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Power and Violence in Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*

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Abstract:

Generally, power is considered and understood as the capacity of an agent to impose his/her desire or will over that of the powerless. In this sense power is understood as something owned by those who are in power. But Michel Foucault opines that power is not something that can be owned but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way. It is more a strategy than a possession. The theme of power and violence has been dealt with by various writers such as Shakespeare, Milton, G. B. Shaw, Osborne and O'Neill throughout generations. In Indian literary context, Vijay Tendulkar, a radical dramatist in modern Indian literature, too has shown his curiosity about the subject of power and violence in his plays. His eponymous play, *Ghashiram Kotwal* deals with the politics of power and its several implications. Through the conflict between Ghashiram Savaldas and Nana Phadanvis Tendulkar has scrutinized the liaison between religion, caste, sexuality and violence in order to expose the structure of power that upholds the status.

Keywords: Politics of power, Violence, Hypocrisy, Lust, Conflict.

Michel Foucault writes in his book, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, "Power is everywhere and comes from everywhere, so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure" (63). He is of the opinion that it is erroneous to assume power as something that the institutions hold and exercise oppressively against individuals and groups. Hence, he undertakes to move the analysis one step far and wide viewing power as the unadorned oppression of the powerless by the powerful, intending to examine how it operates in day to day interactions and communication between people and institutions.

Generally, power is considered and understood as the capacity of an agent to impose his/her desire or will over that of the powerless, or the ability to force them to do things they actually don't wish to do. In this sense power is understood as something owned by those who are in power. But Michel Foucault opines that power is not something that can be owned but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain way. It is more a strategy than a possession.

While defining the nature of power Michel Foucault writes in his book *Power/Knowledge*:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through net-like organization . . . In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (98)

He defines Power as the relationship in which one wishes to direct other's behaviour and violence as continuously hunting, someone, physically, mentally and psychologically.

The subject or theme of power has been dealt with by various writers such as William Shakespeare, John Milton, George Bernard Shaw, Osborne and Eugene O'Neill throughout generations. In Indian literary context, Vijay Tendulkar, a radical dramatist in modern Indian literature, originally writing in Marathi, too has shown his curiosity about the subject of power and violence in his plays.

Vijay Tendulkar is an outstanding Marathi playwright who has brought a sea- change in the world of the post-independent Indian Theatre. He was of those stupendous playwrights who flabbergasted the sensibility of the conservative audience by projecting the bleak realities of life, relationship and existence. He is a stalwart writer who explores and exposes the challenges, quandaries and complexities in true colours in order to present the modern society realistically. He wrote most of his plays in a realistic vein which rebuff the idealized picture of life. M. Sarat Babu, moreover, mentions in his book, *Vijay Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal: A Reader's Companion*:

Vijay Tendulkar portrays the contemporary society and the predicament of man in it with a special focus on the morbidity in his plays, which reminds us of Nietzsche's words 'the disease called man' and also Freud's description of human civilization as 'a universal neurosis'. His plays touch almost every aspect of human life in the modern world and share the disillusionment of the post-modern intellectuals. (26)

All the plays of Vijay Tendulkar depict the different aspects and facets of human life and human character and complexities of human relationship. His plays, mainly deal with the theme of power and violence. Through his plays, he attacks the inhumanity, hypocrisy, absurdity, corruption and other evils of society. Thematically, his plays have ranged from the alienation of the modern individual to contemporary politics, from social individual tensions to the complexities of human character, from the exploration of human relationship to the reinterpretation of historical episodes, the theme of gender relations, sexual norms, institution of marriage and issues of congenital morality have been featured prominently in his plays.

Vijay Tendulkar has written his play *Ghashiram Kotwal* in Marathi which was first published in 1973. *Ghashiram Kotwal*, justifiably enough, is considered as one of the outstanding accomplishments and achievements of Tendulkar which is deemed as an influential and powerful assertion of the violence that human beings are able to do anything like they covet when they are triggered off by jealousy, avarice, lust, revenge and enthrallment for power. The entire action of the play is set around the milieu of intrigue, subterfuge, greed, sexuality, hypocrisy, latent violence, brutality, inhumanity, treachery and immorality which are not only the features of the contemporary power politics but also of the politics of the present time.

The eponymous play deals with the theme of power and violence with its protagonist, Ghashiram Savaldas. It can be said that there is a reciprocal relationship between power and violence. Where there is power, violence is bound to be there and vice-versa. The play deals with the corrupting nature of power. It is the presence as well as the absence of power which beget violence. Having power or not having power is the main cause of violence and corruption. And the union of Politicians and criminals creates lots of nuisance, corruption, evils, destruction, disharmony and fuss in the society.

All the plays of Tendulkar deal with various issues of contemporary social, political, economic and cultural life in Maharashtra which can be found still some or the other way in the society. The play *Ghashiram Kotwal* also deals with such issues. In this play, Tendulkar has used historical references and events to suit his purpose. This play is a satire on a society which defends the powerful and corrupt and punishes the people like Ghashiram. Furthermore, the play is also an arctic and bitter satire on the society which has nothing to do with the moral and human values in front of the craze for achieving power and authority.

Ghashiram Kotwal is a story of the conflict between Ghashiram Savaldas, a North-Indian Brahmin from Kanauj and Nana Phadanvis, the chief minister of the Peshwas in Maharashtra. The play can be called the tragedy of power. The conflict between Ghashiram Savaldas and Nana Phadanvis can be seen as the conflict between power and powerlessness. The conflict between Ghashiram Savaldas and Nana Phadanvis may appear to be the theme at surface level but Vijay Tendulkar has scrutinized the liaison between religion, caste, sexuality and violence in order to expose the structure of power that upholds the status.

In this play, the playwright is concerned with the politics of power and its several implications. The play also deals with the united unfavourable and destructive activities of politicians and criminals. A. Anitha Raj writes in her article, "Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*: A Denunciation of Fraudulent Politicians, Policemen and Prostitutes":

Man is a political animal, says Aristotle, the political ideas and institutions are outcome of the political nature of man. Politics relates man in a state or government. The struggle for power, persecution, tyranny, suffering, passivity and submission has been a continuous process from ancient man's life and is prolonged to thrive also in the civilized society. In the power game, man is either a captive to others or captivates others. The power structured relationship or power game operates at different levels; domestic, social and political. In the cut-throat competition for power, reputation, wealth, dignity and position, man exploits his fellow-beings and uses them as mere puppet for his selfish motives. (1).

In his writings, Tendulkar repudiates to be defrauded by the romantic or false conception of reforms and movements. Vijay Tendulkar exposes the splotches and failures of unrealistic and unfeasible reforms and movements in his plays. The plays of Vijay Tendulkar mainly deal with the powerful expression of human idiosyncrasies and quirks. In his plays, he never tries to infuriate the people but he does his utmost for the improvement, refinement and enlightenment of society. While on one hand, the play *Ghashiram Kotwal* is a powerful criticism of the corrupt politicians, policemen, prostitutes of the contemporary society who are the sole cause for a social disharmony, lawlessness, injustice, inhumanity, corruption, hypocrisy, adultery, vices, confusion, mayhem, it also upholds the nature of power on the other hand.

As the play, *Ghashiram Kotwal* deals with the theme of power and violence, the nucleus of the play is the liaison between corruption and power. It is about the matter how unlimited and absolute power rears and nurtures oppression, duress and coercion leading to disdain and derision of the law and judicial system. Vijay Tendulkar denigrates those people mordantly who misuse their power, authority, status and influence in order to achieve their self-seeking and personal ends. Every now and then, as it is unfurled in the plot of the play that subordinates like Ghashiram are used for this purpose. Nana Phadanvis, the chief of the Peshwa in Poona, appoints Ghashiram Savaldas as the Kotwal of the city not on the basis of merit but because he has a lustful eye on Ghashiram's young and beautiful daughter, Gauri. As having been appointed as the Kotwal of the State, Ghashiram, on his part, started misusing his position to intimidate and startled the Brahmins of Poona who had insulted and humiliated Ghashiram earlier.

As the central concern of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is the abuse of power it also reverberates, to some extent, in Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1973). The novel, *Lord of the Flies* is about the conflict between two competing instincts or impulses that exist within all human beings. There is always a constant conflict between these two impulses in human beings that is the instinct to live by rules, follow rules and regulations and morality and

act everything peacefully against the impulse or instinct to satisfy one's instant desires, act violently to get hold of supremacy over others by imposing one's will over others. William Golding implies that the instinct or impulse of savagery or desire for power or evil is far more primal, primitive and deep-rooted to human psyche than the impulse of goodness. Power in wrong hands can only be abusive and repugnant which becomes very much clear in the play where Nana misuses his status and power by attempting to molest the young girl, Gauri. In the novel *Lord of the Flies*, it is Jack who misuses his power and creates savagery, sadism and evil everywhere.

Vijay Tendulkar doesn't hesitate to highlight the corruption brought about in holding to such a worthwhile and money-spinning portions in politics. He makes use of the historical references and characters, Nana Phadanvis, the chief of the Peshwa of Poona and Ghashiram Savaldas merely to expose the cruelty, violence and inoffensive practices to incorporate power which in due course, escorts their destruction and obliteration. The description of the corrupt nature of politics and politicians is not related to the Peshwa regime of Poona alone, but it is also a universal and general phenomenon. The relationship between criminals and politics is not newfangled to the present time but the link between criminals and politicians is quite antique and older.

Michel Foucault's opinion about the nature of power is that power makes human beings what they actually are. It may be correct to some extent that power doesn't have any function until it is used or misused by human beings according to their attitudes. In the play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, as Samik Bandyopadhyaya comments:

Power is defined 'horizontally' (in the sense in which Maurice Duverger uses it in *The Idea of Politics*, London, 1966) in terms of individuals against individuals; from humiliation, to revenge in assertion, to eventual victimization; played out against a background of political and moral decadence and degeneracy, with sexuality impinging on strategies of power. (587)

The play *Ghashiram Kotwal* points out the existing degradation, decadence and degeneracy of politics and morality. How ironical it is that while on one hand, the background of the play is fraught with the singing of hymns and the performances of religious rituals, the mind of Nana Phadanvis, the chief of the state, is fully encumbered with the evil, lustful and profligate thoughts on the other hand.

In the play, Ghashiram comes to Pune with his family (his wife and his young daughter) in search of his fortune but sooner or later, he has to come across his misfortune there as being accused of theft and sent to prison in the very commencement of the play and later on, he has to face her young innocent

daughter's death. As Ghashiram remarks in the Act one of the play, "I came here to find my fortune- and lost my reputation..." (375).

Thus, the city of fortune as he thought of Poona earlier turns out to be the city of misfortune for him in the end. It is Ghashiram who becomes the victim of the politics of power structure. It is only the misuse of power here by Nana Phadanvis who mishandles his position. Nana Phadanvis keeps hold of illimitable and endless power. Sutradhar, the narrator of the play, like the chorus of Greek Drama, gives us an idea about the limitlessness of Nana's authority and power when he comments:

Ganpati goes to his home-to his home- to his home.
 Whatever Nine Court of Nana Says- the Peshwai obeys.
 Fear of Nana grows day by day - day by day.
 Even his enemies say
 There's only one Nana
 The rest are na-na-na-na. (380)

The beginning of the play juxtaposes the holy prayers (of Lord Ganapati, Goddess Sarawati and Goddess Lakshmi) and the unholy lust of the Brahmin and therefore, betrays the double standard and hypocrisy of the society. The play *Ghashiram Kotwal* opens with the religious rituals and the worship of Lord Ganesha and soon passes on to the red light place, Bavannakhani where the people of Peshwa (Poona) visit in order to indulge in the erotic dance of Gulabi, a prostitute, while their wives stay at home awaiting their return spending the whole night sleeplessly. This shows the oppressive patriarchal culture of our Hindu society. The remark of Sutradhar, the narrator of the play, is a bit germane which depicts the abysmal and deplorable condition of women in Peshwa's Empire:

The Brahmans have lost themselves in Bavannakhani and the Brahman women are at home; they stay at home; oh yes, they stay at home. The Brahmans have lost themselves in the cemetery, in Kirtan; the Brahmin women are sentenced to solitary confinement. (368)

It is not only the condition of Brahmin families but also true of Peshwa's Chief Minister, Nana Phadanvis. "Nana of the Nine Court, Nana of wealth and Power" recurrently visits the place of Gulabi, Bavannakhani. The *nauch-* girls of the red-light area unconsciously unveil the sordidness of the human race. All these show the moral degradation of society.

The play scrutinizes all the shades and nuances of power, which manipulates it, how it operates and functions and for what purpose. And this course of action equally marginalizes individual and group. Women in *Ghashiram Kotwal* literary and metaphorically occupy and dwell in a marginalized space. Poona, therefore, is the symbolic site for all that Brahminism has to come to stand

for: double standard, hypocrisy, power-mongering, intrigues, scheming, cruelty, immorality and brutality. Having lost its religious and spiritual tendency, attitude, propensity and inclination, it loitered and rambled in material pleasures, immoral activities and sensuality. The Brahmins of Poona visit red-light areas on a regular basis, not temples; they prefer lavani and erotic dances of prostitutes to Kirtan and religious rituals. It can be said that they are spiritually dead and it is due to their spiritual barrenness that they turn the gardens of Krishna at Mathura into Bavannakhani, a red-light place. It's very clearly suggested by the narrator of the play, Sutradhar:

Night comes.
 Poona Brahmins go.
 To Bavannakhani.
 They go
 To Bavannakhani.
 They go to the cemetery.
 They go to the Kirtan.
 They go to the temple- as they have done every day.
 The Brahmins go to Bavannakhani . . .
 The street of Bavanna become for a while
 The garden of Krishna. (366-67)

In India, the Brahmins are supposed to profess and preach spirituality, religion and morality, but if we see in the context of this play, we find that it is ironical as well as paradoxical that the same community is highly materialistic, down to earth, immoral, always preferring luxury to spirituality. They are like the 'dying generation' the term used by William Butler Yeats in one of his remarkable and outstanding literary work 'Sailing to Byzantium'. In this poem, Yeats, has used this term 'dying generation' for those who are totally indulged in sexuality and materialistic pleasure without any concern for spirituality. In the same way, the people of Poona have also nothing to do with spirituality and religion.

Nana Phadanvis who is the chief minister of Poona, has also nothing to do with religion and morality. The entire action of Nana is a proof of his immorality which is quite perceptible in each and every page of the play. Furthermore, Worship of Ganapati goes on but Nana doesn't pay any attention to the religious activities and Kirtan which go on because Nana has nothing to do with all these things because his purpose of going there is something else. As soon as, Nana looks at Gauri, the young daughter of Ghashiram, praying in the hall for the first time, he finds himself blind in lust and tries to grab her. When Nana tries to assault the young girl, Gauri just before the idol of Ganapati, she tries to resist him by saying that Lord Ganapati, the idol of holiness is watching his shameless activities. But as Nana has no concern with religion, he crosses all his limits. He

even doesn't think of the age of girl who is like his daughter. Nana unhesitatingly replies to her resistance by remarking:

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 won't say anything!" (378)

Nana considers Ganapati just an idol and nothing else. He is not the worshipper of God but of lust. He even accuses, very shamelessly, Ganapati of having two wives. He is of the opinion that God can by far and uncomplicatedly be bribed and backhanded and that's why he asks Sutradhar to 'do special puja, pray to the Gods. Make a deal with the gods. Promise them anything' for pacifying the fuming Brahmins. Moreover, we see that how disgraceful and reprehensible this act is that a father like man tries to molest a daughter-like girl. Vijay Tendulkar comments very satirically in the play that "lust knows no age, no shame" (382).

The urge of revenge and passion for power is so dominant that Ghashiram haggles his own daughter, Gauri with Nana over his ambition of gaining power. He is ready to sell his daughter although he is aware of the meanness of the agreement which can be seen in his conversation with Nana:

Ghashiram: All right, Sir, to shut people's mouths, make me the Kotwal of Poona . . .

What's hard for Nana? In Poona the sun rises whenever Nana tells it to . . .

This is the only way. Otherwise the lovely Gauri will not come to this place again . . .

Nana: Bastard. You've got me in narrow pass.

Ghashiram: Yes, the narrow pass of my only daughter. (383-84)

Nana capitulates to Ghashiram's stipulations and appoints him the Kotwal of Pune by giving him a signed order of appointment. At this Ghashiram feels that he has succeeded in his witty plan, but as it is rightly said that 'haste makes waste', likewise, in the haste to obtain power, he doesn't even think of the dreadful and grim consequences of this agreement. Nana has, on the other hand, twofold advantage in appointing Ghashiram as Kotwal of the state. While on one hand, he gets a chance of having sexual pleasure from Ghashiram's daughter, he uses him also to control the Brahmins of Poona on the other hand. Though Ghashiram considered himself to be very smart and witty, he goes amiss to realize that Nana

can be smarter than him. Ghashiram axes his own legs by doing all these. The sinister motive of Nana can be seen very clearly when he remarks in a very spiteful tone:

To, Ghashya, Old bastard. We made you. We made you Kotwal.

Raise hell if you wish. But you don't know the ways of this Nana.

This time, there are two bullets in this gun. With the first one, we'll fell you luscious daughter. But with the second we will make the city of Poona dance . . .

We just raised a dog at our door to the position of the Kotwali! (384)

Ghashiram has done an unexpected thing. As Sutradhar also comments on the immoral act of Ghashiram: "No one should pity Ghashiram Kotwal because his unmarried daughter died when she was pregnant" (407).

Throughout the play, we find Nana as a crafty politician. It is Nana Phadanvis who is the master of power game and politics and Ghashiram is nothing but the puppet in his hands. Nana is all in all in Poona as having unlimited power. Accordingly, he executes his never-ending power in such a way that he gets his hands on what he wants. From the beginning to the end of the play, he uses his power for the immoral and inhuman activities very smartly without any moral qualm and trepidation. He also uses his absolute power to victimize, to harass, to set out his victims and prays and hushes up everything very clearly. In *Ghashiram Kotwal: "Text and Subtext"*, *Ghashiram Kotwal: Essays and Annotations* Neela Bhalla also comments on the power-politics and power-game played by Nana and Ghashiram:

If Ghashiram is the juggler naut hurtling throughout the play, Nana is the wily puppeteer, pulling the strings. The Machiavelli of Peshwas he outmaneuvers Ghashiram and the play testifies his mental agility and cunningness. He is the ace manipulator who makes Ghashiram the full guy. We do it and our Ghashiram pays for it; when faced with an enraged mob, he again turns the situation to the dual advantage. By Ordering Ghashiram's execution, he not only pacifies the people but also comes through as the upholder of justice and goodness. The Peshwa is satisfied and Nana rid himself of a Kotwal for whom he has no more use. (96)

Vijay Tendulkar depicts the effect of power over a common man through Ghashiram by representing how a man loses his temperament, values, intellect and self-control and becomes arrogant, oafish, and savage after getting power. But, in the play, he feels culpable, blameworthy and guilty, consequently the shivels of his anguish and pain are audible unambiguously when he says:

Now he's in my hands . . . Oh, my daughter . . . The beast. . .

Oh, you people. Look! I've given my beloved daughter into the jaws of that Wolf! Look. Look at this father. Putting the child of his heart up for sale . . .

That old overripe bartered! Look at him, eating her like a peach . . . spit on me. Stone me. . ." (381)

A common man like Ghashiram becomes devil. But it is not only his fault, but society, to a large extent is also responsible for turning him into demon who is ultimately stoned to death.

To conclude, it can be said that the criminalization of power and politics is not a new problem rather the nexus between politician and criminals is quite ancient. Through this play, Tendulkar strongly attacks the unholy nexus between politicians and police-force which is the sole cause of corruption in the world. Both are shown by Tendulkar as the enemies of morality, peace, law and order and even humanity. He also attacks the caste-system, prostitution, moral deterioration and spiritual decay of the society. In the play, he doesn't attempt to hurt the feeling of Chitparan Brahmin community but tries to focus on the hypocrisy and double standard of the people in power. As Neela Bhalla writes very accurately:

When Nana fears of power of Ghashiram as Kotwal he turns the blood thirsty mob against him without any slightly grievance or lamentation. Through the death of Ghashiram and continuous successful reign of Nana, the playwright suggests that not all the evil doers are punished; some are left free like Nana. Thus corruption goes not only unquestioned but also continues to flourish. Ghashiram's may come and Ghashiram's may go, but real power rest with demagogues like Nana. This social set up remains unaltered forever as long as people start realizing their real exploitation. (55)

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