

The Interplay of Realism and Symbolism in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract-- Vijay Tendulkar has a great place in the modern Indian theatre in its uncompromising image of social reality and in the strength of his dramatic interrogation of power, violence, and human relations. His plays are broadly known as strikingly realistic but there is much more than just that first impression as they have a richly symbolic structure that enhances the ideological and psychological depth. The paper he discusses the dialectical relationship of the realism and symbolism as used in the principal plays of Tendulkar and how his dramatic technique combines the crude immediacy of lived experience with metaphoric and allegorical to reveal the obscurity of the social repression.

The theatre of Tendulkar indicates the inconsistencies and moral uncertainty of the Indian society after independence. He uses realism settings to depict the world of patriarchy, hypocrisy, and politics of power. Meanwhile, these realistic spaces serve symbolically as the places of judgment, surveillance and control. Plays such as *Silence!*, *Individual* suffering is exemplified in the Court is in *Session*, *Kamala*, *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghashiram Kotwal* where the Court is an allegory of societal degradation. The parody trial of *Benare*, the commercialization of *Kamala*, the home despotism of *Sakharam*, the political venality of *Gauri* are not only the personal tragedies of man but the figurative symbols of the violence and corruption of the institutions.

Index Terms-- Realism, Symbolism, Modern Indian Theatre, Power and Authority, Patriarchy, Social Criticism, Psychological Realism, Political Theatre, Theatrical Allegory, Post-Independence Indian Society

I. INTRODUCTION

The modern Indian drama has become one of the most vibrant literary genres to capture the trend as a way of establishing social change, cultural clash and political anxiety in the post independence India. Being a performative art, theatre has a specific quality of reflecting the existing realities of the society and at the same time challenging and transforming the mainstream ideology. In this tradition of development, Vijay Tendulkar holds a unique distinction as a dramatist who is not afraid to bring out the moral contradictions, institutional hypocrisies and power systems that dominate Indian social life.

His theatre is the cross-roads of realism and symbolism, a bleak depiction of daily life and a conception of the symbolic structure in layers that plays individual sense of pain into the context of a social and political commentary. This reciprocal clash of realism and symbolism is what contributes to the unique aesthetic potency and ideological richness of the drama by Tendulkar.

Post-independence Indian drama displays a country that is wrestling with its colonialism and trying to establish its democratic future. The advent of urbanisation, the growth of education, the development of political awareness and the continuation of the caste and gender structures formed a society with contradicting elements. The tensions were well explored in literature, in particular in the field of drama. Naik notes that the contemporary Indian drama disregarded mythological and romantic traditions and started paying attention to the real issues of modern life, thus making the theatre a form of social comment and moral consideration (Naik). Similarly, according to Iyengar, Indian drama in English is characterized by its adherence to realism, moral and psychological exploration, giving an account of life in its bare and unromantic existence, deprived of romantic fiction (Iyengar).

This current research will, thus, aim at analyzing the way realism and symbolism are used in conjunction in the Vijay Tendulkar play in developing an effective theatre of criticism and conflict. Through the analysis of the selected plays the paper will examine the way in which Tendulkar alters the everyday reality into some symbolic drama and how the force of his symbolic structures lies in the concrete social experience. By doing so, it makes Tendulkar a dramatist whose art is in the combination of real with the metaphorical, personal with the political, visible with the invisible.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The dramatic corpus of Vijay Tendulkar has generated an extensive body of critical discourse that situates him among the most influential playwrights of post-independence India.

His theatre has been examined from multiple perspectives—social realism, political drama, feminist criticism, postcolonial discourse, and power studies—yet scholars consistently acknowledge that the distinctive strength of his dramaturgy lies in the fusion of stark realism with symbolic depth. Tendulkar’s plays do not merely represent society as it is; they interrogate its moral foundations and expose the mechanisms through which power, patriarchy, and institutional authority operate. The existing scholarship thus provides a rich theoretical framework for analysing the interplay of realism and symbolism in his drama.

The evolution of modern Indian drama forms the essential context for understanding Tendulkar’s theatrical vision. After independence, Indian literature underwent a decisive shift away from romantic idealism and mythological narrative towards social realism and political engagement.

1. M. K. Naik, in *A History of Indian English Literature*, observes that post-independence writers turned their attention to the “contemporary Indian scene with all its tensions, contradictions and complexities,” making literature a vehicle for social criticism and ethical inquiry (Naik 214). Drama, in particular, emerged as a powerful form for articulating social conflict because of its immediacy and performative force.

“Post-independence Indian writing reflects the tensions, contradictions and complexities of Indian society.”

(Naik 214)

2. Srinivasa Iyengar, in *Indian Writing in English*, similarly situates modern Indian drama within a realist tradition that seeks to portray life without illusion. He argues that Indian dramatists abandoned romantic conventions in favour of a theatre that reflects the raw realities of social existence. According to Iyengar, drama became a forum for examining the conflict between tradition and modernity, freedom and authority, morality and hypocrisy.

“Life in its naked reality, stripped of romantic illusions, is the true concern of modern Indian drama.”

(Iyengar 327)

3. The political dimension of Indian theatre has been explored extensively by Nandi Bhatia in *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Bhatia argues that Indian theatre has historically functioned both as an instrument of authority and as a form of resistance.

While drama reflects dominant ideologies, it also provides a space for challenging and subverting them. In the postcolonial context, theatre becomes a site where power relations are staged, questioned, and destabilised.

“Theatre in India has always functioned as both an act of authority and an act of resistance.”

(Bhatia 142)

Bhatia’s analysis is particularly relevant to Tendulkar’s dramaturgy. His plays depict institutions such as the family, the law, and the state, yet they also reveal the violence and hypocrisy that sustain these structures. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the legal system becomes a symbolic space of moral surveillance. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the historical state machinery becomes an allegory of political corruption. Tendulkar’s theatre thus exemplifies what Bhatia describes as a performative critique of power.

4. The theme of power remains central to most critical readings of Tendulkar. Vijayanand, in “The Issue of Power in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar,” argues that power in Tendulkar’s drama is not confined to political authority alone but permeates personal relationships, social hierarchies, and moral discourse. He notes that Tendulkar presents power as a pervasive force that shapes human behaviour and often turns ordinary individuals into instruments of cruelty (Vijayanand 35). This conception of power aligns closely with Michel Foucault’s theoretical framework.
5. Foucault’s writings on power provide an important lens for understanding Tendulkar’s theatre. In *The Subject and Power*, Foucault argues that power is not merely repressive but productive; it operates through institutions, language, and social norms, shaping individuals into obedient subjects. Power, in this sense, is embedded in everyday practices and becomes internalised by those who live within its structures.

“Power is not merely repressive; it is productive. It produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.”

(Foucault 213)

This Foucauldian understanding of power is reflected in Tendulkar’s portrayal of surveillance, judgment, and discipline. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, the mock courtroom becomes a symbolic arena where society exercises its authority over female sexuality.

The language of law is used to humiliate and silence a woman who defies moral norms. In GhashiramKotwal, the alliance between political ambition and institutional authority illustrates how power legitimises cruelty in the name of order.

6. Patra, in “Vijay Tendulkar’s GhashiramKotwal: Theme of Power and Knowledge,” examines how the play exposes the manipulation of authority and the exploitation of the masses. Drawing upon Foucauldian ideas, Patra argues that Ghashiram’s rise and fall demonstrate the dangerous relationship between power and knowledge, where political legitimacy is constructed through fear and control (Patra 58). The historical narrative thus becomes a symbolic commentary on contemporary politics.
7. The symbolic dimension of Tendulkar’s realism is further reinforced by his use of folk theatre and historical allegory. AnandaLal, in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, notes that GhashiramKotwal represents a turning point in modern Indian theatre because of its innovative use of tamasha form and Brechtian techniques (Lal 192). The play’s stylised performance, with its songs, dances, and chorus, creates a theatrical excess that draws attention to the performative nature of power itself.

“GhashiramKotwal marks a decisive moment in modern Indian theatre through its fusion of folk form and political satire.”

(Lal 192)

While the play is set in eighteenth-century Pune, critics agree that its historical narrative functions as a symbolic allegory of contemporary political corruption. The stylisation does not distance the audience from reality; instead, it intensifies their awareness of the ways in which authority is theatrically staged in society.

8. Another major strand of Tendulkar criticism focuses on gender and patriarchy. Feminist scholars have consistently highlighted the centrality of women’s suffering and resistance in his plays. Malar, in “The Theme of Misogyny: A Study of Select Plays of Vijay Tendulkar,” argues that Tendulkar exposes the deeply entrenched misogyny of Indian society. According to Malar, his drama reveals how patriarchal ideology is internalised and reproduced within families, communities, and institutions (Malar 88).

Women are judged, silenced, exploited, and punished for asserting autonomy, while men are granted moral and social privilege.

III. CONCLUSION

Vijay Tendulkar’s theatre occupies a distinctive and commanding position in modern Indian drama because of its rare ability to combine uncompromising social realism with profound symbolic resonance. His plays do not merely depict society; they interrogate its moral foundations, expose its hidden violences, and compel audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about power, authority, and human cruelty. The present study has examined how Tendulkar’s dramatic vision derives its enduring force from the dynamic interplay between realism and symbolism, a fusion that transforms everyday experience into a powerful critique of institutional oppression and moral hypocrisy.

Tendulkar’s realism gives his drama its emotional immediacy and social authenticity. His characters inhabit recognisable worlds—courtrooms, homes, streets, political offices, and historical spaces—that reflect the lived realities of Indian society. These are not romanticised or idealised spaces; they are marked by cruelty, fear, ambition, and silence. The family becomes a site of domination rather than security, the law becomes an instrument of moral policing rather than justice, and politics becomes a theatre of corruption rather than public service. Through such realistic portrayals, Tendulkar compels the audience to recognise the everyday nature of violence and the ways in which it is normalised within social institutions.

At the same time, Tendulkar’s realism is never merely documentary. It is infused with a symbolic imagination that deepens the ideological significance of his plays. Ordinary spaces are transformed into metaphors of power and control. The courtroom in *Silence! The Court is in Session* becomes a symbolic arena of patriarchal surveillance. The household in *Sakharam Binder* becomes a microcosm of male authority and moral hypocrisy. The journalist’s home in *Kamala* becomes a metaphor for the commodification of women under the guise of social reform. The historical state apparatus in *GhashiramKotwal* becomes an allegory of political corruption and moral decay. In each case, personal tragedy is elevated into a collective indictment of society.

“Good-bad, right-wrong, once you tag things like that, you lose the ability to see the complete truth. A murderer can also be a loving father. Don’t tag things. Words are insufficient to describe the picture in totality.”

(Tendulkar)

In conclusion, Vijay Tendulkar's dramaturgy represents a unique synthesis of social realism and symbolic critique. His plays reveal the cruelty embedded in everyday institutions while transforming personal suffering into a universal moral question. The interplay of realism and symbolism in his theatre enables him to construct a stage that is at once a mirror of society and a tribunal of conscience. Through this fusion, Tendulkar emerges not merely as a chronicler of social injustice but as a dramatist of resistance whose work continues to challenge, provoke, and awaken moral awareness in contemporary audiences.

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