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## **Subversion as a Performative Theme in Vijay Tendulkar's Selected Plays**

**Subhendu Nayak**  
Research Scholar,  
Ranchi University.

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### **Abstract:**

During the 1960s, some Indian playwrights broke away from the common mould and wrote plays challenging the predominantly prevalent ideologies in ways that contributed to the process of social change. Vijay Tendulkar was one of them, the others being Badal Sircar (1925- 2011), Mohan Rakesh (1925-72) and Girish Karnad (1938-2019). He donned many caps in his life- from journalism, playwriting, screenplay-writing to social commentary, writing essays and novels. However, it was as a playwright that Tendulkar was at his subversive best. In the present paper I shall try to show how Tendulkar in his plays questions and at the same time seeks to metamorphose the existing semblance of social system and its hypocritical norms and values, much to the discomfort of the middle-class society that forms the impressionable majority of the socio-political mainstream. For this, I have chosen here three of Tendulkar's plays- 'Silence! The Court is in Session', 'Sakharam Binder' and 'Ghashiram Kotwal' – attempting to show the different ways in which he ruthlessly subverted conventions regarding content and performance in modern Indian theatre.

**Keywords:** Subversion, Realism, Morality, Anti-determinism.

Vijay Tendulkar was unsparing in the way he questioned the milieu to which he himself belonged. He exposed in a style never before witnessed in the Marathi and Indian theatre scene the hypocrisy, violence and suppressed sexual desires latent inside the middle-class psyche. His setting was often the middle-class urban or semi-urban space, where he placed characters who reflected the contemporary social realities of our times. His grotesquely intense realism and his dialogues may be seen as tools he employed to take the bull by its horns so that he could awaken it and provoke introspection or reactions. After his play 'Gidhade' ('The Vultures') was staged for the first time in 1970, Girish Karnad wrote about the production that the staging of 'Gidhade' could be compared to the blasting of a bomb in an otherwise complacent marketplace. In the introduction to 'Five Plays: Vijay

Tendulkar' (Oxford University Press), Arundhati Banerjee writes that 'It was with the production and publication of 'Gidhade' that Tendulkar's name became associated with sensationalism, sex and violence. There ensued a long war with the censors who condemned the play as obscene and in bad taste...' Indeed, the Marathi theatre had been rocked. For the first time in modern Marathi theatre- or even Indian theatre- there was such brazen depiction of sexual desires and violence inherent in the social man, replete with 'obscene' abusive language wherever required. It is most significant that Tendulkar's major subject of frontal attack was the sacredness associated with the institution of marriage, especially in the middle-class society. His plays subverted deterministic notions about the family as a sacred unit of the sacred state (authority).

Many of Tendulkar's characters are invariably the dissidents of presiding notions of morality and values. This made him a rather controversial figure in the late 1960s and 70s when several of the productions of his plays were stalled and vandalized by conservative groups. Tendulkar was already called the 'the angry young man' of Marathi theatre by the mid-1960s and with the production of 'Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe' (Silence! The Court is in Session') in 1967 he came to be recognized as 'a rebel against the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society...' His most famously notorious play 'Sakharam Binder'(1972), staged in the same year by Kamalakar Sarang, was banned two years later in India after protests, many in his state accusing him of encouraging 'immorality'. 'Ghashiram Kotwal' (1972), which is widely known as Tendulkar's *magnum opus*, was also temporarily banned in Maharashtra. Tendulkar's play 'Mitrachi Goshta' spoke about lesbian same-sex love- one of the first plays in the modern Indian context to do so- and raised many eyebrows at the time it was produced (1981), often with empty halls greeting the actors in Maharashtra.

'Silence! The Court is in Session' (1967) was Vijay Tendulkar's first play that established him as a rebel in the Marathi theatre world. The play is about the mock trial of Leela Benare, a free-spirited woman, in a make-believe court. A theatre group, of which Miss Benare is a part, comes to perform at a village and the members of the group decide to use an empty hall for staging a mock trial. They decide that Benare would be the accused and the charge against her would be 'infanticide'. The whole decision is imposed upon her. Benare is at first stunned by this development. Only gradually does Benare realize that her real private life has become the subject of scrutiny of some 'respectable citizens'.

As the structure of the play-within-play keeps unfolding, the hidden malicious attitudes of the other players towards Benare- one of their own- comes to the fore. The play ends with Benare's now famous soliloquy. It is for the reader/ audience to decide whether she actually

says it or imagines it. Tendulkar makes us read/ hear the unspoken feelings of the vulnerable voices in a hostile middle-class society. As eminent theatre scholar Samik Bandyopadhyay puts it, through ‘the sharp stylistic break in tone’, ‘the spoken’ becomes ‘a projection of the unspoken, and (which is) naturally unheard by the other players.’

The whole mock trial is played out as a farce. Each player- except an innocent villager- is keen to play along. At various points, we notice that the farcical element gets exposed. While everyone tries to maintain ‘seriousness’, the accused herself makes a sharp remark with her words or her gestures that not only questions the player’s own patriarchal ideas about chastity and sacredness, but also opens up the farcical plane into reality, even extending into the contemporary real outside the main play. Each time she does that though, she is ‘issued a reprimand’ for ‘committing contempt of court’. When the prosecutor says, ‘Motherhood is a sacred thing—’ Benare immediately interrupts, ridiculing him- ‘How do *you* know? [...]’. A reprimand is issued to her. In all these instances the real and the illusory overlap each other and yet, this Pirandellesque dramatic device does not come across as something used for the sake of using a dramatic device, as in the meaning of Tendulkar’s satirical statement does remain abstract. This way he also subverted conventional ideas of structuring plays which usually employed this kind of device during most of the absurd drama of that time. At another instance, a character comes to the witness box and prepares to take the customary oath. Having glanced at the first page of the fat volume before him, he ‘says gravely’- I [...], placing my hand upon the Oxford English Dictionary, do hereby solemnly swear that I shall tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth- to which, ‘Benare laughs and laughs’. Tendulkar here deftly subverts the holiness assigned to the Geeta. He shows that it really makes no difference as to which book one is placing his hands on before vowing to ‘tell the truth’ in our society. The Geeta here is a symbol of the colonial hangover which never seems to leave the lawmakers and the ones in power in post-independence India. It must be remembered that it was not before the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the colonial rule that a ‘sacred’ holy book of the Hindus came into existence in India as an imitation of The Bible.

A little later, the accuracy of Tendulkar’s dialogues is once more highlighted when a character playing a witness refers to ‘the public eye’ while stating his own view of Benare. Benare retorts back, asking him the view from his ‘private eye’. Here again the contemporary real has made a connection with the play within play. Tendulkar subverts the tendency of most people to desperately establish their private opinion as being in sync with public opinion. Benare’s question is to the whole of the middle-class society.

Benare could be seen as the typical subversive Tendulkar character- upright, free-spirited and fearless with her views. However, a middle-class woman being so makes her a target of the vanguards of orthodox middle-class moralities.

'Silence! The Court is in Session' placed- perhaps for the first time in modern Indian plays- a woman as victim and protagonist, though, as Samik Bandyopadhyay observes, it 'locates its heroine Benare not at an acquiescent receiving end, but at a point of conflict where as aggressive-transgressor of the sexual mores of her community, she challenges the executors or power in absentia.' Leela Benare was Tendulkar's first real subversive character, although she was silenced by the court, the authority.

'Sakharam Binder' (1972) is about a book-binder named Sakharam, who proudly declares that he indulges in all kinds of depravity but does it openly, that he has never done 'a dishonest act' in his life. He is a Brahmin by birth but he does everything that the usual Brahmin man would shudder to talk about openly and do only clandestinely. He is apparently aggressive, violent and is a blatantly rough foul-mouthed person, though his honesty is worth admiring. It is in stark contrast to the hypocrisy of the middle-class. He is frank and straightforward in what he primarily does- giving shelter to helpless women in his house. In a contractual arrangement, he tells them that they have to be like a wife to him and obey him if they have to stay in his house. Sakharam does not believe in the institution of marriage. The other two major characters in this play are the two women- Laxmi, the religious, hard-working, seemingly tender woman, and Champa, the one with a troubled past, but a sensuous and assertive woman. Champa's character is particularly important with respect to our subject of discussion, as she subverts (and vocally so) gender roles. While Laxmi is a proper ideal 'Indian woman' who does all the household chores and religiously serves her man, Champa is her exact opposite. She is least bothered to obey Sakharam and follow his orders. Sakharam at the same time is 'infatuated' by Champa's sexual attractiveness. His attempts at asserting his virility by almost educating her that 'women must always speak with restraint' and that making tea is 'a woman's job' has no impression on her. Even later when Sakharam persists in teaching her the 'rules' of the house she shoots back, 'Rule! Is this a school or a court or something?'

Tendulkar successfully establishes that what Sakharam gets in Laxmi, he does not get in Champa, and vice versa. Although he is ready to sacrifice his daily routines and even his professional commitments for *enjoying* Champa, he is not pleased to think that she does not ever 'feast' or 'fast' like a Hindu wife should on religious occasions and festivals. In Laxmi,

he gets utmost devotion- just like from an ideal wife- but he is not sexually driven by her. In the last act, we find that he is confused in the presence of both Laxmi and Champa in his house. Laxmi's presence renders him impotent when he gets to making love to Champa. Through his violent act at the end he, in a way, tries to cover up his sense of embarrassment and the humiliation Champa hands out to him.

The play opens with Sakharam Binder entering his 'old red-tiled house, the sort one finds in the alleys of small district towns' with Laxmi who 'appears terrified', unsure of what to expect. This is her new shelter. Sakharam starts describing himself as an honest man and says that he is not bothered by what people think about him. A little later, during a conversation with his friend Dawood, he gives a good account of himself and his thoughts on the 'gutless breed' that are the husbands. His pride in being someone who does not believe in any socially legitimized bondage can be gauged when he says that it is only when a woman- otherwise 'a clever lot'- marries that she 'goes wrong'. According to him it is usual that the woman starts feeling content- 'Now I've got my man'. However, the husband, without getting 'tied down' himself, 'ties her down'. He 'flirts around again— a free bird!' According to Sakharam, it is the prostitutes who 'can get to God much faster than all of us', because they have 'nothing to hide'. He is of the opinion that 'men are born with an itch' which only women can satisfy and so, prostitutes giving men 'joy' unflinchingly makes them morally superior. Tendulkar here subverts all kinds of middle-class conventions, the first and foremost being that of not speaking about sexual desires openly even if most men in a deterministically heteronormative society would have that 'itch'. Sakharam's praising of prostitutes is also a subversion of middle-class values.

With the production of 'Sakharam Binder' (1972), Vijay Tendulkar reached the crescendo of impropriety and indecency on the Marathi stage. Now he had truly broken all barriers, challenging the middle-class man to come out in the open and face his new and most dangerous antithesis- Sakharam Binder. Through all his words, gestures and mannerisms, Sakharam Binder at the start of the play exposes the double standards in the upper-class, middle-class society. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadekar, in her book 'Theatres of Independence', writes that Sakharam's house is 'the laboratory where he conducts his eccentric social experiments in the subversion of Brahminism and the institution of marriage'. Tendulkar, through this play, questions this very foundation of middle-class society— marriage. According to Sakharam, marriage is a contract, and he subverts the sacred notion surrounding it. He is also a Brahmin, or so he claims. So, Tendulkar is also subverting the notion of genetic superiority of the Brahmins. According to Shanta Gokhale, Sakharam-

the 'dangerously real man'- subverted performative traditions and trends of that time in Marathi theatre, as in shocked people thought- 'was it possible that such a base specimen (of Brahmins) could exist in the tribe? And even if a stray example did, how could they allow such an unrepresentative example to be presented on the stage?' Tendulkar unleashes, through this play, the basic carnal instinct of man on to the stage while also exploring the repressed violence in human beings. Laxmi's unexpected calmness in handling the aftermath of a violent act which she has herself provoked, is worth mentioning. Subverting orthodox values, societal 'norms' and deterministic notions of morality, Sakharam Binder's actions and words never contradict each other until the very last scene of the play when he kills Champa in a rage and gets frightened. His self-professed manhood is suddenly found wanting. It is Laxmi, the apparently docile human being, who takes over even as Sakharam remains speechless. It is here that Tendulkar takes the play to the unprecedented level of subversion which it is known for today. In exposing the violence repressed inside even the most harmless of people in our society, Tendulkar subverts traditional ways of presenting the subject of violence on the Indian stage.

'Ghashiram Kotwal' (1972) is often considered as the jewel in the crown of Vijay Tendulkar's complete oeuvre. It marked a paradigm shift in the narrative structuring of political and historical plays in India. The play tells the story of Nana Phadnavis and Ghashiram Savaldas. Ghashiram is a Kanauj Brahman who has come to Poona in the Peshwa administration of Nana Phadnavis to make some fortune. Nana is depicted as a lustful man. After being humiliated by some rather unruly Brahmans who charge him of pickpocketing during the Peshwa's festival, Ghashiram vows to come back and take his revenge upon the Brahmans of Poona. He goes to the extent of trading his own daughter with Nana- who is madly attracted to her- to get the post of the Kotwal (the police chief) of Poona. Reveling in his sense of victory, he now uses his new position to oppress the people, especially the Brahmans of Poona, exercising strict control over them. He starts excessive moral policing in the city and orders his men to be ever alert in smelling anything 'immoral' in anyone's house, even as 'Poona lost heart' (translation- Jayant Karve and Eleanor Zelliott). Meanwhile Nana impregnates Gauri, Ghashiram's daughter, who dies at childbirth. Ghashiram, pained and wounded, starts going overboard with his ways. The people of Poona demand his death, which Nana grants. Ghashiram is attacked by a furious mob which ultimately kills him.

Tendulkar used the Marathi folk forms Tamasha and Lavani in this play. However, the uniqueness of this play is those forms being interspersed and overlapped with constant narrations in various forms and prosodic metres by a *sutradhar* (narrator) and 'others', adding

various layers to- and hence expanding- the contextual meaning. This mixing up is not arbitrarily done. The meaning itself is often subversive. Moreover, in most instances, perhaps only except the opening Ganesh Vandana- the prayer offering to Lord Ganesha- there is an overriding tone of subversion of conventional narrative structures in Marathi theatre. The *sutradhar* is a constant presence and a medium of subversion in the play which comes through in the form of numerous satirical set-pieces. Tendulkar, sometimes turns the *sutradhar* into the comedian and sometimes into the *haridasa* or *kirtankar* ('a special kind of religious story-teller-singer'). There are moments of situational irony, for example the point when the *haridasa* sings an abhanga while Nana 'leers at the women' such that some of them 'adjust their saris', etc. Tendulkar makes the abhanga, which is a religious song, change fluidly into a lavani (a love ballad). In fact, along with speech and song, Tendulkar has specified the smallest movement, smallest gesture wherever he has felt the necessity of conveying some meaning. In doing so, he has subverted the traditional ways of staging plays of this genre in Marathi theatre. For, as Shanta Gokhale points out- 'Every song in this play adds meaning, every word indicates gesture or tone of voice, every speech pattern marks character, and the juxtaposing of scenes provides ironic comment'. He does not intend to, for instance, bring in the human curtain of a dozen rhythmically-swaying Brahmans (which closes to hide or reveal action), only for the sake of introducing an innovative theatrical device. It 'is integral to the creation of an environment of intrigue, hypocrisy, greed and brutality, in which the story [...] unfolds'. Unlike 'Gidhade' ('The Vultures') or 'Sakharam Binder', this play works at more than one plane simultaneously, and all the while the *sutradhar* maintains a neutral, uncompassionate view of the characters. In comical tones, he constantly exposes the Brahmans' hypocrisy. Even though they say that they are going to the 'burning-ground', the 'darshan' or the 'keertan', the *sutradhar* sings that the Brahmans are actually going to Bavannakhani- the red-light area. According to Gokhale, this rhythmic narration by the *sutradhar* is 'full of sacrilegious juxtapositions'. Going to the 'Burning ground' is used as an evasive way of mentioning a place when one does not want to name it because it is 'too wicked'. 'These iniquitous places are juxtaposed with the keertan', writes Gokhale. This 'keertan' would thus mean the songs sung by the dancing women in these places. 'The idea of the keertan leads to darshan. A glimpse of the divine idol is its real meaning. In this case, the glimpse would be of the dancing women' - a disturbing meaning indeed for those who consider the orthodox upper-caste hegemony and the caste hierarchy as something 'normal' and important. 'Sex, death and worship are thus all bound up together'.

Throughout the play, there is a subversion of the general ideas about the keertans sung or performed on stage. On several occasions, after a brutal act has been committed (such as when Ghashiram discovers that his daughter has been killed) or a character has been wrongfully accused of some crime, keertans are sung. On one occasion, the 'nocturnal visits of the brahmans to the courtesan's quarters are linked with Krishna sporting with the milkmaids in Mathura. This juxtaposition is unsettling for those who make the connection.' 'Ghashiram Kotwal' broke new grounds and is therefore of tremendous historical significance. Never before were two completely different strands of the Marathi theatre- the Sangeetnatak strand and the modern realistic theatre strand- integrated with such impact to 'achieve contemporary significance'.

Tendulkar defied conventional realistic norms in the performative space. His plays regularly subverted socially approved ideas of morality, values and virtues. This made Tendulkar perhaps the most controversial figure in modern Indian theatre. He subverted so many usual middle-class habits of thinking that, as Arundhati Banerjee observes, it took theatre critics many years to look objectively at his work. It can be safely said that the general perception of modern Indian theatre was never the same again after Tendulkar came along.

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