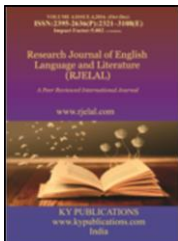




## DRAMATISTS AS HUMANISTS: READING VIJAY TENDULKAR, MANJULA PADMANABHAN AND MAHESH DATTANI'S PLAYS

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### ABSTRACT

Plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani are in the vanguard of Indian Dramatic Literature. Their plays with progressive ideas though got opposing verdicts from the conservative Indians, do not failed to bag international accolades for their acute social realism. When social realism has become a strong force in dramatic creations, they cautiously indulged in exploring beyond its limits. Though the playwrights embraced different spheres of human existence, Vijay Tendulkar – domestic sphere, Mahesh Dattani – social sphere, and Manjula Padmanabhan – scientific sphere, their oeuvre exhibit a deep concern for the welfare of human society. Spreading non-violence turns to be the core theme of their writings irrespective of the subject matter. This paper aims at hinting at the presence of staunch humanism in their plays.

**Keywords:** Violence against humanity, Bystander apathy, Issues of Indian Society, Need for Humanity.

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Humanist writings, though the boundaries of humanism are plain, call upon constructive attitudinal changes in humanity. To quote Davies: "the very idea of humanity, is in real, may be terminal, trouble, and that we have no one to blame but ourselves, no resources to call on but our own ... Fuelled by outrage and invigorated by bitter irony, *writing of this kind draws from a deep well of humanist protest.*" (Davies 134; emphasis added) Such humanistic ideals have found profound expression in more literary works than in philosophical treatises. Literature for ages is in defence of humanity. Since time immemorial, role of literature and arts in injecting humane values and virtues and moralizing mankind is peerless. Literary artists deem literature as the fittest to speak for the

subalterns. They weaponize literature to actuate mankind into the path of righteousness.

The role played by dramatic literature in doing so seems inevitable than any other genre as it delights and teaches both the literates and the illiterates. It is surprising to note that the presence of the variants of humanistic concepts even in the classical plays of Indian origin. Indian Dramatic Literature in English also packs the glory of promoting humanistic values right from the beginning. On the prospect of "Indian drama", K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar justifiably remarks that, it "was expected to comprehend whole arc of life ranging from the material to the spiritual, the phenomenal to the transcendent and provide at once relaxation and entertainment, instruction and illumination

(1).During the Pre-independence phase, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, the “big three amongst English knowing audience, made an epoch-making and abiding contribution” to the development of Indian humanism (Dharan 17). Moved by the human basis of western dramaturgy that emphasized on real-life problems and of Indian model that aims at leading through pleasure to serenity and ultimately to peace, they fused the best of both together in their plays.

For instance, Sri Aurobindo’s *Perseus the Deliverer* underlines the idea of humane love as the benevolent force to destroy the social evils and conflicts; Rabindranath Tagore’s *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders)* “is a symbolic presentation of the triumph of humanistic values over soul-killing Mammonism”(Naik 102: 1982). And, Chattopadhyaya’s *The Sleeper Awakened* satirically allegorizes the evils of modern civilization and exposes the pathetic lives of the poor. The other notable plays with humanistic vigour are A. S. Panchapakesa Ayyar’s *The Trail of Science for the Murder of Humanity* and *In the Clutch of the Devil* which critiques “the ungodly and superstitious practices involving witchcraft and ritualistic murder current in contemporary rural south India” (Naik 147: 1982). Thyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam’s *Karna* or *The Brahman’s Curse* is a miniature of spiritual humanism. Joseph Mathias Lobo-Prabhu’s *Flags of the Heart* “is a sentimental presentation of love thwarted by caste, with a dash of terrorism deepening its already garish colours.”(Naik 151: 1982) And, Bharati Sarabhai’s *The Well of The People* possesses a distinct impact of Gandhian humanism.

As postulated by M. K. Naik, Indian English Drama remained the most neglected art among the genres of Indian English Literature until the emergence of modern dramatists especially Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani, Dina Mehta, and Manjula Padmanabhan. Their contribution assured that no longer Indian English Drama will be a Cindrella of Indian English Literature. This paper analyses the plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani. It strives to demonstrate how they prompt the readers to take humane initiatives to save the

future humanity from growing violence.

Tendulkar, the Marathi playwright’s name should be held first not only in chronological terms but also for his endeavour to infuse modern themes into traditional Indian theatre. The extremist social and political views, revolutionary themes and radical ideals presented in his plays earned him the name, ‘An Angry Young Man of India’. He, the avid observer of his society, has realistically recorded the gloomiest facets of India in his plays. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Kamala*, and *The Vultures* the author illustrates how women are inhumanely treated in the domestic and social spheres. He registers his contempt for gender-violence through his mouthpiece Sarita:

Why can’t a woman at least ask to live her life the same way as a man? Why must only a man have the right to be a man ... A woman can do everything a man can...those who do manly things should be equal to men. Those who don’t, are women. And there will be some among them who have beards and moustaches too. (CPI 47)

The innocent protagonist of these plays – Leela Benare – a victim of child sexual abuse, Kamala – a victim of sexism, Rama – a victim of marriage institution are subjugated to violence and relentlessly exploited by the male – oriented society for no fault of their own. Besides exposing the inherently vicious and destructive nature of human psyche, the author depicts how the humans’ excessive desire for fame and money gradually transforms them into loathsome animals.

The author attacks discriminatory practices on the basis of caste consciousness, gender-bias and religious beliefs in *Kanyadaan*, *My Friend’s Story* and *His Fifth Woman* respectively. Through the characters – Jyoti, Mitra and Fifth – who become the victims of whimsical socio-cultural-traditional persecutions the dramatist explores how women become the eventual victim of caste-based violence. He strongly believes that one day such caste-religion and racial discrimination and untouchability will come to end. He assures “You will see! You are

denying all of human culture and civilization which man has evolved over the years... (CPiIT 554) *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Sakharam Binder* and *The Cyclist* stand individually on thematic levels. *Ghashiram Kotwal* reveals political incongruities and wily nature of politicians through the historical character, Nana Phadnavis who deceptively makes use of his citizenry to achieve his selfish motives and preys on young gullible like Gauri to satisfy his starve for lust. Besides projecting the power politics, it also acknowledges that how women are treated like playthings in the hands of those (Nana and Ghasiram) male power-mongers for centuries. Through this play the author criticizes the contemporary socio-political circumstances where justice has become a weasel word and favours only the opportunists.

And, in *Sakharam Binder* the author presents yet another victim of child abuse, Sakharam. He, unable to bear with his father's inhumane thrashing runs away from home and turns into a more aggressive and violent man. His coarse childhood experience changes him into a uncultured man who never bothers about religion, custom, culture and tradition. He both accuses the patriarchal society that humiliates women and also indulges in the bedevilment of deserted women whom he takes as contract-sexual partners. Laxmi and Champa are equally genuine and their fiendishness is not inbuilt but the result of the awful experiences and abdominal treatment that they encountered. Through depicting the naked realities of life with its ugliness and crudity in this play, Tendulkar demands the audience to find ways to humanize the growing barbarism of the contemporary society.

*The Cyclist* is probably Tendulkar's last but hard-hitting play written on the theme of existentialism. It is about a psychological journey of an adult named MC who is confined at home by his overprotective parents. But the MC, the aspiring adult to know the unknown domains gets locked into the complexities and mulish attitudes that have imbued the bourgeois society.

The play unravels man's dehumanization in the face of society, through a series of encounters which, though apparently real,

keep on getting increasingly surreal and hallucinatory...it is an honest search ...to comprehend the mystery called life. (TP xi)

In short, it is an excellent allegory on the individuals who are doleful, frustrated and frightened to face the injustices of the outside world.

Mahesh Dattani, a promising playwright of this century, has chronicled the latent follies, foibles and prejudices that permeate the Indian society. He calls those lingering issues against which his predecessors voiced, 'invisible issues' of Indian society. He dramatizes everything that affects the humanity in large scale. His *Final Solutions* seeks to moralize man who wars in the name of religion. It remains a powerful plea against politicians who make use of this religious contempt between groups to reap their fortune. Bobby, the Muslim picking the image of Krishna on his palm speaks:

Look how He rests in my hands! ...He smiles! He smiles at our trivial pride and our trivial shame... See, Javad! He doesn't humiliate you. He doesn't cringe from my touch. He welcomes the warmth of my hand. He feels me... I hold Him who is sacred to them, but I do not commit sacrilege... (*To Aruna*) You can bathe him day and night... but you cannot remove my touch from his form. You cannot remove my smell with sandal paste and attars and fragrant because it belongs to a human being who believes, and tolerates, and respects what other human beings believe. That is the strongest fragrance in the world. (224)

Thus, the author establishes that God is love. All on earth are His children. God loves those who love their fellow beings.

Through *Tara*, another notable play, he reprimands the notion of gender-bias. *Thirty Days in September* contemplates how child sexual abuse is at peak. His concern for humanity is apparent through his controversial plays, *Seven Steps around the Fire*, *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* and *Do the Needful* where he takes up the existential problems of eunuchs, gays, lesbianism heterosexuals and homosexuals. Their origin on earth can be traced from all religious scriptures such as the Quran, the

Bible and the Ramayana and other Hindu scriptures. Hinduism worships Hijras as Arthanariswara, an incarnation of Siva and Parvathi, there are so many verses on these people in other two scriptures though they did not accept them. Indian history says, these people were respected the most everywhere and they served as ministers to kings and queens. Hence, it is clear that they are also part of the nature. But, they are subjected to persecution.

*Bravely Fought the Queen, Dance like a Man* and *Where there's a Will* enquires the roots of the age old notions on woman as weaker sex. All such neglected themes neuter sexuality (*Mango Souffle*), diseases with social stigmas like aids (*Ek Alag Mausam*), religious fundamentalism (*The Swami and Winston*) are dealt in-depth by him. His radio plays, *Clearing the Rubbles*, and *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* demonstrate the need for humane compassion. Here, Dattani takes a dig at the society for discriminating against the poor and the minorities on religious grounds. And, *The Tale of a Mother Feeding Her Child* which was commissioned to mark the 600<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Geoffrey Chaucer remains the embodiment of human love which binds people across the world together irrespective of colour and race differences.

Manjula Padmanabhan's, the author of universally acclaimed play, *Harvest* comes then. She wrote it for the Onassis Theatre competition on the theme of "the challenges facing humanity in the next century." (HAR 4) It is the criticism of life on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her plays project the totally dehumanized, terrifying world which is devoid of even the basic human values. She too like Vijay Tendulkar has modeled her plays on real incidents. The theme of human organ trade came to her from the firsthand information that she got from the clients of kidney transplant surgery who lured the poor rural Indians into donating their organs for the trivial sum of 20,000.

This futuristic play consists of characters that are divided into two groups – the Donors from Bombay, and the Receivers from North America. Jobless Om, the poverty stricken protagonist sells his organs to somebody in the west through the brokerage agency called the Inter Planta Services for

livelihood. Soon the whole family falls as a prey to the foreign militants. In reality it criticizes the popular Indian notion that finding job in foreign countries would make their life flourishing. But, each fails to realize that actually they are risking their lives for livelihood and gradually the developed countries are trying to economically colonize us again in the name of globalization.

*Lights out*, her another notable play satirizes the so called modern man who feels comfortable in being a silent spectator of evils that happens around him. This is an account of an urban middle class couple – Leela and Bhaskar– who board a flat in an apartment in Bombay. Regularly during the night times they witness the brutalization of women by a gang of rogues in a nearby under-construction building. Pathetically enough the inhabitants indulge in gossiping variously about that incident but none of them comes to the rescue of the victimized women. Though Leela who psychologically agonizes throughout the play appeals her husband to call police, he neglects that telling, "What about the neighbours... why haven't they complained? (7)." The author censures the inhumane tendencies of modern man who uses their powers not to defy criminal acts but to subdue female voices.

The end of the play with the death of one such woman victim though seems abrupt it symbolically opens way to multiple interpretation. Such an apathetic attitude towards others' suffering is the root cause of violence. This violence persists because we feel afraid of, turn silent, and lose our voices. But, everyone forgets that this indifference can cause more damage physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually to our society than those who commit crimes against humanity. The *Hidden Fires* which consists of five monologues reports how virulent is the virus of violence. These monologues question how violence manifests. She is impatient for change, to change the sense of otherness from human mind. She implores:

Here, there, everywhere ... fires (violence) were running this way and that, threatening our city, destroying our country. Some were actually aflame; others were just barely smoking. But all were

burning from within, lit by their own... otherness. When your life's in danger, you'll do anything to defend it, won't you? When your country's in danger, you'll do anything to protect it, won't you... the fire of otherness, a deadly scourge. But, there's a simple rule to follow: when you see a fire, stamp it out. (HF 3 – 4)

The playwright knows that the complete eradication of violence is impossible, but hopes that endeavouring to do so, possibly will bring some humanistic changes. Such a realistic portrayal of Indian society and the inhabitants' nonchalant way of living makes each reader to be aware of the awaiting doom. The author insists on getting them fixed through taking humanistic measures.

In her latest play, *Astro-Nuts: An Intergalactic Drama*, Padmanabhan makes an earnest appeal towards the present society to safeguard natural resources. This play abounds with the elements of existential humanism and neo humanism. According to the setting of the play, the people are living in a time when earth has made contact with ultra-advanced aliens who are technologically much advanced than the human beings. But, such advancement has never changed their attitude. When Intergalactic Union extended invitation to the representatives of the human (REPs) and non-human species (NHRs) from earth for the first general assembly of the Galactic Union, as usual, the human representatives – Vijay (United Asia), Astrid (United Europe), Mustafa (United Africa), Spitting Bull (North America), Maria (South America), Andy (Australia and New Zealand), Nanook (Unified Poles), Yoko (All Island Nations except England and United Pacific), Aku-Aku (United Pacific Poles), Tony (England), and Alpha (Moon Colony) – carried with them all their 'opposing opinions, narrow views... conspiracies familiar to [human] species.

They indulged in squabbles over the racist, colour and historical injustices for which they are the sole responsible. They referred to the modern existential issues such as nuclear holocaust, genocide, disease like Aids, discrimination, racist and colour prejudices and wanted the unknown organizers of the assembly to find solution. Their

excitement over attending an intergalactic assembly gets nullified when they are told that not all the representatives but one from earth will be permitted to address the assembly. Even before they realize that each of their contrived plan to deceive one another has been thwarted, the next announcement comes. According to that, not a REP but an NHR – (Billie, Bowzer, Nandi, Rauf), birds (Mittoo) and insects (Flit) – will be given chance to be the representative of Earth. This leaves them in a total dismay. They mock at the choice as these animals are incapable of understanding anything. There ensues a brawl between REPs and NHRs.

Padmanabhan should have made such a comparison between the REPs and NHRs to reinstate the idea that humans are responsible for all the environmental and existential issues. This play makes it clear that human with all their scientific and technological inventions have been the cause for all the environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, depletion of natural resources, global warming. At the end, Rauf's address clarifies it.

...I am the last of a race of snow dwellers who once ranged across the entire northern ice-bound region of our planet. Over the past two centuries... Our habitat has been destroyed; our prey animals have all but vanished. We starve slowly in the great white silence. We have no idea what the cause of our troubles is. IF there was a foe whom we could fight, then we would fight. But our foe is invisible! He attacks us without mercy! And so we are lost... Perhaps there are greater and more intelligent reasons for saving a plant than my reason... There are ... so many creatures, so many lives – and maybe each one would have a different story to tell, a different request to make. (62)

Yet, Rauf knows that "his race has declined to the point of no return," and none can rescue his species from being extinct, makes this plea towards the Intergalactic Union that "My world is beautiful. It is worth saving. Even if you can't save me, save my world." (63) But, the human species never even thought of this. This account quite reveals how

human society is insensitive towards the environmental issues. Through this play, Padmanabhan implicitly implores the human society to be responsible and to save the world and its resources.

Thus, the authors attempt to make each individual conscious about their society. They urge the audience to ponder over their problems and devise solutions. The real life situations and events presented in their plays authentically postulate the need for attitudinal change in the modern humanity. They write to relieve the subaltern from religious, customary, and economic bondages; to bring about a silent and positivistic change in the attitude and behaviour of the masses towards their fellow-beings; to recreate a new nation with a social order founded on equity, justice, dignity and peace; to ensure peaceful coexistence of the entire human race; to optimize the potentials of the subaltern through taking measures to empower them. Though this concept of re-humanization seems to be a utopian thought, their plays exhibit that the need of it in the scientific world where humanness went missing.

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