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Satire and Irony in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

Dr. Kapil Singhel

Vasantrao Naik Government Institute of Arts and Social Sciences,
Nagpur
kapilsinghel@gmail.com

Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar's play, *Ghashiram Kotwal* is a bitter piece of mockery. It is the portrayal of the dwindling standards and degradation of society. The city of Poona, its mannerisms, conduct, the ways of the citizens, the chancellor and the ruler, all come under the awning of criticism. *Silence! The Court is in Session* is replete with humour, satire and irony. It directs its sardonic barbs mainly against the urban middle-class. In this play, Tendulkar creates humour and satire through characters, dialogues and situations. This paper posits the use of satire and irony to ridicule and suggest.

Key words: humour, satire, irony, degeneration, hypocrisy

In *Ghasiram Kotwal* the city of Poona is ruled by a defunct descendent of glorious Shivaji. The de facto ruler is Peshwa's chancellor who is an impetuous flooded committing sin. He is cunning, autocrat, sinful and unabashed man with little or no conscience. The people under such a ruler are likely to suffer perpetually and very likely to have the equal or lower standards of ethics. The priestly class under the tutelage of Nana has become arrogant, vicious and immoral. Instead of performance of religious ceremonies and listening to *Kirtans* they visit the prostitute's house in riotous mood and watch and perform *lavanis*. The contemporary Maratha society has so much disintegrated from its dignified position that the women have begun to engage other men to meet their demands. The Maratha *Sardars* are portrayed as charlatans, unscrupulous and pitiless. It is the proverbial 'might is right' for Poona. The civic management seems practically non-existent.

The most derisive attack comes on Nana Phadnavis, the middle-aged chancellor of the Peshwa. He is reprimanded and sternly disparaged

for his extreme unscrupulousness, devious nature and lustful attitude, which worsened to such an extent that he would not even, spare the girls fit to be his daughters or granddaughters. His desire for women goes to countless number of times and besides several paramours he has seven wives the youngest being the fourteen-year-old girl who is bought with gold and grant of land.

Under the administration of such lecher grows up the Kotwal of the city who is no better than him. Ruthless and savage as he is, he prosecutes the innocents and unleashes a reign of terror. The people are harassed-beaten and killed for faults or no faults. This man gives away his daughter to Nana to satisfy his base instincts and procure from him the Kotwali. Nana's hair is graying and teeth have begun to disappear from his mouth but the desire persists. And with his eyes closed he confers the Kotwali on him and sets him at the helm of tremendous powers. The consequences of such unrestrained powers are very likely to be not good. The city bleeds and suffers.

Ghashiram Kotwal shows the corrosion in values. The dilapidation and degeneration of society has been painted with a sharp pen. The same Ghashiram who wields so much of power becomes unarmed man and pushed in front of the mob by Nana. He raises him to a high position and then also becomes a cause for his humiliating fall. He castoffs Ghashiram when his purpose is achieved.

The satire runs at many levels. Initially, the Poona brahminy comes under its scathing attack and the vile Brahmins are exposed. The double speaks and dual standards are exposed by the Sutradhar in the expository scene only. With exception to none they are all drenched in immorality.

Night comes.

Poona Brahmins 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 Brahmins go to Bavannakhani (12)

Along with the Brahmins their wives are also mocked at. Men, as whoremongers as they were to be spent their time at Gulabi's place. They disdain towards their home and hearth pays off in the same way as their wives have done well to sleep with other men. The moral depravity and degeneration are punctuated with corruption everywhere. Lesser women with some moralities spend their time waiting for their loved ones to return home.

The two places viz; courtesan's house and the Krishna's garden are juxtaposed as the the Priestly class has shunned the integrity and chastity.

The gardens of Poona

Become the gardens of Mathura

Where Krishna played. (19)

The disorderly Brahmins find Nana Phadnavis a hero in their mad merriment. Though some semblance of order descends but the satire becomes all the more piercing and fixated at the prospect of being governed by a man no better than any other whoremonger.

The satire comes appositely in the lose morals of the people of Poona, situations and dialogues. The Sutradhar asks as to what happened.

Did he fall?

Tumbled down.

Slipped down.

Tripped down or did he put his foot wrong.
(28)

The last expression is portrayed as voluptuous images. The common corruption and fallen standards of the Brahmins is seen at another place just outside the park where royal honours are being bequeathed. The Brahmins fall over each other to get more and more. Those, who cannot get harass or curry the favours with others for petty gains. This is also a place to settle personal scores. One Brahman implicates the other by falsely shouting about his pocket being picked. Here Ghashi becomes the victim.

The scandal, exploitation and enticement that have beleaguered the police force is equally brought out with critical reproach. Tendulkar draws a parallel of the police then and today's as he finds their attitude as an extension of yesteryear's.

The troposphere of the court is not at all solemn. The dignity of the courtroom seems to be in shambles as witnesses vile each one another and the judge and the counsel is seen chewing betel leaves while others smoking. Instead of the Bhagwadgeeta , a copy of Oxford dictionary finds a place for the oath taking procedure . Such and many more frivolous tropes mock the trial. However, the author is very successful on exhibiting scores of laughter by creating a mockery of the judiciary too. Oxford Dictionary is kept in the place of Bhagavad Geeta for oath-taking.

The play is perceived as a game and the impression that all that is happening on the stage is

part-mock and part earnest gives the play its 'theatrical' edge. The mock-element permeates throughout. What the readers behold is a sheer representation of what is proposed to be a mock-trail to be staged later. The game order boosts the act somewhat since it offers so much scope for unimpeded physical movement. But the play and its structure revolve exclusively around the impression of a game and include the essential ingredient of 'reversal'. Benare, who is on the aggressive in the beginning, finds herself stuck at the close of the play. The harmless door-latch, which hurts her finger and draws her blood (as she enters the place with Saniant) later shuts the group in and in fact, takes on the dimension of a blockade. The confining atmosphere inside becomes the kind of setting where social masks are exposed off.

When the members of cast enter the room, we half anticipate mockery and geniality, as among friends. There is banter, no doubt, but alongside runs a strong streak of pettiness. Perhaps for them theatre activity has reduced itself to an escape from personal failures. Benare exposes that Sukhatme, in real life, is a lawyer without a brief, here he will be seen exploding to parade his knowledge of the legal process. Sukhatme, for his part, riles at Karnik's so called grasp of 'intimate' theatre. Supported by Balu Rokde, he has a dig at the unfortunate Ponkshe, who has, actually failed his Inter Science Exams but professes during the trial to be a scientific genius. Ponkshe, in turn, mocks at Rokde for his slavish dependence on the Kashikars. And the group unites to ridicule the absurd gestures of mutual devotion made by the couple and also their childlessness. The whole lot of them tries to execute Benare but at least in the first half of the play, she is able to out-smart them. The name of Prof. Damle, who does not turn up, hovers in the air, giving rise to some incomprehensible restlessness.

In the first act of the play Miss Benare gives a sarcastic travesty of her immediate colleagues. She calls Mr. Kashikar, 'Mr. Prime Objective' and Mrs. Kashikar. 'Mrs. Hand-that-Rocks-the-Cradle' who 'has no cradles to rock'. By this she implies that the couple is childless. They have adopted Balu Rokde not out of compassion for his poor condition but in order that nothing should happen to either of them

in their bare, bare house—and that they shouldn't die of boredom!' In the name of his adoption the self-styled social reformer Kashikar and his wife have made a slave of Rokde. Then we have Benare's sarcastic remark about Sukhatme

"Well, we have an expert on the law. He's such an authority on the subject. even a desperate client won't go anywhere near him! He just sits alone in the barrister's room at court. swatting flies with legal precedents! And in his tenement, his sits alone, killing houseflies! But for today's rock trial, he is a very great barrister." (29)

Through this Tendulkar makes light of the brief less lawyers like Sukhatme. In the second act of the play, Tendulkar beautifully includes the pan- spitting episode in the plot with a view to exposing the hypocrisy of the court that is bent upon exposing the private and personal affairs of Benare's life. It is highly ridiculous that judge Kashikar himself heads the pan-chewing gang in the court and grants adjournment of the court for this frivolous affair. He himself leaves the judge's chair and goes out to spit to check up the exact time required for spitting pan. Benare rightly asks the prosecutor Sukhatme whether it is a court of law or a spitting contest.

When Benare mediates in the court's proceedings by her offhand remarks, judge Kashikar issues her a rebuke. In return for this Benare goes to the judge's seat and issues him a sweet pan causing ripples of laughter in the court. Again when Mrs. Kashikar intervenes to make some comments now and again, she imitates the remarks of the judge and says

"Can't shut up at home, can't shut up here! [Imitating a lawyer] Milord, let the court's family be given a suitable warning. She has never committed the crime of infanticide. Or stolen any, public property except for Milord himself". (34)

This is an example of Tendulkar's humour arising out dialogue. Ponkshe who comes to the witness-box to overthrow as the first witness for the prosecution finds the Oxford English Dictionary instead of the Bhagavad Geeta because of the bungling of Balu

Rokde, the usherer of the court. So, he takes his oath on the Oxford English Dictionary making the accused Miss Benare herself laugh aloud. This is classic example of Tendulkar creating humour through situation. During his testimony Ponkshe ironically refers to halfway status:

"To the public eye, she is unmarried." Benare humorously retorts to him asking him what she is to the 'private eye'. (36)

Such retorts elevate the humour out of dialogue.

The author in the third act places all the characters in such a way that the audience are left in a splist of laughter. Balu Rokde who finds butterflies in his stomach on being a witness literally shivers to come to the witness-box and depose against Miss Benare. He invites the rage of judge Kashikar who calls him a clown. His nervous behaviour invites a funny situation in the court. The frequent quarrels in the open court between the Kashikars necessitating the intervention of Sukhatme produces a mockery of the court atmosphere. Ponkshe giving out his witness belching smoke out of his pipe, Sukhatme arguing while smoking his beedi and Mrs. Kashikar asking the prosecutor to hold her knitting while she makes her statement are all light-hearted travesty court procedures producing bone-tickling laughter. Samant who is totally new to the court procedures contributes richly to general stock of humour in the play. When Sukhatme asks him to narrate what he saw at Prof. Damle's house after Rokde had left, he tells the counsel has mixed up issues. He asks him how he belonging to a remote village could be expected to go Prof. Damle's house in Bombay. Moreover, he never knew Damle himself. This creates a sense of humour in the court. Such instances are frequently scattered all over the play.

The very title of the play is highly ironical for there is no silence or discipline in the court, which is going to be seated in judgement against Miss Benare for her crime of infanticide and unwed motherhood. To the much dismay of the judge, his wife too is seen poking her nose in all matters pertaining to the court. The judge has to silence her along with all the others before the proceedings begin. Thus, Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a powerful satire on the modern society. The

characters attack each other and expose their latent hostility and pretense. The void of the middle-class society is exposed through Benare-Damle episode. In the name of social values, moral standards and religion, they crash on the accused like a barraged building. But not one of them raises his voice of protest against Damle who is responsible for the devastation of Benare. He is not even summoned as a co-accused in the court. It is such an irony that she faces the trial while he at the backdrop seems to attend an academic seminar.

As pointed out by N.S. Dharan, Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* exposes "the hypocrisy, selfishness, sham moral standards and the sadism latent in the immediate colleagues of the buoyant but belligerent Benare. The characters in the play are entities representing the middle-class and are the most vulnerable devoid of basic civic sense and cordiality" (41). Their letdowns in real life accounted for their ill -manners towards others. They are disappointed, dissatisfied, phobic, brutal, conspiratorial and even deceitful. It is not out of genuine love that they have turned to theatre activity, but out of the sheer sense of their own failures in real life. It might just be too much to expect basic civility, sincerity and truthfulness from these characters as they are the very core to the satirical overtones in the plays.

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