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Social Concerns in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

Pratibha Sharma, Ph.D. and Sanjit Mishra, Ph.D.

Amoral Plays

In the post-Independence Indian Theatre, Vijay Tendulkar has brought a sea change in the world of Theatre as he shocked the sensibility of the conservative audience by projecting the stark realities of life, relationship and existence. Seeking to present the modern society with its real worth, predicament, challenges, difficulties and complexities in true colours, his characters are drawn on the canvas of originality without any attempt to moralizing. Most of his plays are written in naturalistic vein and reject idealized portrayal of life while attaining complete accuracy in presenting the life realistically. He has discussed and touched upon every aspect of life, not only the happy, gleeful but also on human weaknesses, follies and foibles. His plays are neither moral, nor immoral in tone but may rather be seen amoral. 'In a limited sense, he may be seen as a silent 'social activist' who covertly wishes to bring about a change in people's modes

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of thinking, feeling, and behaving' (Wadikar,2008). As an optimist he is willing to make people conscious towards life with all their vices and limitations.

A Mirror Reflecting the Inner and Outer World

Vijay Tendulkar's plays are like a mirror that reflects the individual's inner and outer world. While dealing with the social realities, he unveils two major tendencies of Indian society: male dominance and feminine frailty. While projecting the women characters that play important roles, as important as men, Tendulkar shows them exploited, oppressed and humiliated as in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Kamala*, *Kanyadaan*, *Friend's Story* and others. Even education doesn't bring any substantial change in their life. It produces sophisticated slaves like Sarita or the social victim Benare. Sarita in *Kamala*, Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Jyoti in *Kanyadaan* are the characters who are educated, sophisticated and occupy the focus of the play in their revolt against the outdated conventional moral values. The play *Sakharam Binder* deals with the hypocritical attitude in India, where a woman is denigrated and venerated as suits the man's purposes.

Raising Questions

Tendulkar's plays raise questions rather than providing a guideline or message to the solutions of the problems they deal with. He said in one of his interviews.... 'By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take' (Saran and Patil, 1993). As Shailaja B. Wadikar says, 'The playwright seeks to present the modern man with his predicament, his challenges, his difficulties, and his complexities' (Wadikar, 2008).

In his article, 'Vijay Tendulkar and the metaphor of violence', Sudhir Sonalkar rightly points out: 'In Tendulkar's plays, ...the ethical question remains both untouched and unanswered' (Sonalkar,1993).

Manifesting Different Aspects of Human Character

All of Vijay Tendulkar's plays manifest the different aspects of the human character and complexities of human relationship. He thoroughly scrutinizes and explains the blood relationships on various levels in his plays like *Kamala*, *Kanyadaan*, *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Gidhade*. The varying relationships in the play *Vultures*, for example, brother-to brother, brother-to-sister, father-to-children, etc., expose how greed for money make these family members wild and mad. The play *Kamala* portrays the hollowness of husband and wife relationship and the father in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal* bargains his own daughter's chastity for the fulfillment of his ambition. Tendulkar has tried to bring great variations and innovations related not only to the plays and themes but to their forms also.

Existential Tendencies

One more important aspect about the playwright is as marked by Wadikar, 'The existential tendencies are clearly noticed in almost all the plays' (Wadikar, 2008). Ghashiram gets nothing even after the fulfillment of his ambition; Sakharam who doesn't believe in the institution of marriage becomes totally helpless towards the end of the play; the life of all the members of the Pitale's family exhibits that human life starts and ends in nothingness; the efforts of Jaisingh to get name and fame at any cost in the play *Kamala* prove futile; Nath Devalalikar himself creates a hell for his daughter following his hollow idealism.

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Exploring Sexual Lust and Evil

The social play *Gidhade* explores violence, sexual lust and evil deeply rooted in human nature, as it reveals the degenerated society, fractured selves and problems of living with compassion and cruelty. Arundhati Banerjee opines, ‘conservative sections of Maharashtrian society were stunned by the open display of illicit relations and scenes of violence that constituted the plot’ (Banerjee, 1992). The complexity of human nature with violence and sexual lust is also presented in *Sakharam Binder*. Sakharam, the chief protagonist, a book binder, is an outcast, having a Brahmin father and a Mahar mother. The bitter experience of life has made him hard and violent. The frustrated household life in his childhood crushes his emotions and feelings and leaves him a rough man like desert cactus that stands the onslaught of stormy weather.

Dealing with Modern Society

Whereas the play *Kamala* draws a picture of selfish, narrow minded, self-centered modern society that doesn’t hesitate to sacrifice their human values. In this play also once again Tendulkar raises a certain cardinal question regarding the value system of a so called modern success oriented society that is dying to get success at any cost.

The play *Kanyadaan* has the background of the twentieth century history of the struggle over the practice of untouchability and the immediate phase of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and in the nation as a whole. It is a psychological study of the social tensions caused by casteism in India and the development of Jyoti’s character from a highly cultured Brahmin girl into a hardened spouse of her Dalit husband.

Tendulkar's expresses his view on homosexual love in *A Friend's Story*. Mitra, a lesbian, becomes a victim of the society that gives unsympathetic treatment to a physically deformed person. Through the character of Mitra the playwright attacks on the male dominated society and the pathetic condition of women.

The First Significant Modern Indian Play

'*Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967) is the Tendulkar's first play to become part of the new Indian Drama phenomenon of the sixties and the first significant modern Indian play in any language to centre on woman as protagonist and victim' (Bandyopadhyay, 2009). The play based on a real incidence, is "a play within a play" or a play in the form of a rehearsal. The play is social satire with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society. It deals with the problem of unmarried motherhood.

The action of the play takes place with Leela Benare, a female protagonist and stands as a rebel against the established values of the basically orthodox society. Tendulkar treats the character of Benare with great compassion and understanding while projecting her against the selfish, hypocritical, and brutally ambitious male dominated society. She is a school teacher, sincere in her teaching work and an enlightened artist. So, she joins the amateur group of theatre. The other members of the group are Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Karnik, Proff. Damle and Mr. Rawte, who belong to the urban middleclass of Mumbai. Leela Benare is totally different from them with her zeal and zest for life. She wants to share her happiness with others but hardly succeeds in doing so as her jovial, generous nature is not appreciated by her companions. In this exposure of the private life of Benare, their inferiority

complex reflects frustration and repressed desires of their life. They cannot understand, appreciate and share in the joy of others.

Nora and Leela Benare

The character of Leela Benare reminds us of Ibsen's character Nora (In *Doll's House*), a womanly woman who tries to face the bitter realities of actual world that is full of hardships and challenges (Wadikar, 2008). In love, Miss Benare is cheated twice; first by her maternal uncle and later by Prof. Damle. Hence, in the first case the thing subsides with the passage of time but in the other one, she is caught in a trap, through the cruel game cunningly arranged by her companions, for her love affair has been already exposed by her pregnancy.

At the very outset of the mock trial, Benare is accused of the charge of infanticide. This rehearsal takes a very serious turn when the co-actors arrange it cunningly to discuss and dissect the private life of her. Being isolated and victim of society, she offers to marry any of her companions but none comes forth to accept her proposal. On the contrary, she is denied both, the right of living as she is dismissed from her job of teaching and the right that is God given to a woman to become mother is snatched from her as the sentence is past on her to the effect that the baby in her womb must be destroyed. Damle, who is equally responsible for her so called crime of unmarried motherhood, goes unnoticed and unpunished.

Although the character of Benare symbolizes simplicity, innocence, and straightforwardness but the characters of her fellow companions symbolize meanness and cruelty. Her tragedy reveals the fact that, in the male dominated society, women's innocence is punished and man's violence goes scot-free.

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On Evil Practices

Vijay Tendulkar throws light on the evil practices inherent in human nature like crookedness, cruelty and violence. Here the white collar, middle class educated and civilized people become aggressive and violent against their fellow companions and that, too, a female and entertain themselves at the cost of her honour and dignity. Benare suffers for the crime that she has not committed as she says, 'these are mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See, their faces, how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires' (p.117). Benare's tragedy reveals the fact that women are born to suffer even in the most sophisticated, civilized section of the society.

Ruthless Dissection of Human Character

The play *The Vultures* (1971) is intensely morbid in the portrayal of its characters and action. It is a play that stands apart from the other plays of Vijay Tendulkar, because it ruthlessly dissects the human nature. It depicts the inborn violence, selfishness, sensuality and wickedness in man's life. This play was bitterly criticized by the theatre going public and the Censor Board, too, felt that it was obscene and suspended its public performance for the time being. About the enactment of the play Girish Karnad says, 'The staging of *Gidhade* could be compared with the blasting of bomb' (Banerjee, 1992). Ramakant, Umakant, and Manik are like their father Hari Pitale, always ready to cheat one another and never hesitate to seek each other's lives to extract money. Each one is suspicious of the other and lacks the peace of mind.

All the family members except Rama and Rajaninath are leading a kind of life that is comparable to vultures only. The children follow the footsteps of their father who cheats his

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brother in business and acquires prosperity and affluence. Thus, they all are following the footsteps of their father and belong to a flock of vultures. The atmosphere is completely charged with disbelief and viciousness. Manik's statement bears evidence to it, 'So, I should leave it open? Should I? So you can come and strangle me, all of you? It's because I take care that I've survived in this house!'(p.207).

Greed compels Ramakant and Umakant to beat their father when he rejects to give them information about his secret account in bank. When they do not become successful to get money from their sister's lover, the Raja of Hondur, they skillfully abort her child in anguish by beating her inhumanly. Towards the end of the play, Manik successfully tries to abort the baby in the womb of her sister in law to take revenge from her brothers. The actions of these family members i.e., a wrong done by Hari Pitale to his brother, the beating up of father by his own sons, the forced abortions of Manik's and Rama's babes by Ramakant and Umakant and by Manik, respectively, reflect the fundamental hatred that all the family members have for each other.

Shailaja B. Wadikar views the play as in Shakespeare's plays; the tragic hero is responsible for his death. In the same vein we feel sympathy and pity for them. Further she adds, 'In *The Vultures*, the characters are essentially bad without having a single good quality' (p.17). The woman character Rama, the wife of Ramakant, is described as a sensitive, submissive, helpless, tender little bird among the vultures, turns towards Rajaninath, his younger half brother in law, and gets pregnant by him in the course of time. Rama, having no alternative, as due to excessive drinking her husband grows impotent, accepts this illicit relationship. This play openly

exhibits the sexual relationships, the scenes of violence, and abusive language that shocks the sensibility of its viewers that is never shown nor depicted before in the Indian Theatre.

Depiction of Rebellious Youth

Through *Sakharam Binder* (1972) Tendulkar seems to present the angry, frustrated, rebellious youth of contemporary society. The protagonist Sakharam is against the established morals of the society and shocks the sensibility of the conventional readers by rejecting the accepted and established norms, conventions and moral values. The marriage institution remains an insignificant thing for *Sakharam*. He establishes a rapport with a woman who is deserted by her husband and likes to live with him without getting into wedlock.

Shailaja B. Wadikar rightly quotes him, ‘a foul mouthed womanizer’ (Wadikar, 2008). He pretends to be a savior of the women but actually he is just an egoistic epicure. He is the master of the house and the woman has to obey his word like a slave. She has to satisfy his excessive physical lust and provide him with domestic comforts ungrudgingly, thus, it’s a contractual arrangement based on mutual understanding with a woman in all her helplessness.

Laxmi is the seventh woman in this series of helpless women. She brings positive change in Sakha’s life but that relationship lasts for a short period of time. Though, he becomes religious and family loving man but her rejection to join Daud, his Muslim friend's company in the prayer of lord Ganpati annoys Sakharam and makes him violent. Then, Champa enters in his life, all the good changes ends with her arrival, as he grows more violent, aggressive and full of sensual passion. The play depicts the triangular relationship between Sakharam, Laxmi, and Champa as this relationship. is one of the victims and victimizer. Champa pities Laxmi and gives her shelter,

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whereas Laxmi, once presented an ideal, religious Indian woman turns out to be wicked and vicious when Champa becomes her rival in love. It is Laxmi, who informs Sakharam about the illicit relationship of Champa's, is responsible for her murder. But this tender and religious lady shows a greater presence of mind than Sakharam after Champa's murder. The pathetic condition of women in utter helplessness is explored in this play. Champa's character exhibits women's torture at different levels as she suffers at the hands of her mother, her husband, her male companion, and at the end, her female companion also. Both the female characters i.e. Champa and Laxmi, suffer sexually, physically and psychologically at the hands of Sakharam, for he gives them shelter and they just receive it in their utter helplessness.

The Question of Self-awareness

Tendulkar points out that 'marriage is an institution in which sexual relationship for a woman is possible only if the self is forgotten in the stupor of alcohol, pleasure is possible only through inflicting pain on the others and 'self-awareness' is nothing but the mute and moron like acceptance of inhuman subordination or supremacy' (Burman, 2006). There are certain incidents like playing on mridanga, rejection to Champa's touch on the morning of Dashera festival, for she doesn't have a bath and feelings for Laxmi that she is far different from the previous women in his life show the goodness and sensitivities of Sakharam's heart. It proves Sakharam a victim of bitter circumstances not of his inherent weaknesses, thus the playwright presents life in all its ugliness and crudity. Such a naked reality despite the fact that it is inevitable is still difficult to believe. Again audience is left to ponder about the removal of such rubbish from the society.

Real Life Story as a Play

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The play *Kamala* (1981) is also based on a real life incident. Ashwin Sarin, the then correspondent of the Indian Express bought a girl from rural flesh market and presented her at the press conference. By giving a glimpse of this real life incident, the playwright presents the ghastly flesh market, a harsh reality of our society. Vijay Tendulkar attacks on twin issues, i.e. the field of journalism and the institution of marriage. Jaisingh Jadhav, the journalist brings a girl from a rural flesh market and presents her at the press conference. He does not have any motive to reform Kamala's life but only a means by which he can get promotion in his job and win reputation in his professional career. His craze for name and fame has transformed him loveless and mindless fellow.

This play points out an unbearable fact that newspaper, the so called means of social reform, is transformed into an object of getting self and power. Simultaneously, here Vijay Tendulkar has attacked on the marriage institution. Sarita, Jaisingh's wife is an embodiment of the women is used either as slaves, menial servants, or stepping stones of their male counterparts. Kamala's entry in her house reveals to Sarita her husband, Jaisingh's egoistic, deceitful nature. Kamala makes Sarita conscious that she is the slave of her husband. Jaisingh treats both Kamala and Sarita not as human beings, but as objects of exhibition. The former brings him promotion in his job and reputation in his professional career and the latter provides him with domestic comfort and sexual pleasure in conjugal life.

The play thus, exposes slavery of women in the male dominated society in India. Kamala makes Sarita conscious that she is the slave of her husband Jaisingh. Kamala's views on the subject how both of them have to adjust with Jaisingh are like a revelation for Sarita. She says,

'Memsahib, if you don't misunderstand, I'll tell you, the master bought you, he bought me,

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to..... So, Memsahib, both of us must stay here together like sisters. We will keep the master happy... Fifteen days of the month, you will sleep with the master; the other fifteen I'll sleep with him' (p.35).

The women characters in the play depict simplicity, innocence, sincerity, generosity and the spirit of devotion to their male companions. The character of Sarita suggests that even a modern woman is not so free as her male-counterpart in contemporary society, as she has to follow her husband's whims and caprices in and outside the household life. Sarita becomes aware of the fact that her dignity or position in the house is not far away from Kamala's. Instead of rebelling against her husband, she provides him an emotional support, when he is fired.

Towards the end of the play *Kamala*, she tells Kakasaheb '...a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave'(p.52). Vijay Tendulkar exhibits selfishness and hypocrisy of the modern young generation, and brings out the oppressive nature of contemporary society. Jaisingh Jadhav is the representative of the modern hypocritical society, where the craze for both money and success renders him loveless and mindless.

Becoming Victims of Their Own

Kanyadaan (1983), perhaps one of the most controversial plays of Vijay Tendulkar, exposes the characters becoming victims of their own sham and hollow idealism, as it reveals how a father's idealism becomes a cause of misery for her own daughter. It is a story of a middle class family, where a daughter takes a decision of an intercaste marriage, as she is very much influenced by the idealism of her father and mother. Nath is an MLA and Seva, his wife, is a social activist. They cannot spend sufficient time for the upbringing of their children, Jyoti and

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Jaiprakash. Both father and mother are very sincerely working for the upliftment of Dalit but differ in their views, opinions and approaches. Seva objects Jyoti's decision of marrying a Dalit boy and tries her best to warn her about the risk involved. But it is the support of her father; Jyoti marries Arun and later on faces the evil consequences of her decision as feared by her mother. The play draws attention towards Jyoti's decision to get married to Arun Athawale, a young Dalit poet. Since, he believes that society cannot be transformed through words alone.

This relation of Jyoti, a Brahmin girl and Arun, a Dalit boy provides an opportunity to follow the old social reformers who not only delivered speeches and wrote articles on the remarriages of widows but also married them. So, the marriage follows, but further what follows is the sequence of violence, misery and disillusionment. Arun always remains conscious of her lower class origin and inflicts cruelties and miseries on Jyoti. He never tries to change his opinion that there cannot be any give and take between the Dalit and the upper class. He comes to the conclusion that the Dalit cannot fit into the Brahmins "unwrinkled Tinopal world" (p.513).

Revenge through Marriage

So, 'this matrimonial life is a kind of revenge that he seeks on the Brahmins for having humiliated and exploited his forefathers for centuries'. Jyoti's mother and brother make effort to rescue her from the horrible sufferings by denying for this relation as they can see the misery that may fall upon her life after marriage, but her father compels her to go with Arun, as he is not ready to give up his ideals. What he believes is that, 'No man is fundamentally evil; he is good' (p.563). However, her idealist father who dreams of a casteless society appreciates her decision.

Soon it is realized that all the attempts of Jyoti proves senseless wastage to translate her father's dreams or idealistic values into reality.

However, with passage of time Nath realizes the hollowness of his idealism, he fails to comprehend Arun's split personality. The idealism and teaching of his father 'that it is cowardly to bow to the circumstances', stops Jyoti to get back. She is reminded of the lines from one of Kusumagraja's poems which her father recites 'I march with utter faith in goal; I grow with rising hopes, cowards stay ashore, every wave opens a path for me (p.365).

Towards the end of the play, Nath suggests Jyoti to give up the ideals, but she rejects it for she thinks it cowardly to surrender to circumstances. It is the piteous and helpless state of Jyoti's father that he becomes a pathetic figure for he uses his daughter as a stepping stone to fulfil his utopian dream of a casteless society. This scene of father's helplessness reminds the reader of Shakespeare's famous lines from *King Lear*:

'Pray, do not mock me.

I am very foolish fond old man.'

Both the plays *Ghashiram Kotwal* and *Kanyadaan* portray fathers, as idealists, who use their daughters as stepping-stones in reaching their respective desired goals. *Kanyadaan* also throws light on the intercaste marriage of a Brahmin girl and a Dalit boy, who with his uncivilized inhuman ways sets his wife's life on torture.

Lesbianism

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The play *A Friend's Story* (2001) deals with a bold theme of lesbianism. Sumitra Dev, i.e. Mitra is the central character around whom the action of play moves round. The playwright develops the character of Mitra, through the comments of Bapu, another important character, who is like a sutradhar in Sanskrit plays or that of chorus in Greek plays. The subject matter of the play is different as well as daring. Mitra is portrayed as having physical hormonal imbalance. She is conscious of the fact that she is different from other girls having a stubborn nature like that of a boy. She is reckless in the sense of being quite careless of social norms and moral values.

At the very outset we come across with Bapu talking to himself. He is in the first year degree class. Sumitra comes from somewhere and joins the college as the second year B.A. student. While introducing her character, Bapu says, 'here was a masculine vigour in Sumitra Dev's stride and speech. She was carefree; her laughter came in loud bursts. She had eyes which met in straight combat'(p.419). Bapu comes across with her entire personality that had a natural, aggressive manliness. Mitra has masculine traits right from her childhood as she never feels shy to play games with boys. The elders in the family get worried about her and fixed her marriage with a boy. Mitra tries herself best, but she fails to develop man woman relationship. She does not feel any physical thrill or excitement in the close intimacy of men. It is only Bapu who accepts Mitra as a friend with all her deficiencies. Throughout this play it is only he who supports her. Very frankly, she confesses to Bapu the fact of being abnormal. He tries to understand her and sympathies with her. Infact, Mitra seems to be the one who caters to her own physical needs irrespective of what others may think of her behaviour. Bapu helps Mitra in her relationship with Nama although he is beaten and threatened. Nama in the beginning enjoys the

company of Mitra but very soon gets bored so she finds it difficult to cope with her. Nama lacks the courage to face the ultimate consequences.

Mitra becomes miserable due to her physical deformity. When it becomes an open secret, she is left alone to suffer in this apathetic world. Her family members remain indifferent towards her. When Mitra is rusticated from the college, her parents do not provide any emotional support. The situation becomes more pathetic when she is thrown out of her house and lives in women's hostel. Ultimately, Mitra commits suicide.

Through the character of Mitra, Tendulkar throws light on the total indifference and apathy shown towards her by the society. The whole discussion above leads one to say what Emile Zola states about naturalism, very well apt to Tendulkar's plays. According to Emile Zola, 'It is necessary to accept nature as she is, without modifying her. The work becomes an official record, nothing more; its only merit is that of exact observation of life as it is' (Lahr, 1972). This is a play where life is presented as it is, with all its drawbacks, vices and weaknesses. The audience is left to find out their own remedies for the problems that remain burning in all the times and climes. The analytical studies of Vijay Tendulkar's plays reveals that the dramatist has a desire to strive for perfection of life like Chekhov, he aims at creating a kind of emotionally refined, integrated and conscious world (Wadikar, 2008).

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