

Social Taboos in Plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani

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Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani, the first is a Marathi playwright writing originally in Marathi but English rendering of his plays are also available and the second is an Indian English playwright writing in English, emerged on the realm of Indian drama in English when it was sparsely dotted with a handful of dramatists whose plays lacked dramatic worthiness and distinguished as class-room plays. The duo possesses the gritty determination, as their plays witness, to shed light on the devilish aspect of Indian society which moves on power-relations. Critically analysing Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! Court is in the Session* (1967), *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), *The Vultures* (1970), and *Kamala* (1981) and *Kanyadan* (1983); and Mahesh Dattani's *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*; *Thirty Days in September*, and *Seven Steps around the Fire* the present paper aims at unveiling the social stigmas and taboos running underneath various facades of Indian society which controls human behaviour with useless codes and conducts.

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), basically a social commentator and a journalist, delves deep into the realities of life in cotemporary social milieu. Tendulkar, "first a writer and then a playwright" (*Collected Play in Translation* vii) states: "My inner personality as a writer underwent a natural change to suit the role, to make it took convincing and effective. My writing changed as my roles changed" (*CPT* ix). Committed to revealing the malfunctions of society, Tendulkar in an interview explained his position:

As an individual—or rather as a social being—I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society (because I am affected by it though no immediately in some cases or not as much as others are) and in my own way brood over it. . . .

As a writer I now find myself persistently inquisitive, nonconformist, ruthlessly cold and brutal as compared to the other committed and human me.

As a social being I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end.

As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and obsessively deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end. Nor that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off. (*CPT* xliii)

Interested in analyzing the relationship between power and violence, Tendulkar observes that violence is:

. . . not as something that exists in isolation, but as a part of the human milieu, human behaviour, human mind. It has become an obsession. At a very sensitive level, violence can be defined as consciously hurting someone, whether it is physical violence or psychological violence . . . Violence is something which has to be accepted as fact. It's no use describing it as good or bad. Projection of it can be good or bad. And violence, when turned into something else, can certainly be defined as vitality, which can be very useful, very constructive. So it depends on how you utilize it. (*Indian Review of Books*)

In a series of lectures, Vijay Tendulkar laid emphasis on various elements of a play such as plot, characterization, structure, dialogues, stage paraphernalia and extensive stage directions but he attached a great importance, first to the characterization and structure and then to the dialogue. He observed that “The one characteristic of my plays which I can legitimately boast of, is characterization. My character are not cardboard characters; they do not speak my language; rather I do not speak my language through them; they are not my mouth-pieces; but each of them has his or her own separate existence and expression” (*CPT x*). He accepts that “I think I am an actor-writer. Or to put it differently, an actor on the stage of my creative mind” (*CPT x*). Expressing his views on the dialogue which are complimentary to the characterization, Tendulkar says: “. . . dialogue . . . establishes the character as a living being and real person and not a cardboard character or the mouthpiece of the playwright. The choice of words signifies the culture of the person, his or her region, profession and in short the whole background. The speech likewise helps to particularize the character and to make it an individual rather than a type” (*CPT xxvii-xxix*). He does not ignore the significance of the structure and says: “By structure I do not mean the plot or the story. Structure is not either. It is the total form or the framework of the play. Even a play without a coherent plot or a story has to have a structure” (*CPT xxxi*).

Like most of the contemporary writers, Tendulkar also trained his critical gaze on the plight of women in the contemporary society where women are the victim of the institutional body of powers. As far as violence is concerned, there is a conflict between society and women. Tendulkar's most of his plays, deal with this syndrome of power and violence. His plays depict the woman not only as a commodity of male gaze and as a victim subjected to violence whether physically or emotionally but also as growing, evolving, and dynamic beings. They possess power to right their own battle against their exploitation, though they sometime meet with utter distraught, anguish or resolutions but all their attempts express their quest for freedom and individuality.

Tendulkar, who acquired the epithet of “the Angry Youngman” of the Marathi theatre, has expressed his annoyance with and raised his raucous voice against the established norms of the society in *Silence! The Court is in Session* by depicting Leela Benare, the protagonist, as a challenge to the executors or power in absentia, who aggressively transgresses the sexual norms of her community. In the play, which consists of the play within play portraying a cross-section of middle class society, Leela Benare, the protagonist, lives an independent life on her own will ignoring social taboos. In the mock-trial the co-actors deftly reveals her illicit relationship with Professor Damle, a married man having five children, especially the fact that Miss Benare carries his child. Professor Damle remains absence during trial which signifies his shrinking of

responsibility. Ironically enough, the trial begins with the charges of infanticide laid on Miss Benare for society is not prepared to accept a child born out of wedlock. Consequently, this pregnancy has to be aborted. Tendulkar alludes to the existing hypocrisy when later Damle appears as a mere witness while Leela Benare delivers a long speech in self-defense. Sukhtme, a lawyer, underlines Benare's crime by proclaiming the sanctity of motherhood. Benare's speech of self-defense highlights that she, in her prime of youth, had fallen in love with her maternal uncle, but her love could not result in a marriage with him because it was against social norms. As a woman craving for love, she diverted her love on another man who taking the advantage of her emotional requirement abused her body and then deserted her. The ultimate verdict, which is very heart rendering as it upholds power of society against the of motherhood, presents Leela Benare pleading for the little bud within her to blossom, to have a mother, a father, and a good name, but the society thwarts motherhood for the sake of its control over human life.

Based on the themes of power and violence, *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), set in Poona of the Peshwas, uses history to highlight the perpetuation of the conflict between power and violence. The relationship between power and corruption, and power breeding oppression leading to the mocker of law constitute the crux of the play. He bitterly criticizes those people who use their power to achieve their selfish end. The representative of the Peshwa in Poona, Nana Phadnavis appoints Ghashiram as a Kotwal of the city not on merit but because he helps Nana to find out his young and beautiful daughter, Gauri, who manages to escape from her father trying to molest her. Reminding Ghashiram of his subordinate position, Nana instructs him to keep his voice silence about the death of his pregnant daughter. Finally, Nana orders Ghashiram's death warrant as well.

Set in a middle class milieu, Vijay Tendulkar's *The Vultures* (1972) presents the theme of sex, violence and sensationalism. The play depicts the avarice of Ramakant and Umakant, the gross sensuality of their sister Manik, and the devilish nature of her father. The intrinsic evil inherent in human nature is witnessed when the father is beaten up by his two sons for mere sake of material gain, in the forcible abortion of Manik's child, and in the repeated attempt in creating hatred in the family. Ramakant and Umakant are as cruel as vultures.

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kamala* (1981) depicts the theme of subaltern subjectivity and resistance throwing light on the plight of a woman as a slave in the family. The play delineates women as objects of commodity which can be purchased, bartered and sold. Jaisingh Jadhav, a young journalist working as an associate editor in English language daily, buys a woman named Kamala for Rs 250 in Luhardagga Bazaar in Bihar in order to expose this racket. In spite of severe resistance from Sarita, his wife; Jain, his friend who mocks his idea of purchasing a woman dubbing marriage itself as an act of buying as it enslaves a woman; and Kaka Saheb, his uncle, Jai Singh resolves that Kamala would stay in the house for destitute women. At a night, a brief conversation between Kamala and Sarita develops a better understanding between them and she becomes aware of her position in the family. Sarita arranges a press conference to tell everyone about the predicament of women in the contemporary Indian society. She confesses Kamala's help to comprehend the master-slave relationship. A determination to live on her own comes to her and any argument put forward by Kakasaheb fails to repress her fury against male domination. Sarita emerges a woman who fights against her exploitation though the right of equality is denied to her. The influence of state power also finds place in the play. When Jaisingh

Jadav becomes famous for his write-up on the plight of *Adivasi*, he is intimated that the chief editor has dismissed him for the sake of the wishes of some state minister holding portfolio of significance. Thus, Tendulkar has shed light on the conflict between power and violence in different walks of life and also highlighted the exercise of power and violence on women.

In *Kanyadan* (1983), Vijay Tendulkar has dealt with the theme of social upliftment underlining the chaotic consequences of disturbing the existing social equations. Jyoti, a girl from upper section of society, decides to marry a dalit boy, Arun Jathawali in spite of Jaiprakash, her brother and her mother, Seva's resistances but he proves to be a violent husband. Jyoti's father, Devalikar is a man of progressive ideas as he has no grin against Jyoti's idea of marrying a dalit boy. When Jyoti being feeble to adjust with her husband, comes back to her maternal home, Seva is stunned but he considers it as an individual's choice. Jyoti's futile attempts to bridge the gap between two communities teaches her that the gap is natural and everlasting and attempts on the part of human beings to disturb nature results in great disaster. But after some times, Arun realizes his mistake and goes to Jyoti begging to come back to his home and chopped off his hand. Being asked by Seva the reason behind beating Jyoti, he tells that he has looked his father beating his mother since childhood. Jyoti knowing all those tries to act her free will failing to understand the consequences. These words change Jyoti and she goes back with Arun. Thus Arun misuses power to exhibit violence.

Thus, the use and misuse of authority to maintain the status of power and to perpetuate the violence against women has been recurring theme in Mahesh Dattani's plays. The milieu may change but to examine and underline the power-violence syndrome in different strata of society remain the motto of Vijay Tendulkar.

Influenced by Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, born in Bangalore on November 1958, is a prolific playwright and is regarded as the first Indian English playwright to win the *Sahitya Akademi* Award for his play, *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998. Being actor, director and playwright, he knows what constitutes a play. In an interview with Anita Nair, he says: "I see myself as a craftsman not as a writer. To me being a playwright is about seeing myself as a part of the process of production. I write for the sheer pleasure of communicating with this dynamic medium" (*Gentleman* May 2011).

Mahesh Dattani has relentlessly shed light on the gritty realities of the society which is a hub of such issues which are quite noticeable but generally brushed aside under the carpet of civilization. There are certain hush-hush issues in almost every Indian family which, when leak out and come to the notice of others, become insufferably embarrassing. He says that "I am certain that my plays are true reflection of my time, place and socio-economic background . . . in a country that has a myriad of challenges to face politically socially, artistically and culturally" (*CP* xv). He considers drama as a business of holding a mirror up to society (*CP* xv).

Tara is a story of Siamese twins—one male and the other female. The play dramatizes how a woman becomes perpetrator of the male chauvinistic ideas forgetting that her decision to prefer a male child to female one may ruin the latter's life. Having three legs, the Siamese twins, Tara and Chandan who were conjoined at birth, had to go through a surgical operation to get separated. Against the doctor's opinion that the third leg would survive on the girl child, Bharati, the mother, agrees to her father in conniving with the doctor to give the third leg to the girl child.

The doctor who is supposed to be the god for the patient forgets his all moral duties just for the sake of a few acre land in the prime of the city and attaches the third leg to the girl child which goes rotten with the passage of time and both, the boy child and the girl child become freaks. Like Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadan*, this play also witnesses the influence of political power on human life. The Doctor plays a havoc in the life of the Siamese twin because of political influence of Bharati's father who in return agrees him to give some land in the heart of the city.

Bravely Fought the Queen throws light on the home confined identity and exploitation of women at the hands of not only men but also women and their resistance. The play also exposes issue of extramarital relationship and touches upon the issue of homosexuality. Set in the world of consumerism, the play depicts Alka, Dolly and Baa as women whose lives are defined within the four walls of the houses. Revolving around the Trivedi family which consists of Jiten and Nitin Trivedi, Baa, Dolly and Alka, the play depicts the exploitation of women in the family. Indian society considers women as uncivilized, rude, and ill-mannered needing to be polished. The process of the refinement of their actions and their behaviour horrifies our eyes violence is the tool which is used for the socialization of the women. Alka's present condition is the result of this civilizing process which also creates a rift between Dolly and Alka who are managed by their brother Praful. This play, like *Tara*, also depicts women as the perpetrator of patriarchy. Dolly suffers in the hands of her mother-in-law who provokes her son to beat her. Like *Kanyadan*, this play also dramatizes women as a commodity of male gaze. Jiten and Nitin gratify their sexual desires with market girls. The class-conflict also constitutes the theme of the play. Sridhar is humiliated by his masters Jiten and Nitin who forces him not only to follow their eccentric views about campaign which ignores women as consumer but also to work as a pimp just to manage a whore for Jiten. The issue of homosexuality has touched upon in the play. Nitin has homosexual relationship with Praful. Emotions and desires of women of the family has no significance for the male member of the family and they suffer due to their husband's degraded morality. In the end of the play Alka and Dolly both rebels against the male dominance and their husband's realize their mistakes. Bonsai in the play symbolizes the limited freedom of women.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai elaborately discusses the plight of the sexually marginalized people—homosexuals and lesbians and the effects of homosexual relationship on human ties. In the play, Kamlesh loves Prakash who fails to face the social oddities as a homosexual and turns into a heterosexual. It breeds in Kamlesh a perennial anguish. In trying to suppress his feelings for Prakash, Kamlesh becomes miserable, weak and helpless and, the only way to get rid of his obsession, is to be in Sharad's company. The play reveals double identity of men who live their private lives of homosexuality in the images of heterosexuals. Sharad challenges Ed who has the mask of heterosexuality and considers heterosexuals as a real man Bunny and Prakash/Ed enjoy homosexuality under mask of heterosexuality. Bunny, who is a bisexual, is a hypocrite. He claims to be a perfect husband because he loves his wife more than any heterosexual man does; his wife boasts of his work to the neighbours as she has no problem with him; and his children who love him are popular in school. But his confession about his homosexuality reveals dissatisfaction in his life. The play witnesses the power of society due to which homosexuals turned into heterosexuals. But the play also highlights women as victim of males' hypocrisy. Kiran, Kamlesh's sister, after her bitter realization in her first marriage, finds some hope in Ed but the revelation of his being a homosexual shatter her dream of future life and she is filled with anguish and pain.

The issue of incestuous relationship before reaching the puberty in *Thirty Days in September* shocks the audience. The same theme has been dealt by Tendulkar in *Ghashiram Kotwal*. The latter play has emphasised the physical violence and influence of the power while the first along with child sexual abuse depicts its effect on individual's psyche. Revolving around Mala and Shanta, the play reveals the betrayal in blood relationship in a country like India where even to think of such relationships is beyond imagination. Mala, sexually abused by her maternal uncle, at the age of six has to suffer continuous sexual molestation which leads her to the arms of any man whom she comes in contact with. She fails to marry Deepak because she always realizes her uncle presence with her. In spite of his all attempts Deepak fails to know the truth behind Mala's erratic behaviour but in fit of realization of Deepak's love, she reveals her past life to him. And with his help, she becomes successful to fight against her exploitation by refusing her maternal uncle's gift of house. She holds her mother responsible for her plight. But in end of the play Mala comes to know that her mother also has been the prey of the same fate. Shanta does not dare to reveal the truth because she was financially weak and society does not permit to hear such relationships.

While Tendulkar's *Kanayadan*, depicts life of a Dalit boy who marries a girl from the higher section of society, *Seven Steps around the Fire* depicts the plight of the eunuchs in the Indian society shedding light on the love and betrayal in human relationship. Throwing light on plight of eunuchs, Dattani depicts that their position is better than women as they are free to give vent to their desires in their domain. Uma, a research scholar in Sociology working on the plight of the eunuchs, has no identity of her own as she is always addressed as a wife of the Superintendent of Police and daughter-in-law of the Deputy Commissioner of Police, and the daughter of the Vice-Chancellor of Bangalore University. When she visits the cell where Anarkali is imprisoned for the case study she is overwhelmed perceiving the brutality the eunuchs are meted out in the prison. Munswamy, her bodyguard addressed Anarkali with pronouns like it, they which indicates that the eunuchs in the society are not treated as human beings instead as things. He suggests her to leave the case as there are lots of cases dealing with such issues as murder, rape etc. Suresh, her husband, also hates them and addresses them as castrated degenerated men. The eunuchs are discriminated and hated in the society because of their inability to produce children. But Suresh is also infertile. He does not go to the doctor, who declares Uma medically fit for mothering a child, just for count sperm as it is against his male libido and will uncover his true self. At Subbu's wedding with the help of the eunuchs who during their singing and dancing show him the photograph consisting of Subbu and Kamala in wedding dress Uma becomes successful to get the real culprit behind Kamala's murder. She is revealed that it is the Minister who got Kamala burnt to death because of his false pride and prestige which was in danger as his son, Subbu had married a eunuch, Kamala. In an utter longing for Kamal's love, Subbu also shoots himself with Suresh's pistol. But Suresh for the sake of his promotion as a Commissioner of Police hushes up the story as an incident and does not report it in the register. And thus, the eunuchs' voices remain unheard. Thus, the play witness like Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* the theme of corruption in administration and like his *Kamala*, theme of political interference in human life.

Thus, both, Tendulkar and Dattani are social realists committed to reveal evils present in the contemporary society. Like Tendulkar, Dattani has also depicted the marginal position of women and their struggle against exploitation dealing with the issues, such as gender

discrimination, class-conflict, homosexuality, child sexual abuse before reaching her puberty, and the plight of the eunuchs, which are often brushed aside under the carpet of the society and are dubbed as fringe issues but he never forgets to highlight women's contribution to the perpetuation of their own subjugation. To depict reality on stage Tendulkar has moved from a king to a dalit while Dattani has made subject of his discussion only to middle class urban family. With the help of his dramatic virtuosity and theatrical adroitness, which Tendulkar lacks, Dattani has presented hidden and burning reality on the stage split in various levels signifying the fractured personality and conscience of postmodern human beings who are mechanized to such an extent that human relations have no value for them.

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