

Studying Gender Based Violence in Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract

It is noteworthy to find that in many respects, modern literature has defined itself by reflecting the prevalent violence of modern society—from the destruction of large-scale warfare to individual crimes of murder, rape, and abuse. Critics of modern literature have generally attributed this trend to both the sensational appeal of violent behavior and the primitive nature of violent situations. For Vijay Tendulkar violence is something which designs the course of life for individuals. He puts his characters in violent situations and let them act in accordance to their psyche, ambiance and power relations.

The present paper is an effort to study Tendulkar's plays to find the reasons behind the gender based violence and domestic violence in Indian society. Moreover, the paper also researches in steps and solutions to face such violence in Indian society.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Gender based violence, Human Dignity, Vijay Tendulkar.

Introduction

In general terms, “violence is produced when an individual or group act unilaterally, imposing its opinion without allowing space for negotiation; when the power of each side is not equal. This imposed action can affect the body, life, future, or plans of the other, whether an individual or group (Rousseau, 1987, 3).” Violence is termed as “behavior by persons against persons that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harms” (Reiss and Roth, 1993). The closely related terms- ‘aggression’ and ‘antisocial behaviour’ are associated to lesser forms of violence that include behaviours that are intended to inflict psychological harm as well as physical harm. It is a relatively common human behavior that happens in daily life throughout the world. It occurs among any age group without any temporal and spatial conditions. It affects negatively to all human beings who experience or witness it.

Etymologically, the term ‘violence’ has been derived from the Latin word ‘violationem’ and French word ‘violacion’ which means ‘an injury, irreverence, profanation’ (Etymonline). In Encyclopedia, violence is defined as “the expression of physical or verbal force against one or more people, compelling action against one’s will on pain of being hurt (Enc.)”. Worldwide, violence is used as a tool of manipulation and also is an area of concern for law and culture which take attempts to suppress and stop it. The word ‘violence’ covers is a broad spectrum. It can vary from a physical altercation between two beings to war and genocide where millions may die as a result.

The social thinkers and critics believe that there is a vast array of types of violence. “It is short and episodic as a slap in the face; or massive and organized as a war. It can be passionate and angry as a quarrel; or callous and impersonal as the bureaucratic administration of gas chambers. It is happy as drunken carousing, fearful as soldiers in combat, vicious as a torturer. It can be furtive and hidden as

a rape-murder, or public as a ritual execution. It is programmed entertainment in the form of sporting contests, the plot tension of drama, the action of action-adventure, the staple shocker of the news edition. It is horrible and heroic, disgusting and exciting, the most condemned and glorified of human acts (Collins, 2008, 1).”

To understand its true nature “there is need of putting the interaction in the center of the analysis, not the individual, the social background, the culture, or even the motivation and looking for the characteristics of violent situations and comparison among the range of variation in situations, which affects the kind and amount of violence that emerges. Violent situations are shaped by an emotional field of tension and fear. Any successful violence must overcome this tension and fear. One way this is done is by turning the emotional tension into emotional energy, usually by one side of the confrontational tension/fear as one side appropriates the emotional rhythm as dominator and the other gets caught in it as victim. But only small numbers of persons can do this. This is a structural property of situational fields, nor a property of individuals (Collins, 2008, 1).”

Gender based violence is one of the social phenomenon that is related with social relationship where power mechanism works on the basis of gender. Within the academic fields of cultural studies, gender studies, and the social sciences the word *gender* is used interchangeably both regarding ‘sex’, and ‘identity’, and is often used to describe a gender role. Under this perception of ‘social roles’, the different positions of women and men in society are influenced by historical, social, religious, economic and cultural realities. Their gender relations constitute and are constructed by a range of institutions such as the family, legal systems, or the market. The term *gender* is derived from the Middle English word *gendre* that originally coined from Latin word *genus* which means ‘kind, type or sort’.

Gender relations are hierarchical relations of power between women and men and always tend to disadvantage women. These hierarchies are often accepted as ‘natural’ but in reality they are socially determined relations, culturally biased, and subject to change over time. However, there is no known society where man and woman have equal power and gender roles. Women continue to be placed, implicitly, in the category of nature - instinct, sentiment, and irrationality - while men, on the contrary, are placed in the category of culture - reflection, abstraction of a mental system. Generally, woman are considered weak, emotional, personified beauty and thus they are made subject of subordination, submission and more or less marginalization, depending on their country which gives birth of the thought of gender discrimination. Indeed, gender discrimination has been an issue of critical debate throughout the centuries in India but it becomes more relevant in contemporary times with influences of globalization.

Domestic violence is one of the behaviors that come under the category of gender based violence. It can be broadly defined as a pattern of abusive behaviors by one or both partners in an intimate relationship such as marriage, dating, family, friends of cohabitation. It has many forms including physical aggression-hitting, kicking, biting, shoving, restraining, slapping, throwing objects, or threats there of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, controlling or domineering, intimation, stalking, covert abuse of negligence and economic deprivation. “Domestic violence may or may not constitute and crime, depending on local statutes severity and duration of specific acts, and other variable. Finally, the most common form of family violence occurs among siblings (Gelles, 1977, 32).” We should keep this variety of domestic violence in mind in considering whether a general theoretical argument is adequate.

Vijay Tendulkar, one of the greatest milestones in modern Indian theatre and literature, always lent to his ears to “hear their mute voices” to change them from “dumb dolls” to “speaking sparks”. This outlines a theoretical framework applicable to the concept of gender discrimination and gender based violence in the context of Indian society through the plays of Vijay Tendulkar. Tendulkar’s introspective study of power and violence in human behaviors, especially in middle class society, has emerged in him through his journey of life. He has left school at fourteen to join the Quiet India Movement. Later he has become a journalist in a newspaper, where he has even wrote horoscopes in absence of the astrologer and enjoyed creating a well balanced future for all. Possibly this quest for a satisfactory future has led him to sip off our veil of civility to expose a violent, power-hungry society. He has faced bans, hostility and ridicule for examining violence as a tool of power in political, social, sexual, sectarian or casteist contexts. But his restlessness to express his perception has never been quenched. According to him, the sensitivity towards social problems around him and the ability to transform his ideas into words are primary conditions for being a writer because although he does not give any answer to any human agony, he weaves a world of collective consciousness through which his readers/audience can correlate their emotions. Hence, writing for him is a ‘cathartic’ vent and a pathway to disburse his ‘restlessness’.

Samik Bandyopadhyay, in his critical analysis of Tendulkar’s curiosity about power and violence inherent in human psyche and social ambiance, remarks aptly that a ‘strong ethical concern exploring and critiquing the relations of power in all their complex ramifications is the hub’ around which Tendulkar’s major plays evolve. As a matter of fact, Tendulkar chose ‘the emerging patterns of violence’ as his theme for his project when he was awarded the Nehru Fellowship. In an interview soon after the completion of the project, he said that for two years had ‘moved around the country alone, trying to look into the situations ranging from individual violence to the political movement; covering ‘criminality, the functioning of the police force, the judiciary, jails and the political aspect of the violence and power’. At the end it he was left with a fact that:

“Violence has become an obsession. Violence is something which has to be accepted as fact. It is no use describing it as good or bad. Projections 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 or curb it at times.”
(Tendulkar 1992:147)

There can be many accusations against Tendulkar but it is inevitable truth that only sensible writers want to study such violence. “For, our political sensitivities, visions of a desirable society, systems of knowledge, and techniques of social interpretation are all enlayered within the dislocation we see around us. We suspect that we may be culpable, and we do not want to be certain that we are. In this sense, the violence unfolding before us is doubly orphaned: it has neither acknowledged parents nor willing observers” (The Hindu, 2001). Vijay Tendulkar is an exception. His consistent, prolonged engagement with human aggression has made him one of the most distinguished social theorists of violence in the country. “He considers himself a writer of plays and film scripts on a wide variety of subjects, not a closet philosopher or a sociologist who has missed his vocation. In addition, like all prolific writers, he has other incarnations; it is a trifle unjust to read his entire work as a commentary on human violence. However, those caught in the hinges of post-Independence intellectual life and

public affairs in India cannot but recognized the way Tendulkar has, over the last few decades, scanned the life-world of contemporary Indians in order to identify the sources and nature of the violence that have come to pattern it. Even when violence is not ostensibly his theme, it casts its shadow on his characters - their cultivated or panicky reactions to it, their numbing fear of their own selves. By bringing their world close to ours through his creative powers, he has shaped the way we look at ourselves” (The Hindu, 2001).

The close reading of Tendulkar’s texts and contexts clearly shows that Tendulkar’s understanding of violence is bifocal. His plays, *Gidhade*, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Kanyadaan*, and *Ghashiram Kotwal*, end with violent situations where “violence tends to become an end in itself. It is the easiest way left for many ordinary citizens to cope with their fractured selves and problems of living. No longer does violence come from ideology, faith, or even self-interest. On the contrary, it seeks outlet through ideology, faith and perceived self-interest and latches on to these “causes” to find public expression and legitimacy. In this paradoxical world, violence is prior to its causes (2001, 31).” It is also remarkable to look that “Tendulkar’s violence, therefore, is sometimes tinged with - as the psychiatrist would diagnose it - the psychopathic. It carries the impress of an empty interpersonal world and a maimed conscience. That ambience is almost entirely of Tendulkar (2001, 32).”

Tendulkar’s play, *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)* depicts the conflict of innocence versus cruelty through the tragedy of a simple, innocent, and straightforward teacher victimized by the society; its protagonist “Leela Benare’s defence of herself against the onslaught of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy, has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi Theatre (Banerjee, 572)’. *The Vultures* represents a degenerate family where there is an utter defeat of humanity against monstrosity; *Sakharam Binder* explores the complexity of human nature where the characters simultaneously represent a strange combination of sensibility and insensibility; *Kamala* exhibits the corrupt, success-oriented, modern society in which simple, innocent, and sensitive people like Kamala and Sarita become scapegoats of the treacherous ways of the so-called cultured, civilized and progressive people; *Ghashiram Kotwal* is a satire on power politics, in which deterministic overtones of human life are most perceptible through the life-story of Ghashiram; and *Kanyadaan* deals with the theme of conflict between idealism versus reality.

Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a play where the conflict between socio-cultural power structure and woman has been depicted; and “a play about a woman targeted by men, placed in a regretful situation where she can neither get sympathy nor legitimacy for her child (2001, 14).” The play is a discussion of “the problem of unmarried motherhood through the conflict between an individual and society where innocence is ruthlessly crushed by cruelty (2008, 3).” *Sakharam Binder* is about a man called Sakharam who is a womanizer using women for his physical and mental gratification and discards them like flees from his life without any thinking. *A Friend’s Story* is a play of understanding the sexual orientation not through the lens of gender roles- male and female – but by the choice of individuals; not via the traditions, customs and patterns of sexuality imposed by the social constructs but by means of the personal choices.

Vijay Tendulkar is aware of these inequalities “that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men so that they retain power (2010, 83).” In “Introduction”

to *Collected Plays in Translation*, Bandyopadhyay comments on *Silence! The Court is in Session* by highlighting the fact that it is, “the first significant modern Indian play in any language to centre on woman as the protagonist and victim, locates its heroine Benare not at acquiescent receiving end, but at point of conflict where as aggressive-transgressor of the sexual mores of her community, she challenges or power in absentia” (Bandyopadhyay, 2003, xliv). Thematically, Leela Benare, the protagonist in the *Silence! The Court is in Session* is caught into the web of unwanted and disturbing questions of love, sex, and moral values prevalent during the rehearsal of ‘play within play’ designed by her companions to show her inferior as a woman and establish their patriarchal superiority. The male characters- Rokde, Ponkshe, Karnik and Mr. Kashikar try to prove that women are ‘inferior Other’ which is a process where women are seen not as independent or unique but as variation and flawed version of the male. They make efforts to construct them. Through the mock-trial Benare is forced to accept that in love she has been cheated two times by her lovers; first by her maternal uncle and later by Prof. Damle with whom she got pregnant. In both cases she has been used as an ‘object’ for physical satisfaction. She suffers at the hands of her colleagues for the offence she has not committed. “During the mock-trial...so, the pursuit of the hen by the dogs symbolically represents Miss Benare’s inhuman hunt by her fellow-companions (SCS, 23).” Mr. Kashikar’s announcement in a role of the judge during mock-trial appears a voice of patriarchy that considers women weak and puppets in the hands of male and wants to keep them in chains in the name of traditions, social customs and religion; hence, they should be punished. Observing this Ashis Nandy called Vijay Tendulkar “One of the most distinguished social theorists of violence (2001).”

In the conclusion it can be remarked that Vijay Tendulkar is such a dramatist who keenly observes the gender issues in Indian society through his plays; he creates the plots of his plays around women; and how gender based violence has been used to subjugate the women in the society. He does not avoid portraying the harsh realities of society where woman can be used as a ‘commodity’, subordinate and secondary in spite of their glorification through religious texts. For Tendulkar the gender based violence destroys the entity of woman as an individual, wife, daughter and colleague. In most of Tendulkar’s major plays he projects women as victims. The plays highlight the gender stereotyping that is forced upon them. The roles allotted to women in the patriarchal set up are purely domestic- daughter, wife and mother. From birth the girl-child is subjected to the negative reinforcement of her vulnerability to rape and assault. As a girl she is under the protection of her father/brother; after marriage her husband is her lord and master and in old age her son becomes her protector. As part of the gendered difference that is emphasized from childhood the girl is taught to believe in the importance of ‘family values’- values which are presumed to be her responsibility and not the male’s. A girl/woman is expected to be meek, submissive, patient; she should subordinate her will and desires to those of the male unselfishly. Such sustained sociological conditioning inhibits and restricts the full development of a woman's personality. Hence the policies for women empowerment should be executed properly; they should be politically, socially and economically strengthened; and strict punishment should be implemented to rescind the gender based violence.

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