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Staging Authority: A Power Structure Analysis of Contemporary Marathi Plays

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Abstract:

Marathi theatre occupies a central position in India's performative traditions not merely due to its artistic excellence but because of its persistent engagement with social realities and political consciousness. Evolving from mythological spectacles and reformist narratives of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Marathi drama has transformed into a dynamic mode of cultural expression that mirrors and critiques the social order. In particular, the post-independence phase of Marathi theatre has served as a fertile ground for dramatising power dynamics, often grappling with the authoritarian structures embedded in the social fabric of Maharashtra and India. This tradition, rich in both textual complexity and performative innovation, has been instrumental in challenging dominant discourses on caste, gender, class, and institutional authority. Contemporary Marathi playwrights, such as, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, and Satish Alekar have significantly contributed to this critical theatre by placing questions of power and resistance at the centre of their dramaturgy. Their plays function not merely as narratives of oppression or social critique but as dialogic spaces where authority is interrogated, dismantled, and sometimes,

ironically reinstated. Tendulkar's political allegories, Elkunchwar's existential dissections of familial and cultural collapse, and Alekar's absurdist critique of bureaucratic and religious institutions together form a triadic lens through which the performance of power can be understood and evaluated.

This paper seeks to examine how these playwrights negotiate, represent, and resist various forms of power whether it is political, patriarchal, caste-based, linguistic, or institutional. In doing so, it emphasizes that the plays do not depict power as a static or external force but rather as a relational and performative process enacted through discourse, space, and the body. The characters in these plays are not merely victims or perpetrators of power; they are also mediators and sometimes unwitting agents of hegemony, caught in complex webs of societal expectations and institutional constraints.

To unravel these nuanced articulations of power, the analysis is based in a triadic theoretical framework. First, Michel Foucault's concept of power as omnipresent, relational, and productive helps illuminate how authority operates through everyday practices and disciplinary mechanisms. Foucault's idea that power is not simply repressive but also constitutive guides for a deeper understanding of how characters internalise and reproduce the very structures they seem to resist. Second, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony provides tools for understanding how consent is manufactured within social institutions, particularly in familial and religious contexts, making the oppressed complicit in their subjugation. Gramsci's insights into the role of intellectuals and cultural production are relevant to theatrical practices where the artist can function as both chronicler and disruptor of hegemonic norms. Finally, post-colonial theory—particularly the contributions of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—enriches the discussion

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by exposing how power intersects with identity, representation, and voice. Their emphasis on hybridity, mimicry, and subalternity enables an interrogation of both colonial legacies and internal hierarchies within Indian society. Within this analytical framework, the dramatic form itself becomes a site of contestation—a symbolic battlefield where dialogues are not merely spoken but enacted as power struggles. The use of language, silence, stage space, folk forms, and character dynamics all contribute to an aesthetic politics that both mirrors and disturbs dominant paradigms. As such, the stage in these plays is not a neutral ground but a politically charged arena where power is always at play—contested, reified, and occasionally transcended.

To sum up, this study will critically explore how contemporary Marathi theatre stages authority not only through its content but also through its form and performative choices. By examining select plays by Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, and Alekar, the paper will map the contours of resistance and complicity, rupture and continuity, in the complex dramaturgy of power. The intention is not just to analyze how power is shown but to reveal how theatre itself acts as a form of cultural resistance—simultaneously reflecting and reshaping the political consciousness of its audience.

Keywords: Power Mechanism, Marathi Drama and Theatre, Michel Foucault, Vijay Tendulkar.

Introduction: Marathi Theatre as Political Discourse

Marathi theatre, particularly in the post-independence period, has functioned as a compelling site for political discourse and cultural inquiry. The evolution of this theatrical tradition from the devotional and didactic forms of the 19th century—exemplified in mythological narratives and reformist drama—into a modern, politically charged, and aesthetically complex

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medium marks one of the most significant trajectories in Indian regional theatre. This transformation is not merely a stylistic or thematic shift; it represents a fundamental reconfiguration of the theatre's relationship with society, politics, and the structures of authority. In this sense, Marathi theatre does not merely reflect the socio-political transformations of modern India—it actively participates in their construction and critique.

The roots of political expression in Marathi theatre can be traced to the works of 19th-century reformers, such as, Vishnudas Bhave and later Kirloskar, whose plays addressed social evils through the lens of myth and morality. However, it was in the post-independence era, amidst the rise of Dalit literature, socialist politics, and middle-class anxieties, that Marathi drama began to assume a sharper, more subversive edge. As Ananda Lal observes, "The Regional theatre in India has continually negotiated the terrain of political dissent through cultural idioms" (Lal 112). This negotiation becomes particularly pronounced in Maharashtra, where theatre has historically served as both a mirror and a critique of caste oppression, patriarchal authority, and institutional corruption.

In this evolving landscape, the figure of the playwright emerged not only as an artist but also as a public intellectual—engaged in shaping political consciousness and interrogating hegemonic structures. Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), for instance, reconfigures the historical narrative into a sharp critique of political opportunism and moral decay. Tendulkar's plays often expose the complicity of institutions—family, media, politics—in perpetuating violence and injustice. Mahesh Elkunchwar, on the other hand, probes the disintegration of tradition and the alienation of the individual in a rapidly changing socio-economic milieu. His *Wada Trilogy* stages the collapse of a feudal household, reflecting the decline of Brahmanical

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authority and the emergent crisis of identity in post-colonial India. Similarly, Satish Alekar's absurdist dramaturgy, exemplified by *Mahanirvan* (1974), employs black comedy and ritual parody to unmask the hollowness of middle-class respectability and the bureaucratic farce of death and salvation.

What binds these playwrights together is their consistent focus on power—not merely as a repressive force but as a discursive and performative phenomenon. Michel Foucault's theory of power as a diffuse, relational force that "permeates all levels of the social body" (Foucault 94) is particularly relevant to understanding how these dramatists conceptualize authority. Their plays often reveal how power operates through language, ritual, family structures, and the daily practices of life, rendering even private spaces politically charged. For instance, in *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar subverts the domestic space into a site of violence, exploitation, and moral ambiguity, problematizing the boundaries between victim and perpetrator, rebellion and complicity.

Moreover, these plays resist simplistic binaries of oppressor and oppressed. They foreground the ambivalence and entanglement of characters within the very structures they critique. Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony provides useful lens suggesting that domination is often maintained not through coercion alone but through consent manufactured by ideological institutions such as family, religion, and education (Gramsci 12). Tendulkar's characters, such as the patriarch in *Kamala* or the journalist in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, represent hegemonic complicity revealing how power works through performance, discourse, and self-justification.

The Postcolonial theory further enriches this analysis by drawing attention to the hybrid, contested, and stratified nature of identity and authority in post-independence India. Scholars such

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as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have highlighted the politics of representation and the ways in which subaltern voices are often silenced or distorted in elite cultural forms (Bhabha 37; Spivak 271). In this light, the marginal characters in Marathi drama—servants, widows, Dalits—emerge as figures of disruption, whose presence destabilizes dominant narratives and compels the audience to confront uncomfortable truths. Importantly, the stage itself becomes a metaphorical and material arena where authority is enacted, contested, and sometimes dismantled. The performative strategies employed—nonlinear narratives, folk idioms, ritual parody, fragmented dialogue—underscore the political nature of form. As Erin B. Mee contends, "Indian theatre often articulates resistance not just through content but through dramaturgical innovation that resists hegemonic aesthetics" (Mee 45). Alekar's use of death rituals in *Mahanirvan* becomes a grotesque comedy that ridicules both religious orthodoxy and state apparatus, transforming the ritual stage into a space of satire and protest.

Thus, Marathi theatre functions as a deeply political discourse, where power is not only represented but actively interrogated. The critical engagement of these playwrights with authority structures—be they colonial, patriarchal, or neoliberal—situates their work within a broader continuum of resistance in Indian literature and performance. Through a synthesis of content, form, and critical intent, Marathi drama reaffirms the potential of theatre as a transformative social force, capable of unsettling the very foundations of established power.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault, Gramsci, and the Cultural Politics of Power

This paper employs a multidisciplinary critical framework to investigate the power dynamics staged in contemporary Marathi plays, with particular reference to the works of Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and key postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri

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Chakravorty Spivak. These thinkers provide complementary yet distinct lenses through which to examine how power is constructed, enacted, resisted, and internalized within theatrical narratives. Their theories are especially pertinent to a dramaturgical analysis that seeks to locate power not solely in overt political institutions but in everyday discourse, cultural practices, and symbolic structures.

Michel Foucault's reconceptualization of power represents a radical departure from traditional juridico-legal models that conceive of power as centralized, repressive, and held by dominant agents. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously asserts that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). This conception of power as diffuse, relational, and productive enables an analysis of theatre as a performative space where authority is not only represented but constituted. In the context of Marathi drama, power is inscribed in the bodies of characters, the spatial dynamics of the stage, the silences between dialogues, and the repetition of rituals. Plays such as Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* do not merely depict domination; they stage the micro-operations of power as they are reproduced in intimate, domestic, and linguistic acts. Foucault's emphasis on discourse as a medium of power becomes crucial here, since the theatre is, above all, a discursive field where ideologies are spoken, enacted, and questioned.

Further, Foucault's idea of *bio-power*—the regulation of bodies and populations through disciplinary mechanisms—finds resonance in plays like *Mahanirvan* by Satish Alekar, where death, funerary rites, and state bureaucracy converge to expose the absurdity of institutionalized control over human life and death. Similarly, Mahesh Elkunchwar's characters often inhabit spaces

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of self-surveillance, where they internalize the norms of caste, gender, and familial duty, reflecting Foucault's notion that "the soul is the prison of the body" (Foucault 30).

In tandem with Foucault, Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding how domination is maintained not merely through coercion but through the manufacture of consent. As Gramsci argues in *Prison Notebooks*, civil society—comprising schools, churches, media, and family—is the terrain where ideologies are naturalized and normalized (Gramsci 245). The characters in Marathi theatre frequently reveal the internal contradictions of such hegemonic structures. For instance, the female protagonists in *Kamala* or *Silence! The Court is in Session* are not only victims of patriarchy but also enforcers of societal expectations, illustrating the subtlety of hegemonic power in shaping subjectivity. Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual" (Gramsci 6) is also pertinent here, as Marathi playwrights themselves function as counter-hegemonic voices challenging dominant narratives through cultural production.

Moreover, Gramsci's insistence on the role of language in securing ideological consent aligns with the playwrights' attention to linguistic registers and performative speech. In plays where Sanskritized Marathi, bureaucratic jargon, or colloquial dialects are deployed strategically, language becomes both a marker of social stratification and a site of subversion. By foregrounding the politics of language, these dramatists critique the very discourses that uphold systems of caste, patriarchy, and state authority.

Postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, further deepens the analysis by focusing on the politics of representation, hybridity, and the subaltern voice. Bhabha's concept of the *Third Space*—a liminal zone where fixed identities are destabilized

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and meaning becomes negotiable—is especially relevant to plays that resist monologic authority and foster dialogic engagement (Bhabha 37). In Alekar's *Micky ani Memsahib*, for example, the cultural encounter between colonial and indigenous subjects creates a hybrid performative space that unsettles binaries of colonizer and colonized.

Gayatri Spivak's critique of representational politics in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" offers a cautionary reminder about the limits of voice and agency in dominant cultural forms. While Marathi plays often attempt to give voice to the marginalized—be it Dalits, women, or lower-caste characters—they also expose the structural difficulties of authentically representing subaltern experiences within elite cultural institutions like theatre. Spivak's notion of "epistemic violence" (Spivak 284)—the erasure or misrepresentation of marginalized knowledges—becomes crucial in analyzing how certain characters, though present on stage, remain silent, symbolic, or caricatured.

This theoretical framework posits that power in contemporary Marathi plays is not confined to political rulers or oppressive institutions but is enacted through everyday practices, cultural rituals, and narrative strategies. The plays under study deploy dramatic techniques—such as irony, satire, fragmentation, and ritual parody—not only to represent authority but to challenge and reconfigure it. By drawing upon Foucault's micro-politics of power, Gramsci's hegemony, and postcolonial critiques of voice and representation, this paper interrogates how authority is staged, destabilized, and negotiated in the complex world of Marathi theatre.

Vijay Tendulkar: Violence, Patriarchy, and State Power

Vijay Tendulkar occupies a pivotal position in modern Indian theatre, not merely as a dramatist but as a cultural critic who consistently interrogates the contours of authority, violence,

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and social conformity. His plays serve as powerful critiques of institutional and interpersonal power, functioning as theatrical laboratories where the dynamics of domination and resistance are laid bare. The themes of state violence, patriarchal control, and the manipulation of social morality pervade Tendulkar's dramaturgy, making his work indispensable to any analysis of power structures in Marathi theatre.

In *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), Tendulkar draws upon a historical episode from 18th-century Pune, only to transform it into a biting allegory of contemporary authoritarianism. The narrative traces the meteoric rise and brutal fall of Ghashiram, a Brahmin from North India who is appointed Kotwal (police chief) of Pune by the powerful Nana Phadnavis. Through this Faustian bargain, Ghashiram enforces draconian laws and becomes a symbol of unchecked state power. Nana, meanwhile, exploits Ghashiram's ambition for his own political ends, particularly to gain unrestrained access to Ghashiram's daughter—a clear intersection of sexual and political exploitation. The play critiques not only the feudal-caste power hierarchies but also implicates the emergent modern state in continuing these exploitative logics.

The innovative use of the Tamasha form—Maharashtra's vibrant folk-theatrical idiom known for its music, dance, and satire—becomes an aesthetic and political choice. As Aparna Dharwadker notes, Tendulkar's appropriation of Tamasha "disrupts the sanctity of classical realism and inserts a folk-ironic perspective that turns history into performance and ideology into spectacle" (Dharwadker 163). This stylization enhances the play's subversive capacity, destabilizing Brahminical and nationalist myths that often underwrite historical narratives. The folk idiom also allows the audience to oscillate between complicity and critical detachment,

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intensifying the moral ambivalence of the characters. Ghashiram is neither hero nor villain but a figure shaped and destroyed by the very power structures he seeks to manipulate.

Tendulkar's critique of authority takes a different but equally potent form in *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), a psychological courtroom drama that exposes the performative violence of legal and societal norms. The play centers on Miss Leela Benare, a schoolteacher who becomes the subject of a mock trial staged by a group of amateur performers. What begins as theatrical rehearsal quickly descends into a real trial wherein Benare is accused of moral depravity, specifically for having an illegitimate child. In this scenario, the courtroom—a symbol of objective justice—is transformed into an apparatus of moral surveillance and gendered repression.

The legal discourse, rather than offering recourse to justice, becomes an instrument for enforcing patriarchal norms and silencing female autonomy. Miss Benare's articulate and assertive voice is gradually submerged under the weight of accusations, social expectations, and hypocritical standards. As Samik Bandyopadhyay observes, "Tendulkar's theatre unmasks the mechanisms through which the social order disciplines dissenters" (Bandyopadhyay 87). This 'disciplining' is not merely metaphorical; it is enacted through the performative violence of the trial, where speech itself becomes a weapon used against the protagonist. The play also aligns with Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, particularly in its depiction of how individuals internalize societal norms and become self-policing subjects. Benare's final breakdown is not caused solely by external condemnation but also by her internalization of shame and guilt. The play renders visible the micro-physics of power that regulate sexuality, speech, and social behavior—especially in the lives of women. In this sense, *Silence!* resonates with Gayatri Spivak's formulation of epistemic

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violence, wherein the subaltern woman is spoken for, defined by others, and ultimately silenced (Spivak 284).

Tendulkar's characters are often caught in double binds—simultaneously victims and agents of power. Nana Phadnavis in *Ghashiram Kotwal* is both a shrewd manipulator and a product of feudal, colonial, and patriarchal structures. Similarly, the male participants in the mock trial in *Silence!* enact moral judgment while hiding their own vulnerabilities, failures, and repressions. This ambivalence is central to Tendulkar's dramaturgy: he does not offer moral clarity or simplistic binaries but dramatizes the complexities of power as it operates through history, gender, class, and the state. Furthermore, Tendulkar's work challenges the myth of the autonomous liberal subject. His protagonists are not self-determined agents but fragmented individuals shaped by larger ideological apparatuses. Whether it is Ghashiram's descent into tyrannical cruelty or Benare's ultimate collapse, Tendulkar refuses to idealize resistance or victimhood. Instead, he reveals how authority is enacted through everyday rituals, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks. His plays compel audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about complicity, structural injustice, and the human cost of social conformity.

Vijay Tendulkar's plays constitute a radical intervention in Marathi theatre and Indian drama at large. By interrogating the entanglements of violence, patriarchy, and state power, his dramaturgy offers a profound critique of the socio-political order. Through allegory, irony, and formal innovation, Tendulkar makes the stage a mirror to society's darkest mechanisms of control—compelling both recognition and resistance.

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Mahesh Elkunchwar: Existential Power and Urban Alienation

Mahesh Elkunchwar stands out in modern Indian drama for his introspective engagement with the psychological and existential dimensions of power. His work reflects a distinct philosophical temperament, navigating between the aesthetic of minimalism and the cultural weight of tradition. While Vijay Tendulkar exposes overt structures of violence and state control, Elkunchwar turns inward, scrutinizing the quiet despotisms of family, memory, and selfhood. His dramaturgy maps the subtle yet suffocating terrains of authority within urban middle-class consciousness, making his plays emblematic of India's postcolonial transition.

In *Wada Chirebandi* (*Old Stone Mansion*, 1985), Elkunchwar offers a powerful meditation on the disintegration of a feudal Brahmin household—the Deshpandes—set against the backdrop of a changing socio-economic order in rural Maharashtra. The *wada*, a sprawling ancestral mansion, becomes a metaphor for the decaying edifice of patriarchal and caste-based authority. The play stages a slow unravelling of power, not through rebellion but through decay and emotional entropy. Characters within the Deshpande family cling to vestiges of privilege, but their authority is increasingly hollowed out by economic decline, generational conflict, and ideological disorientation. This erosion of traditional power aligns with Antonio Gramsci's idea of *passive revolution*, wherein hegemonic classes lose influence not through direct confrontation but through gradual transformation from within (Gramsci 123). The elder Deshpande, who once commanded familial and moral authority, now faces irrelevance, as younger members reject inherited values in favor of urban aspirations. Yet, this transition does not produce liberation. Instead, it ushers in alienation, fragmentation, and a crisis of meaning—exemplifying Michel Foucault's notion that

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modern power operates through the regulation of identity, space, and affect rather than overt repression (Foucault 102).

Elkunchwar's exploration of the psyche reaches new depths in *Atmakatha* (*Autobiography*, 1981), where the act of writing becomes a contested terrain of agency and power. The protagonist, Chandrashekhar, a retired writer, seeks to pen his life story. However, this act becomes fraught with interruptions—both external, from family members who question his version of the past, and internal, as he grapples with guilt, failure, and selective memory. The central metaphor of autobiography here is not merely narrative but existential: Who has the right to tell their story? And can one ever truly escape the ideological structures that shape one's self-perception?

The anxiety surrounding authorship in *Atmakatha* is closely tied to Foucault's idea of the "author-function," wherein the author is less an originator of meaning and more a product of discursive formations (Foucault, *What is an Author?* 113). Chandrashekhar's struggle to write himself into coherence reveals how individual identity is embedded in larger matrices of language, power, and cultural expectation. The protagonist's crisis becomes symbolic of a broader postcolonial predicament—wherein individuals, particularly those from privileged yet declining social classes, attempt to reclaim agency in a society that increasingly undermines singular narratives and moral certainties. Moreover, *Atmakatha* reflects the pressures of censorship—not only institutional, but also familial and social. Chandrashekhar's daughter-in-law challenges his sanitized version of the past, demanding an acknowledgment of emotional and moral failures. This tension foregrounds Gayatri Spivak's question of "epistemic violence" and the challenge of giving voice to subaltern perspectives within dominant narratives (Spivak 281). Elkunchwar's play, in

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this sense, not only critiques the power of the narrator but also underscores the ethical responsibility of representation.

The themes of decay, alienation, and contested memory in Elkunchwar's plays are often rendered through a restrained aesthetic. Unlike the performative energy of Tendulkar or the satirical irreverence of Satish Alekar, Elkunchwar's theatre operates in silences, pauses, and subtext. As Shanta Gokhale observes, "his plays are meditations on the quiet, almost invisible forms of violence that operate within the family and self" (Gokhale 91). This stylistic minimalism intensifies the existential dimension of power—highlighting not dramatic revolt but the slow corrosion of meaning in everyday life. What makes Elkunchwar's contribution particularly significant is his ability to link the politics of the self with the collapse of broader cultural structures. His characters are not merely victims of social change but also active participants in their disintegration, caught in the dialectic of freedom and futility. In doing so, Elkunchwar crafts a theatre that is at once personal and political, rooted in regional specificity yet resonant with universal questions of authority, memory, and identity.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's plays offer a profound exploration of how power is internalized and enacted within domestic, narrative, and psychological spaces. By engaging with philosophical and poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, he complicates the idea of resistance, focusing instead on the ambiguities of agency in an alienated world. His dramaturgy not only redefines the contours of Marathi theatre but also expands the discourse on power beyond the political to encompass the existential.

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Satish Alekar: Absurdism and Bureaucratic Violence

Satish Alekar's contribution to contemporary Marathi theatre is marked by his pioneering use of absurdism, dark satire, and ritualistic subversion to unveil the deeply entrenched power structures in bureaucratic, religious, and cultural institutions. While his contemporaries like Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Elkunchwar focused on overt and existential expressions of authority respectively, Alekar introduces a unique theatrical grammar—merging folk performative idioms with avant-garde dramaturgy—to critique the absurdity and cruelty embedded in everyday institutional life. In *Mahanirvan* (*The Dread Departure*, 1974), Alekar transforms the solemnity of death into a space of ironic scrutiny. The narrative, which unfolds around the death of a Brahmin patriarch, interrogates the ritualization of death by religious orthodoxy and municipal bureaucracy. The body becomes a bureaucratic object—a corpse that must be transported, ritually purified, and disposed of, according to strict procedural codes. The absurdity lies in how human grief is systematized into checkboxes of compliance. This aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power, wherein modern institutions manage not only the living but also the dead as part of social order and governance (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 245).

The play's use of repetition, stylized gestures, and folk performance elements—such as keertan and bhajan—juxtaposes sacred performativity with hollow ritualism, exposing the disconnect between cultural symbolism and lived experience. As Aparna Dharwadker observes, *Mahanirvan* "employs irony not to negate tradition but to highlight its ossification under state and religious custodianship" (Dharwadker 178). Through this method, Alekar exposes the powerlessness of individuals in the face of ritual bureaucracy, where even death cannot escape institutional regulation. Further expanding his critique of institutional and cultural marginalization,

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Alekar's *Begum Barve* (1979) offers a poignant exploration of memory, desire, and the commodification of artistic labor. The titular character, a former female impersonator in the Marathi *sangeet natak* tradition, now lives a life of anonymity and poverty, forced to conform to menial roles in a modernizing, unsentimental society. His existence becomes emblematic of a lost cultural aesthetic, crushed under the weight of capitalist utilitarianism and heteronormative patriarchy.

Begum Barve is not merely about the decline of theatre—it is about the systemic erasure of gendered and artistic fluidity, which once found expression in traditional Indian performance. The play uses fantasy sequences—where Barve imagines performing on stage again—to contrast his rich interior world with the monotony of his real-life exploitation. These sequences, which border on the surreal, align with the Theatre of the Absurd, where disjunction between language and reality becomes a medium to explore existential and institutional voids (Esslin 124). The socio-economic dynamics of Barve's marginalization reflect Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, where dominant ideologies absorb and neutralize alternative forms of expression to maintain status quo (Gramsci 275). As Barve's artistic identity is commodified and dismissed, Alekar critiques the cultural homogenization enabled by state-market alliances, which reduce art to entertainment or labor to surplus.

Moreover, *Begum Barve* also offers a queer reading of gender performance. Drawing from Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, Barve's theatrical and real-life identity challenges rigid binaries. His existence as a performer who embodied femininity destabilizes the conventional alignment of gender and biology. Yet, this fluidity becomes the reason for his alienation in a society that increasingly demands coherence and productivity. As Rachana Zutshi notes, "Alekar's

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Barve is not merely a nostalgic figure but a site of resistance against the capitalist erasure of queer cultural labor" (Zutshi 133).

Alekar's dramaturgy is also politically radical in form. His plays eschew Aristotelian structure, opting instead for episodic, often circular narratives that resist closure. This non-linearity, characteristic of absurdist drama, mirrors the repetition and inertia of institutional violence—where characters are trapped not by overt repression but by the slow, grinding mechanics of cultural and bureaucratic apparatuses. These formal experiments are deeply political, challenging audience expectations and foregrounding structural critique over emotional resolution.

Satish Alekar's theatre innovatively combines absurdism, folk motifs, and queer aesthetics to challenge and deconstruct dominant power structures in religion, state, market, and culture. His plays do not seek to resolve the tensions they expose but rather lay them bare—forcing the audience to confront the systemic absurdities that regulate human life. Alekar's work thus extends the possibilities of Marathi theatre, making it a space not only of representation but of radical epistemic disruption.

Gendered Power and Performance in Marathi Theatre

Power in contemporary Marathi theatre is often articulated through gendered hierarchies, where women and feminized subjects are situated at the intersections of familial, legal, and cultural subjugation. Across the works of Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, and Alekar, female and feminized characters are rendered voiceless, marginal, or subject to symbolic violence. Yet, these same plays paradoxically also stage resistance, subtly undermining the very structures they depict.

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In Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* (*Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe*, 1967), the character of Miss Leela Benare stands at the epicenter of this gendered critique. Accused of promiscuity and unwed motherhood in a mock trial that devolves into real humiliation, Benare becomes a scapegoat for the anxieties of patriarchal morality. The courtroom, supposedly a site of justice, is transformed into a ritualistic mechanism of patriarchal surveillance and shaming. Benare's articulate defense of her autonomy is continually dismissed, exposing the epistemic violence through which women's voices are delegitimized. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks in her seminal essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, the female subaltern is often spoken for or rendered inaudible within dominant discourses (Spivak 294). Benare's powerful final monologue—while emotionally devastating—becomes a paradoxical act of performative resistance, asserting affect and subjectivity in a space designed to deny her both (Bandyopadhyay 89).

Similarly, Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Wada Chirebandi* (Old Stone Mansion) examines the slow dissolution of patriarchal authority, but also reveals the collateral erasure of women within familial and generational transitions. The women of the Deshpande family exist in a liminal space of silence and servitude, performing domestic duties but denied existential agency. Their silence is not neutral; it reflects what Pierre Bourdieu terms symbolic violence, the internalized norms that render inequality natural and unspoken (Bourdieu 35). The play's focus on male inheritance, lineage, and legacy marginalizes feminine experience, even as the world of the family collapses. Yet, the endurance of these women, their quiet labors and muted resilience, also challenge the apparent heroism of male characters, exposing the gendered labor that sustains feudal authority.

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Satish Alekar's *Begum Barve* further complicates this discourse by exploring feminized identity within male performance. The titular character, a male actor known for performing female roles in *sangeet natak* (musical drama), embodies the interstitial space between gender performance and marginalization. Begum Barve's real-life erasure from the theatrical and social sphere represents the devaluation of feminized labor and the commodification of queerness in a society governed by heteropatriarchal norms. His identity, tied to a tradition now deemed obsolete, is treated with both nostalgia and disdain. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is useful here—Barve's feminine persona, performed with skill and depth on stage, is invalidated offstage, showing how gender fluidity is sanctioned only within tightly circumscribed performative roles (Butler 187).

Alekar's use of surreal fantasy and internal monologue gives Begum Barve a rich, tragic inner life, allowing him to resist the social erasure imposed upon him. The character's retreat into fantasy is not mere escapism but a form of refusal—a quiet rebellion against a world that refuses to see or honor his subjectivity. As Rachana Zutshi notes, "Barve's fantasy sequences reclaim dignity for a cultural identity that society has already buried" (Zutshi 135). In this sense, Alekar's play functions as a meta-theatrical commentary on the politics of representation—both who is allowed to perform and who is allowed to exist within dominant cultural narratives.

These playwrights, while varying in form and focus, collectively interrogate the gendered structures of power within Indian society. While women and feminized subjects are frequently positioned as victims of authority, they are not entirely without agency. Their moments of rupture—Benare's emotional defiance, the silent resilience of Elkunchwar's women, Barve's imaginative reassertion of artistic identity—serve as fissures in the edifice of patriarchy. As Spivak

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suggests, even when the subaltern cannot "speak" in dominant codes, they can sometimes perform resistance through alternate modalities (Spivak 307). Ultimately, contemporary Marathi theatre offers a layered critique of gender and power, balancing the representation of oppression with gestures of defiance, and enabling a more nuanced discourse on the possibilities of subversion within structural constraint.

Conclusion: Theatre as Political Praxis and Resistance

Contemporary Marathi theatre, particularly as exemplified in the works of Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Elkunchwar, and Satish Alekar, has decisively transformed the theatrical stage into a discursive arena of power and resistance. Far from being merely a space for entertainment, the stage becomes an ideological battleground, where various forms of domination—patriarchal, casteist, bureaucratic, and institutional—are critically examined, performed, and at times, subverted.

Tendulkar's dramaturgy, especially in plays like *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Silence! The Court is in Session*, exposes the brutal alliances between state power, religious orthodoxy, and patriarchy. His characters serve as ciphers through which power's performative mechanisms—as theorized by Michel Foucault—are exposed (Foucault 98). In these texts, power is not only repressive but productive, generating identities, norms, and silences that the plays bring into dramatic relief. Gramsci's concept of hegemonic consent is also evident in the internalized oppression characters display, particularly in how societal roles and expectations are willingly accepted (Gramsci 245).

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Mahesh Elkunchwar's existential realism captures the ideological residue of feudal and patriarchal dominance as it mutates in post-independence India. Plays such as *Wada Chirebandi* show how the erosion of traditional power structures does not necessarily lead to liberation but often ushers in new forms of alienation and despair. Elkunchwar dramatizes how modern subjectivity is fragmented and entangled within systems of family, memory, and cultural nostalgia, reinforcing the idea that power operates even in non-explicit, psychological forms (Gokhale 161).

Satish Alekar, through plays like *Mahanirvan* and *Begum Barve*, introduces a form of absurdist dramaturgy that critiques power not through confrontation but through irony, surrealism, and melancholia. Alekar's contribution lies in his ability to destabilize normative structures, both thematically and formally, pushing audiences to confront the incoherence of institutional logics. As Zutshi argues, Alekar's work "undoes the naturalness of social rituals," revealing them as mechanisms of control and commodification (Zutshi 137).

Thematically, the gendered dimensions of power are woven throughout these texts. Whether through the silencing of Miss Benare, the muted endurance of women in Elkunchwar's dramas, or the erasure of gender-variant performance in Alekar's oeuvre, these playwrights lay bare the intersectional violence endured by women and queer subjects. Yet, as Gayatri Spivak asserts, the moments of affective rupture and narrative disruption offer modes of subaltern resistance, even if incomplete or symbolic (Spivak 307). What unites these diverse dramatists is their commitment to theatre as a critical apparatus—a mode of cultural intervention that not only represents society but also challenges and reimagines it. In doing so, they affirm the stage as a liminal space, where ideological tensions are not only enacted but deconstructed, and where audiences are invited to confront their own complicity within these power structures. As Rustom

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Bharucha observes, "theatre in India does not merely reflect society—it actively questions and remakes it" (Bharucha 214).

In conclusion it can be remarked that contemporary Marathi theatre is more than an aesthetic medium—it is a political praxis, where drama becomes discourse, and performance becomes protest. Through their explorations of power and resistance, Tendulkar, Elkunchwar, and Alekar redefine the very function of theatre, making it an enduring site of ethical inquiry, cultural critique, and emancipatory possibility.

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