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Ghashiram Kotwal: A Study

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Vijay Tendulkar with the alchemy of his genius has created a number of classics in the sphere of Marathi literature. *Ghashiram Kotwal* is a revolutionary play against the then orthodox Brahmin society. There is little dispute about the phenomenal and lasting popularity of the writing of Vijay Tendulkar. His creativity has a prismatic quality – myriad potentials and a multitude of colours seem to emanate from it. He is a keen observer of men, manners and cultures. With a probing spirit, he adopts a radical attitude towards human problems. The play unveils the ghoulish nature of the game of politics and also the basic craving for power in human nature. The powerful satirical novel lays bare the intricate political intrigues designed to attain position of authority and also the corruption involved in holding on to them. The play conceals threats of a fast changing transitional society. The British colonists and their vested interests had caused the breaking up of traditional communities and the growth of vast amorphous conglomeration of the city of Pune. We find Ghashiram and his sufficient individualism pitched against the growing collective forces of mass politics and social determinism all of which appeared as threats to the free individual. The era that witnessed disturbing currents, nameless horrors and omnipresent threats of increasing criminalism focused on the steady disintegration of identity and the absolute instability of the world rather than the restoring of order and meaning.

The narrative structure and trajectory of both the realist play and historical account is the driving force towards an uncovering of the truth, be it of the nature of life, reality, man or society.

Geeta Kumar¹ in her essay ‘Theater of Cruelty and Ghashiram Kotwal’ has sought in the play, elements of the theater of cruelty, a concept propounded by the French actor and writer Antonin Artaud. He proposed to revolutionize theater trying to connect the audience with things that are primal and honest deep within themselves. Cruelty for him is not only violent behaviour and an infliction of pain but laying bare and shattering the false reality and the garb behind which humans hide their baser animal instincts and degeneration. He proposes to introduce a blend of thought and gesture creating a unique language.

“Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not possible. In our present state of degeneration, it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our mind”.²

The theater seeks to communicate to its audience a sense of pain and evil danger and dissociation not through characterization and dialogue but gestures, movement, sound and symbolism. It is through human grunts, moans and yelps that the theatre vocabulary is enlarged. The audience finally surrenders itself, lives it and feels it. It envisages an honest stimulation of the audience to the realization of their deep seated nightmares.

In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the stage techniques bring the performance alive creating a searing impact on the audience. Even Shanta Gokhale observes,

“If a content analysis of the play script were done, one would discover that more than half of it consists of instructions for movements, expression and gesture...Every song in this play adds meaning, every word indicates gesture or tone of voice, every speech pattern marks character, and the juxtapositioning of scenes provides ironic comment”³.

Tendulkar skillfully synthesized visual concreteness and everyday prose with a cutting frankness of manner to bring forth the desired objective and that is the empirical presentation of human beings. In an interview given to “Shailaja Wadikar, Tendulkar says “Whatever is there in my life, or people’s lives is reflected in my plays. There is very little fictitious in my plays”⁴.

As Geeta Kumar Observes, “*Ghashiram Kotwal* is a play that becomes live on stage. reading it would never have the same kind of gripping and searing impact as one can have while watching a good performance of the play. Incantations, Brahmins and Ganesh –Sarawati dances, songs, quick repartees by the cheeky Sutradhar, kho-kho, musical instruments like cymbals drums and shehnai being played, whistling, pugree-throwing, lavni, mujra, erotic gestures and dances, puja, quawwalis, kirtan, abhang, ogling, leering, lazim-playing, processions, people with masks, Rangpanchami celebrations, chanting of marriage and Vedic rites, death-dance by Ghashiram Kotwal, groans and cries from the wings—all seem to deluge the spectators’ senses to create what is called total theatre”⁵.

He used multitudinous sounds, gestures and facial expressions and still never compromising with its cohesion and stylistic uniformity. He manipulates all the components with extreme expertise. R N Ray observes that Tendulkar, like Bertold Brecht, believes that “the purpose of the drama is not to produce catharsis i.e. ‘peace of mind, all passion spent’ in the minds of reader-audience but to encourage, stimulate and provoke them to think over the issues affecting the normal and balanced growth of human society”⁶.

Through an igneous use of folk art, Tendulkar launches a scathing attack on all the negative societal elements. Even the use of ‘lavani’ which brings in the sensuous element serves a high end purpose. This passionate erotic dance form does not merely tantalize the audience but serves as a dramatic element to comment on the prevalent corrupt social attitudes. The numerous songs and chants infused in the fabric of the play only heighten the emotion and set the mood of the play. A conventional Sutradhar is a mere observer and reporter of facts. But Tendulkar is successful in griping the

audience with his subtle remarks and enchantments. On occasions he exhibits quick wit, engages in tricky conversations and also adds comic relief to the tragedy. At times he is meddlesome and inquisitive but a good humoured character instrumental in exposing the slyness of the Brahmans. It is through his eyes and ears that the audience sees and hears the narrative. He heightens contrasts, upholds an ideology, interprets the situations, conceals and discloses every grey shade in the equations of life.

Influenced by Peter Brook, the master craftsman in the art of theater, he realized that all visual arts including the art of the theater, have one thing in common – the space. The creative challenge is how meaningfully and ingeniously you fill the space. A very innovative technique that Tendulkar uses is the human wall, which is a curtain of a dozen rhythmically swaying Brahmans, cleverly devised to highlight tyranny, hypocrisy and decadence. The human wall acts as a curtain that drowns screams of tortured Brahmans and also acts as a symbol of intrigue secrecy and degeneration. This same Brahman line sings, dances and chants hymns in perfect harmony setting the tempo of a corrupt garish ethos.

Neela Bhalla ⁷ in her essay “Text and Sub-Text” explains how Tendulkar has created a splendid blend of theatrical technique use of folklore and hard hitting satire to achieve the much desired effect. The members in the line conveniently take the shape of arches and temples besides even commenting slyly by altering a word here and there in their refrain. This wall of actors through various gimmicks also tones down the severity of certain scenes. She cites some examples when they chant names of holy saints while men are being tortured on stage. This chanting grows louder until the shrieks of the vulnerable victims can be heard no longer. This use of traditional folk art perfectly fits into the rubric of the play representing multitude as the central character. Politics is a class phenomenon and not an individual oriented. Tendulkar himself classifies:

“This is not a historical play. It is a story, in prose, Verse, music and dance set in a historical era. Ghashirams are creations of socio-political forces Which know no Barriers of time and place. Although Based on a historical legend. I have no intention of Commentary on the morals or lack of them, of the Peshwa, nana Phadnavis or Ghashiram. The moral Of the story, if there is any, may be looked for Elsewhere”.⁸

He intended to depict the power game and the socio political construct that creates and helps numerous Ghashirams. He had no intention of defaming the image of Nana Phadnavis or promote any anti-Brahminic feeling or show the society of 18th century Maharashtra in an unsavory light. It was only incidental that he chose this period in the history of Maharashtra. He did not wish to universalize the character of Ghashiram and Nana Phadnavis nor did he attempt it as a historical play. His only focus was to highlight the contemporary caste politics and caste hegemony. He says

“History interests me in so far as it relates to my period and the situation around me.” He only seeks contemporary relevance of all historical elements. Besides, after showing the ghastly end of Ghashiram, Tendulkar does not foresee that all the Ghashiram’s have been brought down; he rather wants to awaken us to the socio political dangers giving birth to such Ghashirams to beware and avert the emergence of more Ghashirams. Samik Bandopadhyay observes “Nana needs Ghashiram and Ghashiram needs Nana; but in the shifting game of power, it is only a temporary adjustment that Nana exploits as long as necessary and can drop unceremoniously the moment it has served its purpose”.⁹ Men in power propound ideologies to serve their purposes and later destroy them when they become useless. Nana’s own misdeeds and machinations are obscured by Ghashiram’s cruelty. Ghashiram assumes power and arrogance but he does not realize that the real power vests with Nana. “What’ll happen is that our misdeeds will be credited to your account. We do it our Kotwal pays for it.” (pg 30)

Ghashiram is deluded into believing that he can thrive on power but Nana’s misdeeds are credited to his account. Ghashiram is made a scapegoat and thrown in front of the blood- thirsty crowd of Pune. Nana had deputed Ghashiram as the Kotwal but even Nana is deputed by the Peshwas, a symbol of power in the feudal society. Thus we get to see a whole hierarchy of power positions. It is evident how an individual is pitted against another. Governance structured thus maintains hierarchies so that the attention is focused on individuals and their personal wiles and the powerful can go unscathed. Ghashiram and then Nana in turn are meer puppets in the hands of the mighty Peshwas. The deputationist politics conceal the real perpetrators of crime. The men on the lower rungs are exposed to pacify the common man.

The play is universal since the depiction of characters and their circumstances go beyond time and place. These characters belong to all times and climes. In play after play Tendulkar has sought to problematize the female body and show how the fear of female sexuality compels the society to control female bodies and minds. The sacred institutions of religion and marriage have also been misused by men to bind women in slavery. Women characters are unaware of the violent impulses behind a respectable façade and the overwhelming compulsions of sex. The self-complacent smiles of ineffectual men are shown as concealing ugly and vicious traits. It is clear that the ‘content’ of the play deals with universal issues. The tyrants of Pune are the best metaphors for the prejudice and annihilation of the untouchables, subalterns, the underprivileged and the like all over the world and at all times. The play owes its world wide acclaim to its vibrant delineation of contemporary socio-political concerns. The play is also a study of a common man’s search for identity and then disillusionment.

The beauty of a piece of art is always judged on the basis of its capacity to move to, stir, to interpret human actions and attitudes and to help understand life. A lofty literary work elevates and transcends beyond dreamy sentimentalism and unbounded imagination to a position where it is relevant to the reader’s everyday trials and tribulations. Under of the veneer of humanity and morality man has turned this

world into a seedbed of most ugly practices and inhuman cruelties. In spite of the light of education and culture our land is still wrapped in abysmal dark. The savage animal instinct of man raises its ugly head time and again *Ghashiram Kotwal* exposes a society infested with inferiority, inconstancy and insincerity. Our human society that boasts of co-operation and harmony in fact can turn up the value system upside down.

The most sacred of all human relationships is mocked right at the onset of the presentation. Man-woman relations are devoid of any mark of decency and a requisite equilibrium. The institution of marriage is derided through various episodes. Ghashiram stoops to crass shamelessness when he tries to discipline the commoners of Pune. While patrolling at night he suspects some indecency behind the four walls of a house, he then very vindictively abuses the couple, drags them out and seeks for testimony from neighbours confirming their marital status. In an attempt to curb the ills and evils in society Ghashiram only devalues the traditional human and cultural practices. The incrimination and ignominy faced by a much married couple at an odd hour showcase how traditional standard equations are radically altered.

The Brahmins are supposed to be interpreters and mediators between God and a common man. They are the flag bearers of all that is pure, ethical, just and holy. The Brahmins are supposed to be the saviours protecting mankind from doom. But *Ghashiram Kotwal* shocks us by their raw expressions, their curses, their pretences, their vain and fickle minded approach. The moral and political bigotry of the Brahmin class and their utter degradation is exposed when the 18th cent custodians of religion and sanctity have all their activities programmed around Bavannakhani ,a red light area. These men frequent the quarters of harlots while their wives cosy up with their lovers. Thus the Brahmins, inimical of all social and moral constraints, signify the hollowness and hypocrisy that was corroding the society.

The figure head of the state Nana Phadnavis is a lecherous, insensate creep who has set an example of utter depravity and indiscriminate lawlessness before his people. Tendulkar demolishes history and the idolization of Nana as the deputy of the Peshwas. Historians for years had been glorifying Nana as an upright administrator with unparalleled statesmanship. History was selectively appropriated and Nana was built up as an icon of a god fearing and just ruler through numerous literary representations. *Gashiram Kotwal* carefully deconstructs this image of the Peshwa rule fortifying an ethically upright and a flourishing Maratha kingdom. The play comes as a vehement attack, dismantling elaborately built images of Nana exposing him as a lascivious and morally degenerate ruler. This explosive representation of the Brahmin rulers reflecting their oppressive cultural practices and self complacence went a long way in decrumbling images deeply rooted in the social psyche.

Tendulkar brings this about by choosing Ghashiram Kotwal, city Magistrate of Pune as the pivotal figure to portray the depravity and lack of governance. the theme of isolation of the individual & his confrontation with the hostile surroundings. His character, dialogues, gestures and even mannerism reflect his petty circumscribed existence fraught with frustrations and repressed desires that find expression in his malicious and spiteful attitude towards his fellow beings. By juxtaposing the divine

and the profane in the Kirtan, Tendulkar means to suggest the blatant promiscuity and vulgar degradation in the populace.

Night comes
 Pune Brahman go
 To Bavannakhani
 They go
 To Bavannakhani
 They go to cemetery
 They go to the kirtan
 They go to the temple as they
 Have done every day.
 The Brahmans go to Bavannakhani (Act I, pg 16-17)

This reiteration of Brahmins going to Bavannakhani is more of a badgering to emphasize on the degeneration of society at the hands of those who claim to form its upper most strata. The perfidious Brahmins preach and profess morality but are themselves highly materialistic and lusty. Institutionalized sexuality and institutionalized religiosity are brought into unholy alliance in the reiterated image of Bavannakhani a red light district turned into a pleasure garden of Krishna. Tendulkar achieves a powerful effect when on stage most inhuman crimes are perpetrated with very decorous chants of Dnyanaba-Tukaram & Namdev Tukaram hummed in all seriousness. The chanting is the dialectical purpose much intended by Tendulkar who contrasts the two simultaneous dramatic effects to unravel the sham and snobbery of the Brahmins. Nana disregards all forms of idolworship and sanctity attached to idols when he leers at the nubile Lalita Gauri and seduces her right in front of the idol of Ganesha. The following conversation proves it.

Nana : oh, don't be shy. This is our house. This is a private hall. No one will see....

Girl : He will see.

Nana : He will see ? who?

Girl : (pointed of Ganpati) he

Nana : That idol of holiness? That all holy Ganpati? The maker of Good? Look, he has two wives. On one this side one on that side. If you sit on our lap, he won't say anything. (G K pg 28)

This cynicism on the part of the powerful indicates to the decadence that the exercise of power brings about. Power has stifled the springs of genuine human love. The entire aura of hymns and religious ceremony provide an ironic screen that is pierced through and through by the crudest lusty desire born out of arrogance and bravado.

Nana is drunk with power and so pounces upon any woman with beastly urgency. He throws all consideration to winds while violating a woman. Women have always borne the brunt of man's insensitivities and callous attitude towards them. She is expected to be docile, silent and a long suffering woman endorsing a picture invented and nurtured through a male oriented culture. All the women characters in the

play are marginalized and find themselves on the periphery of everything worthy. Even the prostitute Gulabi remains impersonated in man defined sexual norms. The body of the woman and the institutional body of power come in to collision sparking off and calling forth varying intensities of violence. The play also exposes collusion between power and sexuality. Women have always been sacrificed to satisfy man's physical lust and lust for power. It is amply clear from Nana's relationship with three women – all having a different societal status whether it is Gulabi a concubine, Lalita his keep or his young lawfully wedded wife. He is insincere with all of them. Our patriarchal society and its deep rooted cynical norms have been responsible in the commodification of women.

In a study Forisha and Goldman find that “The gravest problem that women face is sexism --- not --- sexist practices which are overt but – the pervasive and the relatively inaccessible non-conscious value, that women are not men and men are better than women”.¹⁰ The words cast light on how because of their sex women are subjected to discrimination. Although both men and women can be targets and victims of sex discrimination, one can find that being a woman is frequently a better predictor of inequality than such variables as age, race, religion, intelligence achievement or socio-economic status. Although some men may be discriminated against because of their education, religion, race or political affiliations like Velutha in *'The God of Small Things'*, they are not treated unequally simply because they are men. Velutha belongs to an untouchable caste and undergoes discrimination similarly Ghashiram is a Brahmin but a Kanauj Brahmin, and hence an alien. He is not accommodated by the hostile Pune Brahmans who vent their spleen. He is treated like a Shudra a criminal and a useless animal. He is set against a mighty exploitative system that strips him of all his modesty and humanity just because he looks simple, unorthodox and unconventional. He is humiliated not because of his sex but because he has 'no shaven head' pious look and 'holy thread' and 'looks like a scoundrel'. Thus hurt and humiliated he strikes back with a vengeance. After attaining office Ghashiram too unleashes a reign of terror.

Arundhati Roy expounds – psychology of the repressed beings in the *'God Of Small Things'* in the following words –“A lofty sense of injustice and mulish reckless streak that develops in someone small who has been bullied all their lives by someone Big”¹¹

A father himself exploited his only daughter's beauty and chastity to satiate his power-thirsty desires. To console his own manly pride and self aggrandizement Ghashiram barter humanity. His vaulting ambition to become a Kotwal likens him to Dr Faustus who had bartered his soul. In Marlowe's *'Dr Faustus'* overcome by a desire to reach beyond the grasp of ordinary mortals, Faustus sells his soul to the Devil for 24 years of pleasure and gift of knowledge. His lust for knowledge makes him blind to the fact that he is committing a horrible sin and bringing on himself eternal damnation.

Ghashiram buys power through sacrificing the virtue of his daughter at the altar of power. The savage and barbarous father does experience the pangs of guilt which make him clamour :

“Now he’s in hands ----- oh, my daughter

--The beast --- oh you people! Look!

I’ve given my beloved daughter into the jaws of the wolf! Look at the father putting his heart’s child up for sale. Look at my innocent daughter – whore. The overripe bastard eating her like peach – spit on me. (GK 31)

The grave emotional and physical exploitation of Lalita Gauri leads to a lot of psychological anguish. The disgusting selfish motive of a father is amply showcased when Ghashiram promises to send his daughter to Nana’s place only when the order of his appointment is signed and honestly placed in his hands. Nana’s words, “Bastard you’ve got me in a narrow pass” are readily answered “yes the narrow pass of my only daughter.” Ghashiram is a cold calculating and cruel jerk. This is one of the powerful dramatic statements showing how humans are capable of intrigue greed and brutality when actuated by envy lust and urge for power. Vijay Tendulkar skillfully brings out the tragic potential in Ghashiram by setting him against all powerful grinding system which attempts to strip him of every ounce of humanity. It is through a number of wily manipulations that he works his way up to holding the post of the Kotwal of Pune.

While Nana dallies with Gauri, Ghashiram rules Pune with a stern hand. He abrogates the privileges and responsibilities of the state to himself and breaks the letter of law continually. The whole town is under threat of his ire. Prisons overflowing with innocent victims slapped with heinous crimes bear ample testimony to his straitlaced rule.

The Sutradhar sums it up “Gauri orders, Nana does, Ghashiram’s reign is here - - Gauri dances, Nana dances Ghashiram’s got his chances.” (36)

There is a spurt in demonic treatment meted out to innocent Brahmins on the pretext of clearing the city of all moral turpitude. But in spite of turning the tables against his tormentors Ghashiram cannot change the destiny of his disgraced daughter. She is soon used up and discarded on the streets by the British Nana. This hostile development turns him into a fiend who then plunges headlong into a career of bloodshed and bloodbath. It is due to this multi-dimensional unsettlement that all the forces conjoin to seek revenge and shatter his life. The scenes of torture and blood curdling violence testify to Tendulkar’s views that violence is deep seated in the psyche of modern man. Many of his plays are studies in power politics and its resulting instigation of baser human instincts. In modern times the image of a politician is nothing more than an opportunistic shrewd money minded jerk. The common man, who is persuaded into accepting muddled state of affairs, is trapped in their demoralized and turbulent governance.

Gauri’s death at the hands of a midwife while trying to abort her illegitimate baby makes the father ruthless and sadistic. He avenges her death by imprisoning twenty one Brahmins who had unknowingly plucked fruit from Ghashiram’s garden. These Brahmins die of suffocation because of an un-ventilated cell. The genocide

results in Ghashiram's downfall. Nana turns a deaf ear to the resultant torture of Ghashiram and hands him over to an irate mob. They mercilessly stone him to death. Thus as Shailja Wadikar concedes –“Ghashiram's role constantly changes from Victim to Rescuer (because he provides a kind of relief to Nana by sending his daughter to him) from Rescuer to Persecutor and finally from Persecutor to Victim.....

The Brahmins, who torture Ghashiram at the beginning, perform the role of Persecutor. They become Victims of Ghashiram's anger and frustration, after he becomes the Kotwal of the city. Towards the end of the play they are shown returning to their previous role of Persecutors when they punish Ghashiram for his indiscriminate heartless cruelty”.¹²

The Sutradhar tries to assure the audience sarcastically that even if the men “have lost themselves” in Bavannakhani all is well with the civilized society as the subjugated know their place. Manju Kapur a renowned feminist novelist also disapproves women's acceptance of gender inequality and participation in sex segregated activities and attitude of self-denigration. But in the play after this reassurance of the existing moral world there is a visual image of “A Brahmin woman with a savvy air” embracing her lover when the menfolk obsessed with unbridled sex are away splurging in drinks and nefarious activities. The point is that the powerless must and do strike for freedom in whatever way they can. Even Gauri confirms to an image created by men of how a mistress should carry herself. Accordingly, she is charming, enticing, gay and vivacious. She uses her attributes to entice Nana. Her transformation from an innocent girl to a coquettish mistress is alarming. She turns into a straightforward shrewd seductress wooing men and raising their passion and desires manifold. It is very touching to comprehend how a subjugated status affects the powerless into making them sly and subversive. Gauri knows that Nana's infatuation would be short lived and so she masks her revulsion and apprehensions and successfully woos Nana.

Gauri, the divine Mothers' human namesake who cannot be allowed to become a mother herself, dies a lonely and ignominious death at the hands of an abortionist.

Tendulkar's concern with all form of oppression his strong artistic sense, anticipation of all structural strategies gift of style and presentation and thematic synchronization make him one of the most eminent theatre personalities. He is a force to reckon with in the terrain of new age drama. No other playwright captured the public imagination the way Ghashiram and its exploits did.

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