



Violence in *Ghashiram Kotwal*

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Vijay Tendulkar, a leading Indian play wright, movie and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist and a social commentator primarily in Marathi, was in the vanguard of not just Marathi but Indian theatre for almost 40 years. Beginning his career as a dramatist in the mid – fifties, this prolific writer wrote twenty eight full length plays, twenty four one – act plays, and eleven children’s dramas to his credit, a good number of which have been translated and produced in major Indian languages. His *Silence! The Court is in Session* earned him a place among leading Indian playwrights in the late sixties while his *Ghashiram Kotwal* won him international fame in the mid – seventies. Winner of several national and international awards and fellowships, he was both a venerated and a controversial figure in the country’s theatre scene.

He received a number of awards like Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1970, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award in 1970, National Film Award for Best Screenplay – Manthan in 1977, Film fare Screenplay Award – Akrosh in 1981, Film Fare Best Story Award – Akrosh in 1981, Film fare Best Screenplay Award – Ardh Satya in 1983, Padma Bhushan in 1993, Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1998, Kalidas Samman in 1999, Katha Chudamani Award in 2001 and The Little Magazine SALAM Award in 2006.

His later plays are *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Kamala*, *Kanyadan*, *Encounter in Embugland*, *Thus Arrive the Birds*, *The Cyclist*, *It Has to Be in One’s Blood*, *Ask A’Fakir’s Lineage*, *My Sister*, *Sidewalk Emperor*, *A Friend’s Story*, *I Won*, *I Lost*, *His Fifth Woman*. All his plays put him at a remarkable place in the Indian English literature.

Vijay Tendulkar is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of modern India. He heralded a revolution in Indian theatre, both in content and style, by his bold themes and natural expression. He was the first Indian playwright to consistently explore the theme of violence in a direct way. Violence in his plays is explored in the context of the period of writing as well as similar attempts worldwide. His plays display piercing insights into human behaviour and were intended to expose hypocrisy.

Most of his plays concentrate on different aspects of the human character. They highlight the complexity of human relationships. Many of his plays derived inspiration from real life incidents or social upheavals, which provides clear light on harsh realities. Most deal with the individual placed against the backdrop of society and explores the tension between the two. All his works contain a latent critique of modern Indian society, mostly middle class though from different angles. Despite these similarities, the plays are clearly distinct from each other.

Tendulkar, however, has not only been the most productive but has also introduced the greatest variations in his dramatic creations. 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 man – woman relationships to reinterpretations of historical episodes. Thus, his creativity has a prismatic quality – myriad potentials and a multitude of colours seen to emanate from it.

His *Khashiram Kotwal*, a brilliant satire on political violence, is a musical combining Marathi folk performance styles and contemporary theatrical technique. It is said to be one of the most performed plays in the world with more than 6000 performances since 1972. Violence is an integral and unavoidable part of it. This play raised many an eyebrow on its stage performances because it had dealt a severe blow to the violent side of human nature. Through this play, the dramatist has tried to sketch the vices, cruelty, oppression, tyranny, corruption and also haughtiness of the Brahmins rampant in those times. The play is a replete with instances of scheming, treachery, sex, violence, brutality and machinations of power at different levels. The play very succinctly and pertinently brings out the evil connection between sex, violence, religion and politics. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, violence at various levels like verbal, physical, mental etc. are clearly and powerfully depicted by the author.

Soon after *Ghashiram*’s entry in the play, the element of violence begins. *Ghashiram* is a Kannoj Brahmin who comes to the city of Poona with his family – a wife and a young and beautiful daughter, *Gauri* – to try his luck and earn his livelihood. But his experiences in Poona were so painful and horrible that it ends up falling a victim of hypocrisy, evilness, corruption and duality. Though he is a Brahmin, he stoops to the level of working for a whore and performs all petty works ranging from household work to dancing with a woman – *Gulabi*.

While working there, he comes in contact with *Nana* and finds a favour with him for his ready wit and servility. *Nana* is very much pleased with his ready wit and sweetness in words and offers him beautiful and valuable necklace which he initially refuses



but later on he accepts it. From that incident, the problem starts in his life. Gulabi, a whore in whose house Ghashiram is working is not ready to let him walk away with the necklace. On his refusal, Gulabi orders his muscle men to grab the valuable necklace forcibly from him and give him good thrashing. Ghashiram protests a lot but is beaten up and flung out by the muscle men. It is Gulabi, the weaker sex ironically who gets him kicking and abuses. Here, verbal as well as physical and mental violence are powerfully depicted by the author. As described here:

Gulabi: I hired you as a dancer. That's why you could get as much as a glimpse of Nana's shoes. I should have that necklace.

Bangs her foot on the floor. Gestures for someone. Two or three come in, rolling up their sleeves. To the rhythm of the mridanga:

Ghashiram: This is mine. It's mine'. Clutches the necklace. Is beaten. The thugs take the necklace; throw Ghashiram to the front of the stage. He gets up after a while. Dusts his sleeve. Wipes blood off his face. Air of humiliation (Tendulkar: 2003, 371 – 72).

This is the first incident of violence in the play.

Very soon Ghashiram is to be treated roughly again and this time is the soldiers who abuse and make fun of him. Humiliated, hungry and without money, he happens to come to the place where the royal favours are being bestowed on the Brahmins of Poona. Ghashiram also stands in a queue to obtain something for himself and for his family. But he is a stranger and ignorant of the ways of Poona city. He is held responsible for the pick pocketing and once again he is insulted, kicked and thrown out by the soldiers. This is too much for him and he cannot bear it any longer. He pleads for mercy but he gets only kicking and beating and also filthy abuses. To quote this:

Brahmin: Is wasn't a man, sir, it was a thief. That corpse stole my prize money! May maggots eat his hand? May the hand of that bastard fall off...

Second Soldier: Be quiet or you will be bound hand and foot. May be I should kick you in the balls. You'll wiggle like a butchered goat (Tendulkar : 2003, 373 – 74).

Ghashiram is imprisoned. He yells but his cry is a cry in the wilderness. The soldiers treat him very shabbily and threaten to tie his hands and feet and throw him behind bars with a warning that if ever he steps into this holy city of Poona, he will lose his head. Even his shadow should not fall on the city of Poona. Ghashiram undergoes tremendous embarrassment and suffering.

Here, through the mouth of Sutradhar, the author has satirized the contemporary situation of police force which is hated by all. "A thief is a simple thief while the police are the official thieves" (376). If one needed any respite from them then one should go to the feet of God. The sleaze, corruption and bribery that have plagued the police force are equally brought out with carping criticism. The police force in those times also was no better than what it is today or may be today's force is an extension of the yester years. Thus, Tendulkar has drawn a good parallel here.

Like Chanakya, Ghashiram Savaldas as he is known until now takes a vow while tossing about in pain on the ground that he will return one day and convert the city of Poona into the kingdom of pigs and will spare none. He pledges to come back to Poona one day and take revenge. He has now forsaken his status of a Brahmin and has become a shudra. A drastic transformation occurs in him. It is now Ghashiram who gets into the driver's seat and let's loose the hell. The utter humiliation suffered by Ghashiram awakens in him the powerful emotion of revenge. He, therefore, takes a firm decision to stay in Poona and pay the people of Poona in their own coin:

Ghashiram : (takes off his sash, throws it on the ground). But I'll come back. I'll come back to Poona. I'll show my strength. It will cost you! Your good days are gone! I am a Kanauj Brahmin, but I've become a Shudra, a criminal, a useless animal. There is no one to stop me now, to mock me, to make me bend, to cheat me. Now I am a devil; I'll be a devil inside. I'll come back like a boar and I'll stay as a devil. I'll make pigs of all of you. I'll make this Poona a kingdom of pigs. Then I'll be Ghashiram again, the son of Savaldas once more (Tendulkar: 2003, 376 – 77).

Mridanga is played furiously and Ghashiram dances a war dance striking his feet on the earth.

Apart from the physical violence, the verbal violence continues as well. Whether it is Nana, Ghashiram, soldiers, sutradhar or the Brahmins, the choicest abuses continue to rent the air. Verbal abuses like May maggots eat his hand, May the hand of that bastard fall of ... (374), Misbegotten bastard! Shut up! (373), you graveyard stink (372), looks like a scoundrel! (373), you'll wiggle like a butchered goat (374), a shapeless piece of shit (376), that old over ripe bastard! (381), you'll die a dog's death, grinding your heels in the dirt (397), I'll skin the culprits, I'll hang them upside down over a fire. I'll have their heads on a pike! (414) etc. is again and again found throughout the play through the mouth of various characters.



In order to grab power, this ordinary human being exchanges the only daughter – Gauri with Nana for being appointed in the key post. He bears humiliating and sexual remarks about his daughter to achieve his aim. His cynical spirit of revenge goes too far. After becoming Kotwal, Ghashiram pours out his revenge on the city of Poona by a lot of bloodletting, false cases, threats and imprisonments. Ghashiram's handling of people is very rough and grating. He deals with different people in his rude and cruel manner. In the name of straightening people out and morality, he wreaks havoc. The guilty and the innocent are harassed and punished alike. He issues a life of permit and anybody who breaks the law is imprisoned and punished. His harsh measures have their impact on the people of Poona and the result is that now the people went straight about their business and venturing out at night is stopped. The cruelty and madness has come forth from within his self. His handling of the Poona Brahmin who is accused of sleeping with a woman other than his wife is barbaric and chilling. The fear of Ghashi however is rewarded in the sense that the Brahmins began to behave properly, cheating is stopped and prostitution became a dull business.

However, Ghashiram failed to understand Nana and his cunningness. The death of Gauri brought a great change in Ghashiram. Deeply saddened by her death, Ghashiram literally spills blood and butcherly over the city of Poona. The people became dry with fear. But politically immature, he once again became an instrument to play with in the hands of Nana.

A Maratha Sardar gave a deathblow to him when he imprisoned a few Brahmins on the charge of pilferage and some of them died of suffocation in the narrow cell. The Maratha Sardar reported the matter to Peshwa. Nana signed a death warrant of Ghashi with as much of ease and indifference with which he had signed the order to depute him Kotwal. As described here:

Nana: (Stands in suspense. Suddenly a little jump). Oh shit, is that all? Bring my pen, you idiot. Bring paper. (Takes the instrument and writes). Take this. Take it. Give it to them. The order for Gashya's death. Give it to 'em. Tell them to be happy. Tell them to humiliate him all they want. Run! (Tendulkar: 2003, 413).

The incident of the death of Ghashiram is really a terrible example of violence. Ghashiram meets a violent death no better than the one which he had been inflicting on the common masses. He was humiliated in his end. The grass is always green on the other side of the fence, he realized too late. He was tied in chains to elephant feet and surrendered to the mob which shaves his head, put vermilion over his head and took him around the city on a camel and then began to throw stones on him. His one hand was tied behind his back. He faced the mob without fear. Even while he was being stoned to death by the frenzied mob, he growled like an animal. He dared them, exhorted them to hit him hard and faced him closely. However, he was remorseful for spoiling the life of his daughter, Gauri. He still called the Brahmins cowards who were scared of him even when his hand was tied. He growled:

Ghashiram: Hit me. Beat me some more. Hit me!
(Suddenly Ghashiram shields his face as if a stone hit him).

Why stay so far away? Come on, you cowards. Still scared? I spit on you. Beat me. Come on. Stone me, cowards. Pig shit! Come on and beat me. I dare you. Hit me. Look – one of my hands is tied. And you're scared! Come on, beat me. Crush me! (The mob Yells).

Ghashiram Savaldas! Ghashiram Savaldas! I danced on your chests but I wasted the life of my little daughter. I should be punished for the death of my daughter. Beat me. Beat me. Hit me. Cut off my hands and feet. Crack my skull. Come on, come on. Look! I'm here. Oh, that's good. Very good.

The mob shouts. The drums beat loud and fast. Ghashiram begins to move in a sort of dance as if dying to the beat of the drum. Falls, gets up, falls growls like an animal. Grawls. Jerks in spasms. Falls and falls again while trying to rise. Death dance. The crowd's shouting continues. Finally Ghashiram lies motionless (Tendulkar: 2003, 415).

It was mob's turn to laugh and clap and throw stones on him. He was stoned to death and his body was left to rot. This was the end he was perhaps working for.

The skillful and cunning Nana defined Ghashiram as demon Kotwal and who had been plaguing all of them had finally met his death. He attributed Ghashiram's terrible death to the wishes of God. He strokes his walking stick into the corpse of Ghashiram and passed an order to let the body of Ghashiram rot and let the canines tore it into pieces. Violence does not stop here. Nana further ordered all the relatives of Ghashiram to be expelled from the city ruthlessly and a festivity of three days to mark the happy occasion. Here, violence reaches at the highest peak in the play. For the people like Nana, the life of common people like Ghashiram is nothing but only a game of joy and fulfilling the personal lust. The people from higher status use the common people for their own sake. They do not care a little for the feelings and situation of others. They indulge in their own life.

Thus the whole incident of the death of Ghashiram creates not only violence but also pity and fear among the audience. From the beginning to the end, violence remains as the most important dramatic device. It is an important part to the organic whole of the drama. It leaves deep impression on the mind of the audience and readers. Through violence, Tendulkar has focused a satanic side of human nature. With the instrument of violence, the author reflects the horrible reality of the contemporary society. Thus,



the play comments on the contemporary Maratha society with its vulnerabilities. The prevalent corruption, degradation and erosion of moral values are truly echoed in the play. It is the portrayal of the falling standards of the society.

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