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IS VIOLENCE INHERENT IN HUMAN NATURE? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF VIJAY
TENDULKAR'S *SAKHARAM BINDER*

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Abstract

Philosophers like Thomas Hobbes propounded violence to be an inherent aspect of human nature. Naturalists, on the other hand, believed human nature to be a construct of his environment. The paper analyses Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* to understand the violent aspect of human nature through the characters presented in the play. The contention of this paper is to see if Tendulkar solves or further problematizes the issue of basic human nature by delving into the element of violence present in human mind through his plays. This paper will attempt to see whether the bestial nature of man is due to intrinsic element of violence present in human mind or is the violent aspect of human nature result of some external factors.

Keywords: Violence, Human Mind, Human Nature, Power.

Vijay Tendulkar was one of the leading playwrights of the Experimental Theatre in Maharashtra which began during mid-twentieth century in opposition to the Mainstream Marathi Theatre. Shanta Gokhale in her book *Playwright at the Centre* says, "It is a strange fact of the history of Marathi theatre that a genre (Realism) which was to become a staple in the times to come, began as an experiment" (96). Realism in Indian Theatre was inspired by European concept of Realism in Theatre. The plays written in Marathi before mid-twentieth century drew their themes from mythology and history. With the beginning of the Parallel Theatre the focus shifted to contemporary life.

Vijay Tendulkar objectively portrayed contemporary life in his plays. He brought out the harsh and sordid realities of life through his plays. He

was not only a Realist but also a Naturalist. Tendulkar once said, "I am interested in human mind" (Chaterjee 16). He tried to dissect human psyche through the characters of his plays. One of the major criticisms of Realism and Naturalism has always been the presentation of gloomy and pessimistic aspects of life. Tendulkar became a controversial figure for the depiction of violence in his plays especially because of the play *Sakharam Binder*. Arundhati Banerjee pointed out, "one of the reasons why there was such a reaction against *Sakharam Binder* was its burning naturalism. Here was a raw chunk of life with all its ugliness which was more than a shock to refined and prudish middle class audience"(xv). Tendulkar considered violence to be an important aspect of human mind. In an interview with Shukla Chaterjee he said,

"An element of violence is there in human mind. And their different expressions come through my plays. It has been happening even before I was born and it is happening now". (16)

Tendulkar's views on violence show some consonance with Thomas Hobbes' views expressed in his famous work *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes' central argument can be summed up as: man's essential nature is bestial and each man in this world is against another. According to Hobbes there is a need of an authority over men in order to prevent disorder in the world. He thus justifies the need of a 'Social Contract' in his work. One can infer from Tendulkar's statement and Hobbes' argument that the element of violence in human mind is responsible for the bestial aspect of human nature.

Hobbes said, "the condition of Man is a condition of War of every one against every one" (72). This statement sounds similar to the concept of 'Survival of the Fittest' proposed by Charles Darwin in his theory of Evolution. Evolution is a form of struggle between fellow beings of the same species and the members of the other species. And out of this struggle only the fittest being is naturally selected to survive. In order to survive organisms adapt themselves according to their environment. Naturalists were influenced by Darwin's theory and presented the characters of their works as products of their heredity and environment. Naturalists present human beings in relation to their environment but they do not determine the basic human nature as Hobbes does by stating that the primary nature of humans is bestial. The contention of this paper is to see if Tendulkar solves or further problematizes the issue of basic human nature by delving into the element of violence present in human mind through his plays. This paper will attempt to see whether the bestial nature of man is due to intrinsic element of violence present in human mind or is the violent aspect of human nature result of some external factors. It will also present alternative views on the essential character of human nature. All this will be discussed by looking at the characters of Tendulkar's play *Sakharam Binder*.

"*Sakharam Binder* is probably Tendulkar's most intensely naturalistic play" (Banerjee xiii). Tendulkar objectively portrays all the characters in the play without passing any kind of moral judgment over them. Sakharam, the protagonist of the play, is the anti-thesis of the general idea of a member of Brahmin caste. He himself says in the play that he is a Mahar born in a Brahmin house. Through Sakharam, Tendulkar explores the demonstration of lust and physical violence. Sakharam is of the view that human beings are no Saints. Man according to him is a slave of his desires and these desires are provided by God itself.

Sakharam does not believe in the institution of marriage. He is aware that man and woman need each other for the fulfillment of certain needs but for that they do not need to get married according to him. The institution of marriage is deconstructed through Sakharam's character. He is of the view that a husband never treats his wife with love and care. In a patriarchal society wives are just dirt for their husbands. Binder brings home cast off women and provides them with material goods required for living and he fulfils his bodily hunger through them. Champa says in the play, "your Sakharam, he really takes his money's worth out of a woman" (181).

Although Sakharam does not get tied up in marriage, he is no less than a typical husband of a patriarchal society. He imposes a number of restrictions on the women he brings home and violently beats them. He ill treats them physically and sexually in return for the material comforts he provides them. But Sakharam is not a hypocrite. He is what he is and he admits that.

Sakharam is a very complex character. It is difficult to understand the cause of his bestial nature. It is mentioned in the play that he was ill treated by his father during his childhood and even society did not accept him as the kind of man that he was. This could be taken as a reason for his bestial nature. But, is this reason enough to account for the bestiality of his character?

Thomas Hobbes was of the view that there is a need of some authority which man can fear and this authority is needed to control the bestial nature of man. But what if an authority/some institution of

society gives more power to man instead of limiting his power? Patriarchy is one such institution.

The institution of Patriarchy suppresses the power of women but it provides a license to men to dominate women. Men in a patriarchal society thus get the right to commit violence against women. Sakharam is fully aware of his power as a man in the play. He knows that when it comes to his house he is the Master and women he brings are his slaves. He expects those women to treat him as their Master. In the beginning of the play, he commands Laxmi, "I'm the master here. I don't care if they treat me like dirt outside" (124). In a patriarchal society, when it comes to man-woman relationship, man always exercises his power over woman no matter whether he is able to exercise his power outside his house or not. Binder's dialogue, "You'll have to make food yourself. That's a woman's job, and women must do their own jobs. That is the rule around here" (161), clears out that Sakharam is a construct of patriarchal society. He ill-treats women he brings home because he is 'the man' who has been given power in a patriarchal society.

Kamla Bhasin, a leading feminist and activist, in an episode of *Sataymev Jayate*, equated the relation of violence to power. She is of the view that men in a patriarchal society are violent because they have been granted power over women. And because of this power the rate of violence committed by men is rising in society. She is also of the view that socially constructed notion of 'Masculinity' grants the right to be violent to men. This view of her expresses the views of various other feminists. Hamilton McCubbin and Barbara Dahl, in an essay "Sex Roles", describe how gender roles are constructed by society and culture. They say in the essay, "The script comes from social expectations about masculine and feminine nature: men should be brave, strong, ambitious, and aggressive, while keeping their feelings under control; women should be gentle, nurturant, passive, dependent, and expressive of their feelings" (189).

Kamla Bhasin further says in the same episode that in a patriarchal society women are not allowed to be violent and aggressive but as soon as a woman is granted some power she turns

aggressive. She gives example of a mother-in-law who exercises power over her daughter-in-law. Here again her views are in consonance with McCubbin and Dahl's views as they explain in the essay how in certain tribes which are matriarchal, women are dominant and aggressive whereas men in those tribes acquire the sub-ordinate roles that women have in patriarchy.

The notion of masculinity in a patriarchal society allows men to be aggressive. In fact, sometimes aggressiveness is the only emotion allowed to men, other emotions like gentleness, pity etc being reserved for women. Binder, thus, can be seen as the product of the society he lives in. Bhasin says that violence has a direct relation with power. Man or woman whosoever gets power will turn aggressive. But how can power influence one so much? Thomas Hobbes statement, "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (55), could be taken as an explanation for this.

But this issue gets further complicated here. If desire for power is inherent in man and if man's essential nature is bestial as Hobbes points out, then it could be said that social constructs and environment act only as catalysts to bring out the violent nature of man to the front. Bhasin's views on the other hand inclines with the view of Naturalism that man is the product of his environment. The notions of masculinity and femininity are not natural as Bhasin points out but are constructed by a society. Thus different social constructions of different societies lend human beings various traits of his/her character including violence.

Manchi Sarat Babu in his book *Indian Drama Today* analyzes Tendulkar's plays along with plays of other dramatists by applying Claude M Steiner's concept of six maladies generated by culture as given in his book *Scripts People Live*. According to Steiner culture suppresses human nature and distorts human personality in different ways thus resulting in various kinds of cultural deformities. Babu derives a paradigm to study cultural milieu of Indian society through Steiner's observations. Babu analyzes the characters of the play *Sakharam Binder*

on the basis of gender deformity and physical deformity. The concept of gender deformity again describes how notions of masculinity and femininity do not allow the true nature of man to come out and what comes out in obedience to these notions is deformed. Babu explains Binder's and Champa's characters to be the result of physical deformity. He is of the view that various divisions of society bring out alienation of mind from body in individuals resulting in physical deformity. People then find life joyless and meaningless and take to liquor, loveless sex and idealism to overcome meaninglessness of life. Babu says in his book:

"Human beings have to strip their souls of all enveloping cultural layers and reach the inner core, their true nature, humanness on one hand, and, on the other, they have to dissolve their cultural world in order to reintegrate with Nature ... Until then, people will continue to suffer from various hydra headed problems caused by our cultural deformity".(16)

Babu thus holds culture responsible for the deformed nature of man. By keeping his viewpoints in mind one can say that Binder's nature has been deformed by the culture and society he lives in. Babu describes humanness as the true nature of humans in contrast to Hobbes' viewpoints. One can then analyze that Sakharam's humanness has been deformed. Sakharam's treatment of men as equals irrespective of their religion and caste hints at his humanness. All this raises the question, Is Sakharam inherently humane or inherently violent? Or is it just the environment that shapes human nature?

The two female characters of the play need to be studied to understand the questions being raised about human nature. Laxmi and Champa in the play act as foil to each other. Laxmi is humane, gentle, religious and is bound in tradition. She talks to animals but at times fails to show sympathy towards humans. She cannot accept a Muslim (Dawood) performing Ganpati Puja. She suffers physical and sexual abuse at the hands of Sakharam but still keeps a mangalsutra for him.

Champa as opposed to Laxmi drinks liquor, uses abusive language and does not believe in

religion. She is well aware of the realities of life. She says to Laxmi, "They don't come and live your hell for you-those gods and Brahmins" (180). She leaves her husband after going through excessive torture. She comes with Sakharam because she knows that she needs food and shelter for her survival. She gives in to Sakharam's sexual advances but she sleeps with him only after nullifying her senses by drinking alcohol. She says, "Instead of having ten beasts tearing at me every day, I'd rather do what one says to me" (184). Champa is not an evil character. She gives Laxmi shelter when she needs it. Champa is what her circumstances have made her. Champa's character has been realistically drawn out. She is a grey character like human beings in real life. Tendulkar was of the view:

"A human being is again a complex entity by itself. It cannot take away anything by one's being good or bad, cruel or kind or whatever. Can be both at the same time. This complexity is something that appeals me". (Chaterjee 16)

The complexity of Laxmi's character further problematizes the issue of human nature. Laxmi's revelation of Champa's affair with Dawood to Sakharam makes Sakharam outrageous and in rage he kills Champa. But Sakharam is left in a state of shock after killing Champa. Laxmi, however, gains a new kind of strength and asks Sakharam to bury Champa inside the house so that nobody could doubt them. When Sakharam is unable to recover from the state of shock, she herself starts digging Champa's grave. How does the bestial nature of Laxmi come out? Is it because of the suffering she has gone through? But Champa helped Laxmi when she was in need. Then how could she turn violent towards her. The ending of the play by bringing out the violent side of Laxmi complicates the issue and again raises the question if the element of violence is actually intrinsic in human mind.

The play problematizes the issue of violent human nature. The characters of the play seem to be products of their surroundings, environment, culture, and society. But at times one wonders if it is actually so or is violence inherent in the characters. Tendulkar offers no answer to the question: from

where does that violence come in the characters? Whether that violence is inherent or product of environment? He said that he wrote about things from his personal understanding and presented in his plays what he saw in life around him. Tendulkar was interested in human mind and he dissected human mind through his plays. He saw violence as an important aspect of human mind. And as a Realist and a Naturalist he gave an objective account of it in his plays. He gives expression to violence in his plays because he saw it in life around him. He does not try to trace the origin and cause of violence present in human nature nor does he try to propose some theory to explain it. His own words sum up his understanding of human mind and his approach towards it:

“It (Theatre) led me to make newer and newer discoveries in the vast realm of the human mind which still defies all available theories and logic. It is an ever-intriguing puzzle or a jungle which you can enter but has no way out”. (“The Play is the Thing” 58)

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