

THEME AND DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE IN *GHASHIRAM KOTWAL*

MS. RACHANA
GUEST FACULTY
BUNDELKHAND UNIVERSITY

Vijay Tendulkar, the well-known playwright has written *Ghashiram Kotwal* in Marathi (first published, 1973). It has been translated into different languages-the Hindi translation was done by Vasant Dev (Delhi, 1974). Jayant Karve and an American professor Eleanor Zelliott have jointly translated *Ghashiram Kotwal* from the Marathi into English (Calcutta, 1984). The play was first performed on 16 December, 1972 at Bharat Natya Mandir, Pune by the Progressive Dramatic Association. But after nineteen successful performances, the play was banned on the grounds that: the portrayal of Nana Phadnavis's character was a distortion of historical facts, the play was anti-Brahman; violent audience reaction was feared.

Ghashiram Kotwal is set in eighteenth century Pune at the time of the Peshwa rule. The play features the Peshwa's chancellor Nana Phadnavs and when it was first staged it came up against a lot of criticism of or showing the revered Nana's character in a derogatory light. According to Tendulkar:

This is not a historical play. It is a story, in prose, verse, music and dance set in a historical era. Ghashirams are creations of socio-political forces which know no barriers of time and place. Although based on a historical legend, I have no intention of commentary on the morals, or lack of them, of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis or Ghashiram. The moral of this story, if there is any, may be looked for elsewhere. ('Introduction,' *Ghashiram Kotwal*, 4)

History has been transformed into a lively situation full of theatrical potential rate Nana He is described as 'secretive, exclusive and often vindictive, his exacting and stern. methods, his insistence more upon the form than the essence in a thousand and one matters of administration, did in the long run harm to the Maratha State'. Nana was born on 12th Feb, 1742 and lived to be 58 years one month. He married several wives, of whom the names of

nine are available. His last wife named Julbai who became a widow by his death, was then nine years of age. In the writers' note to Vasant Deo's Hindi translation, Tendulkar says :

In my view *Ghashiram Kotwal* indicates a particular social situation which is neither old nor new. It is beyond time and space. Therefore 'Ghashiram' and Nana Phadnavis are also beyond space and time'.(Web citation)

The story is about Ghashiram, a Brahman from the North, who comes to eighteenth century Poona. It was at that time that the Peshwa's chief minister Nana Phadnavis ruled supreme. Implicated in a false charge of theft, Ghashiram is insulted and humiliated by the Poona Brahmins and he vows to take revenge. His moment comes when the ageing lecherous Nana takes a fancy to his beautiful-young daughter Lalita Gauri. He sacrifices his daughter's virtue to the Nana's lust and manages to become the Kotwal of Poona. Now he unleashes a reign of terror on the Brahmins.

His cruelty crosses all limits and the death of 22 innocent Brahmins results in his downfall and leads to his ignominious end when he is stoned to death. The Nana who has used Ghashiram's daughter and discarded her when he moves on to free pastures goes scot free. After Ghashiram's death, he announces public rejoicing for three days. The play is a satire on a society which shields the powerful and the corrupt and punishes people like Ghashiram. Justice is seen to be done, and the equilibrium of society seems to be restored.

The personality clash between the Nana and Ghashiram may appear to be the theme at the surface level but Tendulkar has examined the relationship between religion, caste, sexuality and violence to expose the structures of power that maintain the status quo. Tendulkar is concerned about the politics of power and its various implications. According to Samik Bandhopadhyay, 'In *Ghashiram*, power is defined horizontally in terms of individuals against individuals from humiliation to eventual victimization.' (*Collected Plays in Translation: Vijay Tendulkar*. 5.)

The play begins with a religious hymn and the popular gods dancing on stage. This sets the context against which the drama unfolds itself. The Brahmins go to Bavannakhani to see the dancing girls and say they are going 'to the temple' to give a sermon on 'Vishwamitra and Menaka'. They justify their decadence by comparing Bavannakhani to holy Mathura. The 'abhanga' or devotional song is often sung with the 'Ivani' or love song in his play. Scenes of violence and cruelty are alternated with devotional song. When Nana tries to seduce Gauri in front of the statue of the holy Ganapati, he simply dismisses her fears saying 'That all holy Ganapati? The maker of Good? Look, he has two wives. One on this side, one on that side'.(GK,8) Further on in the play when Gauri is dead and the distraught Ghashiram confronts the Nana and accuses him of his daughter's death, the latter reassures him: 'He - the Omnipresent - He makes everything happen We are merely instruments' He then urges him to 'forget what happened. All merges into the Ganga Thou shall not grieve over what is gone. The Vedas have said that' (GK 44) It is a case of the devil citing scriptures to suit his purpose? Religion becomes a useful alibi in covering people's misdeeds. By invoking religion, all kinds of evils are glossed and even sanctified. Rituals are encouraged to fill the pockets of the greedy Brahmins. Moreover, their position as the 'twice born' is reinforced by the prevalence of the caste system.

Caste is used as an instrument of power. The Sutradhar reports that according to Ghashiram 'to eat with a lower caste person is a crime' (GK 26). To sleep with a 'Mahar woman' (a lower caste among the untouchables) is also considered a crime. On the other hand, the Brahmans, have no hesitation in chasing and pestering a white Sahib for money. This shows that race and colour constitute a higher position in the social hierarchy. And the white Sahib ranks higher than the privileged Brahman who is feasted and showered with gifts in the Peshwa's Poona, debaucheries of the Brahman men. Gulabi's tantalising dances, Nana's lustful pursuit of Lalita Gauri, the clandestine meeting of the Brahmin wife with Maratha lover all serve to create an underlying strain of eroticism throughout the play.

Women too, have become a pawn in-the power game. In fact there is a close nexus between sexuality and power. The Nana's statement with reference to Lalita Gauri: 'Our grandeur's gone if she's not had' (GK 20). A man's self-image, identity and machismo is definable only, it seems, relation to the conquest and oppression of women. There is a close connection between sexuality and religion as *lavanis* (love song) and *abhangas* (devotional song) are sung at the revelries in Bavannakhani which is likened to Mathura and the erotic dances to Krishan Lila.

The Play, Ghashiram Kotwal makes use of song, dance and music. No other major playwright before Tendulkar had made such extensive and innovative use of folk theatre. In addition to the songs and music, Dr. Jabbar Patel also calls 'the first sangeet natak in the real sense of the term'. (*Contemporary Indian theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Director*. 47).

The play begins with a devotional song and Ganapati, Saraswati and Lakshmi come in dancing. This immediately establishes a link with Dashavatar (a form of folk theatre) which begins with these three deities. This opening ritual also has links with classical Sanskrit drama and likewise has a certain function, that is, to arouse the interest of the audience, instill a feeling, seriousness and to arrest their attention. According to Pushpa Bhawe 'The music and the dance numbers are not embellishments to the narrative The changing musical notes express the changing mood' (*Contemporary Indian Theatre*, 46). The music director of the successful Marathi production Bhaskar Chandavarkar has said that the music in the beginning of the play was used innocuously in the *shri Ganaraya* song. But after the Intermission, when Ghashiram has become the Kotwal, the music for the same song becomes much more revolutionary.

The use of traditional songs and dances effectively sets the background of the decadence of the Peshwas Poona of the eighteenth century. The strategic placement of songs and music helps to provide dramatic relief after an unusually tense situation. Music and dance sometimes serve to reinforce the tense atmosphere. As Satish Alekat assistant director to Dr. Jabbar Patel tells us 'After the ordeal by fire the tempo tended to slow down a little. But with the introduction of the 'Malhari' song, the tense atmosphere created by the sequence was reinforced'. (Ghashiram

Kotwal: A Production Casebook, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, xiv,xv). The *lavani* highlights the sensuous, passionate element but at the same time provides a comment on the social

corruption, the juxtaposition of the lavani or love song with the abhanga or devotional song serves to bring out the contradiction in social values and norms, the musical form helps to 'deglamourize' history. History has an element of grandeur, distance, formality, which gets reduced by the introduction of song and dance. Take the example of Nana Phadnavis. The great Nana who struck terror in the hearts of many looks rather ridiculous as he steps a measure or dances with Gulabi.

Ghashiram Kotwal is a serious play, a satire on the hollowness of society. Tendukar himself admits, 'The criticism has a point the form had a certain inevitability'(45). Trust the tale and not the teller, we are often told. And as we are aware the play has been considered extremely disturbing. In this play we have seen that laughter can be as much an element of subversion and change as anger. The grotesque figure of the Nana dancing effeminately demystifies the power he represents and thereby shows the hollowness of what he represents so that we are made aware of the fact that the possibility of change exists. The form and content subvert logical and authoritarian structures. We have seen in the play how folk forms with the abusiveness represent irrepressible vitality and freedom. *In Ghashiram* it is very subtly subverts the hierarchy of caste in the following

Brahman	Oy. Oy. You son of a bitch. Don't you have eyes and ears?
Sutradhar	I'm sorry, 0 priestly Brahman.
Brahman	Don't you have any manners?
Sutradhar	I'm so sorry, 0 lordly Brahman.
Brahmin	Dont you have any brains?
Sutradhar	I'm very sorry, 0 honoured Brahman.
Brahmin	You bumped me, you son of a bastard.
Sutradhar	I touch your feet, 0 Brahman.
Brahmin Brahman'	'Oh you monkey! Is this the Peshvai or the Mughal Kingdom. Bumps a holy
Sutradhar	But not a Brahman's wife! (p. 4).

One may note the sarcasm and insult intended in this exchange. Thus laughter can be seen as a political mode. Music and dance has not been used for its own sake. The songs sung or hummed by the chorus establish the appropriate mood and comment on the action. There is blend of folk forms with mainstream urban drama which has created a unique landmark in the history of Indian theatre.

The human wall is an innovation and takes the place of a curtain in a conventional stage. The stage is stark and empty without any props and when the members turn their backs, to the audience. The wall ceases to exist. As there is no conventional demarcation of the play into acts and scenes, the human wall helps in the transition from one scene to

another. The wall serves as a chorus in the play. The chorus is a convention also found and used very effectively in ancient Greek drama. It was usually a group of village elders, dressed in masks, who gave an account of the event that had happened offstage or a long time ago. In Greek drama, the chorus moved from left to right and back again. In *Ghashilam Kotwal* the 'chorus' of twelve men comprising the human wall sways in unison. Not only do they sing and dance establishing a link with folk theatre but they also comment on the action of the play.

The Brahmans make a curtain with backs towards the audience. The curtain sings and sways:

Ram Shiva Hari

The Street of Bavannakhanni, became for a while

The garden of Krishna. (GK,6).

The song exposes the debauchery of the Brahmans who in the name of God Krishna wish to justify their erotic dancing with the courtesan.

The human wall is also a binding factor that holds the different scenes together. The plot has several episodes which makes it different from naturalistic plays in which one scene follows necessarily from another. Instead of artificially engineered exits and entrances, the play then assumes a semblance of continuity and motion. Human wall also takes on individual roles. At times it is transformed into a group sitting in Gulabi's hall at others; they sneak off stealthily as individuals, in a hurry to get to Bavannakhani. At another the Brahmans form a human god house round Ganapati, and when the Nana chases a girl, the human wall becomes a garden. Throughout the play the human wall assuming new and visually stimulating configurations. And finally at Ghashiram's execution, the human wall becomes the fierce mob of angry Brahmans shouting with sadistic glee. The human wall is also a symbol of secrecy that conceals the various faces of human beings: their hypocrisy, double standards and tendencies to violence and oppression. This is amply demonstrated in the course of the play.

Thus we have seen that along with its tremendous potential as spectacle, the human wall performs several functions controlling and enhancing the flow of the story. In addition, the use of the human wall makes it as easy to put up the play on a conventional stage or in any open space in a village

Folk theatre invites audience participation and in this play, the Sutradhar and Ghashiram addressing the audience directly. According to Jabbar Patel, it is different from the effect that Brecht, the German playwright intended to create. According to Brecht 'Modern theatre is epic theatre'. (*Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11) According to Dr. Jabbar Patel 'As Ghashiram speaks directly to the audience, the effect achieved is the opposite of that usually created by Brecht.' (Preface - Hindi translation of Ghashiram Kotwal, VasantDev).

However, the setting of the play in eighteenth century Poona helps to create a sense of distance. Characters in period costume produce the effect that the people portrayed are

removed from us in time and space. Moreover, the Nana depicted in the play is quite different from the revered Nana of history. This grotesque dancing character reinforces the fact that the spectator is watching a play rather than witnessing reality. Tendulkar has used the folk form which is predominantly interactive and ensures active audience participation. But here the folk form is used in mainstream theatre and the use of songs and dances further creates a sense of distance from the action.

At first, it seems that the personality clash between the Nana and Ghashiram is the main theme. The Nana promotes Ghashiram and when his protégé becomes a maniacal monster as is evident in the climatic ordeal-by-fire scene, the Nana decides that the time is ripe for destroying the creation that is now of no more use to him. But on a more careful reading, we realise it is the social system that throws up such aberrations that is being probed. So while the song, dance and

visual configurations of the human world provide for sheer entertainment, the juxtaposition of dialogue, verse, hymn, love song, dance, narration and mime make us probe beyond surface appearances to understand the subtle and complex social processes that dehumanize individuals. And unless the system is changed, such a situation will continue. The end of the play with its revelry may project the false illusion that all is now well with the world on one level but on another it is clear that this is a mere facade and the real danger continues to thrive.

So, for such a complex play which operates on many different levels, it may not be suitable to pin down the effect to either 'empathy' or 'alienation'. It seems that the play veers between the two. And the dominant impact is one of shock at the violence and cruelty depicted. Such a theatre must create a dynamic language of expression that will arouse general attention. This would include the visual language of movements, attitudes, gestures, music, dance and mime. This language of theatre must transgress the usual limits of art and speech so that what results is a kind of total creation in which man must reassume his place between dream and events. There are certain similarities between what Artaud (Theatre of Cruelty) proposed and what Tendulkar achieved.

Ghashiram Kotwal admits all several interpretations. Literature contains a plurality of discourses, and it is this that allows us to read a text in different ways. It is not simply a case of taking up a particular aspect of what is in the text. Reading is an active process in which all aspects of our own personality also come into play. For example, a person reading this play twenty years from now will look at it differently from the way we do now. Also a person from a different culture will have a perspective that is not the same as ours.

ABBREVIATION USED: Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*: GK

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