Poona dance" (384). Ghashiram has also a senseless absorption in violence, getting a sadistic pleasure out of the ordeal suffered by the Brahmins. In Act One, Nana very pertinently comments that he has made Ghashiram an outsider to perform the role of a kotwal in order to use him as an 'easy tool' (to quote Eliot) against his conspirations. So in order to enjoy power Ghashiram gets entangled as a victim of the evil power-politics. Nana is to play the role of the *dues-ex-machina*. From historical figure to the modern one; he is the same incarnation of evil.

CONCLUSION

"Ghashiram Kotwal" is a dramatic expose of the latent savagery of human being, i.e., treachery, violence, sexuality and power mania. It presents the power politics between Nana Phadanvis and Ghashiram---the former being hungry for sex and the latter, for power. From a common man Ghashiram becomes a beast in his speech of power.

The play is a glaring example of the saying that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". It succeeds in presenting political power and revenge are so strong that one can go to the basest of things. This signifies the present political scenario so well!

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