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LIFE, STAGE & VIJAY TENDULKAR: AN INSIGHT INTO THE UNFLINCHING INTEGRITY  
OF MARATHI THEATRE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Literature produced anywhere and at any time, does not exist in a vacuum. It becomes expressed in the context of people through the medium of a language. Besides, mental climate which gives rise to such an aesthetic expression evolves from an organic conditioned by the political realities, economic forces, social aspirations, and spiritual quests. The state of growth and sophistication of the society, as well as its degeneration and decay, become reflected in the milieu, and capsule in the literature. It has always provided us glimpse of human life and its fullness in the thoughts and emotions, visions, ideals and follies. Literature is that imaginative recreation of human experience into an organized pattern for the purpose of representing, as in a mirror, actions of people living and expressing in an age in the socio-cultural milieu. A writer doing this exercise, is indeed portraying Indian life, Indian society as he sees it. The social reality and the human predicament, the prevalent literary traditions and social norms, the human isolation and confrontation with the hostile surrounding do strike on the surface of literature. Literature puts forth the enormity of the nation's agony, its extreme redemptory suffering. The present paper intends to focus on the portrayal of the reality of life through the medium of Indian Marathi theatre via the writings of one of the most prolific playwrights of our nation Shri Vijay Tendulkar.

**KEYWORDS:** society, social surrounding, conflict, communication, evils, identity, culture, literary sensibility, social attitudes, footpath literature, patriarchy, naturalism, vernacular.

Literature is a social product and the life of the milieu out of which it springs, is reflected in it. The expression of life is visioned in literature. It is determined by conditions under which it is produced. Every writer grows up as a member of a particular society, and his view of life and his emotional conflicts and communication are conditioned by social functions. He is likely to be receptive to those broad currents of thoughts and feelings, which are shared by other members of his society. For this reason the content of his work cannot be explained without reference to his social surroundings. In revealing himself the writer always leaves its impact on literature.

Indian literature, no matter in what form, is composite in character reflecting a large concourse of varying influences, even while each region has its own special form, style and imagery as its distinguishing feature. But all these varied strands make a recognizable composition. It is this base and background that

provides a single identity to Indian aesthetics and therefore to literature. It is particularly so in the field of drama. Often when we watch dramatic performances no matter how far flung the region of their origin, how different the language, the Indian core is recognizable. It was as though they are the offspring of a single parent.

An incontrovertible presence in the literary background is Sanskrit. Even if all the regional languages do not trace their origin to this grant, all of them have inevitably been affected, by its very vastness, its immense parameters; it's almost limitless vocabulary and wide variety of expression. But in spite of its weight and status, Sanskrit did not smother the regional shoots coming up and attaining full bloom. In fact it was the reign of Sanskrit drama that enriched that entire period. And far from cringing under the shadow of the Sanskrit drama, other language dramas shone and flourished.

With the passage of time Theatres gradually took on definite shapes, built around rituals, festivals and temples. Again, though each was individualistic with special marked characteristics, they all had equally recognizable common features. A drama in action is a common feature. A drama in action is a combination of dance and music along with the spoken word. The Indian theatrical production is marked with the quality of the inspiration that flows as vocabulary and this vocabulary is conditioned directly by the outer manifestations. In Indian drama that dialogues get improvised as the action moves along because drama is but the reflection of life, working out the relationship between individuals, and as also between individuals and the community.

The total Theatre of India had been the inevitable form of the Indian community. Earlier, this community was a close knit one and its functioning was largely in unison. But periodically, there have been great emotional upsurges, some strongly interwoven with spiritual elements, like Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Vaishnavism, each with its myriad offshoots, flowering into its own aesthetic forms, including literature, for all these had been closely interlinked. Periodically, there have also been patriotic upsurges, all through our history, that have given birth to passionate outpouring, contributing to virile verses, song, dance and drama.

For a period India's identity began to be clouded while she was in political bondage. But then as the passionate struggle for India's freedom and feelings of nationalism filled the air, it inevitably re-lit the inner fires of creativity, revived fading images, and injected new vigour into concepts that had dimmed into shadows. One very significant fact that has contributed to the richness of our cultural heritage and its continued survival is that all sections of our society contributed to this wealth, and everyone at every level, no matter how lowly, caste differences notwithstanding, was equally involved in keeping the cultural cycle moving.

Many new dramatists have been influenced by the medieval folk and the classical and are stirred to introduce attractive and meaningful elements in the current, as an antidote to the complexities and anxieties, which are an inevitable part of today. There seems to be a new search for the Indian identity. A natural desire has evolved to pull out some of the old treasures that were perhaps casually set aside under the advent of new arrivals from foreign lands, a healthy assimilation of the *desi* and the foreign.

The passage of time allowed the Indian Theatre to flourish in a host of regional languages. To note down, the Bengali Theatre started its journey through social dramas of Girish Chandra Ghosh, historical dramas of D.L. Roy and artistic dramas of Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh and H.N. Chattopadhyay making the beginning of the parallel Theatre. Closely following the trends of Bengali Theatre, Theatres of Kannada, Gujrati, Oriya and Hindi were also developing.

Marathi, a language spoken by more than Fifty million people in the western parts of India, can trace its literary history to the 11<sup>th</sup> century but in spite of such a long literary history, Marathi literature and language began to change with the British expansion and domination in western India. The decline of the Maratha empire, degeneration during the latter part of the *Peshwa* rule, and British colonization have had an impact in shaping educated, urban, middle-class Marathi culture and character during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. To go back into the history of Marathi literature (drama), the period from 1890 to 1920 was a period of revolutionary changes in Marathi literature.

The period from 1920-1945 was devoid of any noteworthy changes in life and literature in Maharashtra. All the drama companies were in financial difficulties. They could not attract new talented actors, nor could they get dramatists of worth to give them their new plays. By this time since drama had

become only a form of entertainment, it did not exploit the social advantages of the theatrical art. The audience sought another entertainment at this time, which was not worse than drama but cheaper. It was the film.

However, the period after India's independence may be called the modern period for several reasons. The Second World War had started serious rethinking of the basic norms in all fields and given a jolt to the sensibility of the educated people. The Marathi writers became conscious of a wider reference to their works. The educated people became conscious of problems of the entire world. There was thus a widening of horizons.

In modern times literature has not remained any more the common heritage of a speech community- an educated speech communities by being multilingual are exposed to the literatures of different languages. According to the development of literary taste, the degree of literary sensibility, social attitudes and world-views, every speech community is again divided into different groups that appreciate a particular kind of literature. Broadly speaking, there are three levels: the highbrow literature, the popular literature and the footpath literature. Marathi drama, in modern times, functions at all the three levels.

In the footpath drama entertainment is the only aim. The dramatic companies that stage them are commercially oriented. A still more artistically degenerated version of the footpath drama is form of drama that m... *tamasha* with it. The *tamasha* is an old folk art, which narrates a story, using folk music and dance with extempore comments on current topics of interests.

The popular drama is commercially successful and attracts a large section of playgoers. It is in continuation with the earlier tradition though it has made certain changes to suit the changing times. The dominant group among the popular plays is of those that deal with middle-class themes, or themes that appeal to the middle-class sensibility. They have a story element, a hero and a heroine, a typical middle class attitude, a wise character that mouths the dramatist's pseudo-philosophy, a moderately sad ending or a happy ending, a plot fully of accidents and coincidences.

The highbrow drama has made experiments in stage production and technique of writing and has also achieved literary distinction. Highbrow plays were staged both by professional as well as amateur troupes. But amateur troupes like *Rangayan*, Progressive Dramatic Association, Kalopasak Theatre Unit, Theatre Academy, *Abhivyakti*, *Avishkar* and other have been creditable for introducing modern drama to the Marathi audience.

It was in the midst of this theatrical era amongst these contemporaries only that Vijay Tendulkar came up as a modern playwright who ushered modernity into the sphere of drama and theatre. Tendulkar did not accept the traditional setup and aspired to find and project something challenging and new. Basically, what sets him at par, taking him beyond his illustrious contemporaries has been his deep concern for the contemporary issues and his experimental techniques that have made all his plays unique.

Vijay Tendulkar was born in a Brahmin family on 7 January 1928 in Kolhapur. He abandoned formal education in 1943 to join the freedom struggle. He started working at the age of 15 in a bookshop, rising to the position of proofreader and eventually managing a printing press. He took up journalism and was an assistant editor of Marathi dailies like *Navbharat*, *Maratha & Lokshatta*. His stint as an editor of literary magazines like *Deepavali* and *Vaudha*, fanned his creative urge which first expressed itself in a short story *Amachyaavar Kon Prem Karnar* (who love me 1948). He started his career as a creative writer writing short stories, plays and later, he took to screenplay writing, translation and adaptation of plays from English and regional languages and T.V. serials in Hindi.

"Creative writing has never been my first love; my primary interest has always been life itself. I would rather play with a child or meet and interesting person or learn a new skill than write. Writing to me is like talking and I'm not the one to fall in love with my own voice. I am more interested in other people's voice,"<sup>1</sup> says Tendulkar, to whom theatre came naturally. He says that writing started as an unplanned trip to nowhere. It was a trip full of surprises, challenges, adventures and decisions. His father, Dhondupant Tendulkar, an amateur writer, theatre director and actor, initiated him into writing and theatre. And so theatre had literally been in his blood.

Writer of the most critically acclaimed plays which brought modernism to Marathi theatre, he has

been the recipient of many prestigious awards. He is a fighter for cultural freedom, the freedom which is stifled at present by various forces. Although being a modernist, Tendulkar, an uncommon artist, never negates the common man's world, getting lost in modernistic subjective islands. Thematically his plays have ranged from the alienation of the modern individual to contemporary politics, from socio-individual tensions to the complexities of human character, from the exploration of man woman relationships to reinterpretations of historical episodes. To quote his words:

"I have been writing about life around me. When I feel the need to say or do something, I do it. Otherwise I will not be able to sleep."

That Tendulkar's work has such a wide canvas reveals the versatility of his creative genius. The greatest quality that Tendulkar can claim as a creative writer and dramatist is an ability to involve and distance himself from his creation. This endows his work with infinite subtlety. To Tendulkar it would be a blind allegiance to an outworn tradition, which does not practice the morality it professes, so in the absence of any such allegiance to tradition or morality, his plays become citadels of immorality. Totally uninhibited about the past heritage and glory, Tendulkar never lingers to look behind. Original, subtle and daring, he holds the banner of man not as formidable and venerable but appallingly hideous. His intelligence may rightly be categorized as radically oriented, supplemented with neither reflection nor sentiment. He discouraged, assailed and condemned an exaggerated self-righteousness and distorted historical perspective. Adulation of anything in conformity in blindness is not acceptable to him. He challenges the upholstered morality. The writers of India, by and large, except for a few aberrations, have always followed the tradition of humanity and sympathy. Tendulkar is such an aberration.

Vijay Tendulkar, for the first time deals with the unconventional theme of sex and violence and makes it a viable subject on the Indian stage. Thus, his major plays, *Sakharam Binder*, *The Vultures and Silence!* *The Court Is in Session* exposes the uglier side of human passions. But a shift in his concerns is evident when he professes emphatically that man is constantly and violently seeking after positions of power and he would work on his 'basic theme' therefore in fact it is the machination of power and digression of moral values in the modern political system that come up in their true colours in his plays. With a determined integrity he diagnoses the contemporary reality by saying that "the tradition of drama is to break all traditions, it has no history or *Guruparampara* but a heritage of understanding. It is the only medium capable of arresting the dull uniformity of globalization. Every age requires a stage to express itself."<sup>3</sup>

Tendulkar has experimented with all aspects of drama content, acting, stage direction and audience communication, the innovation of a new experimental theatre, which has cross-culture manifestations. He always adopts the model of naturalistic drama and is deeply concerned with the presentation of existing reality or human condition, as he perceives with his own naked eyes. He has always shown interest in depicting the agonies and suffocations, tensions and turmoil of common man. His central concern has been to reveal the confrontation of the individual with the hostile society, exposing the hypocrisy inherent in the accepted social norms and values. With the use of irony, satire and pathos, Tendulkar brings out the hollowness of the middle class morality. He believes that theatre is a serious medium and not like a sitcom.

"If nothing is happening through theatre, then there is something wrong with the medium itself. The lure of television cannot be faulted for the decline of theatre. I do not think that the ill effects of one medium can be thrust on another medium"<sup>4</sup>.

In his plays Tendulkar has underlined both the dark ambiguity of the cardboard figures of power. Patriarchal society holds in high esteem and the continuing of the dangers of this never ending struggle for power, in which gender has always played a pivotal role. Giving a vivid account of his love for play writing in the Tenth Shri Ram Memorial lecture on 'The Play is One Thing', Tendulkar said, "I love to indulge in the physical process of writing and I never get tired of it. Writing in my mother tongue Marathi gives me immense pleasure"<sup>5</sup>. He believes that playwriting is an endless learning by experimenting and committing mistakes. It is not mere grammar it is expression.

He has enriched Marathi literature by translating several plays from other Indian languages like

Mohan Rakesh's *Adhe Adhure* and Girish Kannad's *Tughlaq* and plays form American theatre also. Tendulkar, an icon of the vernacular theatre, has always been a challenge to the audience as well as the critics. Much has been written about him, by other and also by himself, as a practicing dramatist. Still he attracts critical attention on a number of counts. Regarding criticism, Tendulkar admits, "A good review is right in its own place."<sup>6</sup> However he also feels that many times critics write reviews without trying to understand the creative process of a writer. The fact that he uses various themes and employs a great variety of forms i.e. from naturalism and stark tragedies to farces, from musicals set in traditional folk modes to absurd drama is indicative of the magnitude of his creative genius. Gowri Ramnarayan aptly observes, "With his exposure to Marathi theatre from childhood, and journalistic background, Vijay Tendulkar turned contemporary socio-political situations into explosive drama."<sup>7</sup>

Topicality and timelessness together create an enigma around his plays. His multifaceted creativity forever experimented and explored the potentials of the dramatic genre. A milestone in the development of Marathi drama, Tendulkar said that "Like a seagull, I have flown over the ocean of life patiently, calmly, without discussion, without a purpose. There is only one curiosity. How deep will this ocean be? How will the bottom look like?"<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Quoted in Ashok K. Chaudhary, 'Vijay Tendulkar: Born with the Theatre', Indian Express, Sept., 2001. Hereafter referred as 'Born with the Theatre'.
2. Interview with K. Kannan 'When Writing is Life itself', The Hindu, Sept. 16.2001. Here after referred as 'When Writing is Life itself'
3. Gowri Ramnarayan, 'In the Shadow of a Giant' The Hindu, Oct.15, 2000.
4. 'When Writing is Life itself'
5. 'Born with the Theatre'
6. Urvashi Barat, 'On Gender and Power', in Critical Perspectives :Ghasiram Kotwal, ed. by V.B. Sharma. (New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2001), p.85.
7. Gowri Ramnarayan, Dialogue with Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, February 8, 1998. Pp. 12-17.
8. Prachi Raturi, Interview with Vijay Tendulkar 'I shouldn't have been a Writer', Indian Express, 2000