

## INTERPLAY OF SOCIO-CULTURAL FORCES AND PSYCHO-SEXUAL MOTIVATIONS IN THE PLAYS OF VIJAY TENDULKAR AND BALWANT GARGI

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### Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to study the plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Balwant Gargi to understand the tragic plight of suffocated individuals at the mercy of oppressive socio-cultural forces and hidden psycho-sexual desires. The plays of Tendulkar and Gargi depict the sufferings and agonies of individuals who are trapped under the weight of deteriorating moral values, and their inability to come to terms with their own desires and cravings.

**Keywords:-** Tragic plight, socio-cultural forces, moral values.

Theatre is a revelation as it unveils the drama of human life and emotions in a society warped by injustice and oppression. Theatre's ability to plumb the depths of human psyche in this oppressive and corrupt world makes it a strong voice for addressing the suffering and the angst of the individual suffocated in the terrible grip of control and exploitation. In doing so, theatre not only problematizes contemporary socio-cultural issues but also provokes critical thoughts on conflicts, dilemmas, and struggles of the individual trapped in the violent and polarized society. Thus, theatre becomes a damning indictment of the unjust, unequal and unsympathetic forces of the society which have benighted the minds of men and women and rendered them lonely and alienated. The anguish and turmoil created in individual's mind because of the confrontation with hostile surroundings is manifested through theatrical performances. Here, theatre becomes the double of life and the reflection of truth lying dormant in the unconscious of the individual. In this regard, this paper makes a comparative study of the predicament of such trapped individuals staged by two seminal playwrights Vijay Tendulkar and Balwant Gargi. Vijay Tendulkar, a Marathi playwright and Balwant Gargi, a Punjabi playwright, galvanized Indian theatre with their startling portrayals of the agonies, suffocations and cries of humanity against the pressures of a brutal and repressive society.

The purpose of the present paper is to study how Tendulkar and Gargi explore the existential anguish of the individual characters torn between complex socio-cultural forces and obscure psycho-sexual motivations. Their plays portray how these forces act and interact with each other, and reveal the prevailing conditions in the society as well as the darkest truths lurking deep down in human psyche.

The relationship between man and society is ambivalent. Rousseau, in his book *The Social Contract*, professed, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” (Rousseau, 1) The freedom of the individual is curtailed by socially imposed moral boundaries. Morality has become a convenient camouflage for strangulating the desires and aspirations of the individuals who try to live life on their own terms. The rebels of the society are silenced by branding them immoral. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche traces the birth of morality to the herding together of the weak and proclaiming their opponents, the strong, as “bad” or “evil”, and consequently themselves as “good” and “moral”. The so-called moral ideals are according to Nietzsche, an excuse of the weak for not trying and being like the strong. (Nietzsche, 39) The hypocrisy and the deceit of this morally upright section of the society have led to the failures of love and morality, and have spawned a corrupt and tilted world of human relations.

Vijay Tendulkar and Balwant Gargi profoundly exploit theatrical space to give a clear insight into the lives of individual characters who are embattling social constraints on the one hand and personal freedom on the other. They explore the suffering of ordinary characters facing a tragic web of circumstances and personal weaknesses that spell their doom in an unsympathetic world. Influenced by Antonin Artaud, Tendulkar and Gargi exteriorize the psychological tussle in the minds of characters through sexual perversion and frenzied violence. The perversity and violence in human relations become emblematic of the psychological conflicts, dilemmas and struggles of the anguished characters. This paper endeavours to draw parallels between selected plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Balwant Gargi to study the plight of such tormented selves pitted against the prevailing structures of power. For the present study, Tendulkar’s plays *Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Sakharam Binder* and Gargi’s plays *Loha Kutt* (English: The Ironsmith) and *Saukan* (English: The Rival Woman) have been analyzed. These plays enact the trials and tribulations of the tortured individuals negotiating between the conflicting demands of personal desires and societal pressures. Their embattling selves struggle to find emancipation in such circumstances. To critically examine the internally split nature of such individuals, a critical study of the plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Balwant Gargi has been attempted in this paper.

### **A Study of Selected Plays of Vijay Tendulkar**

Vijay Tendulkar, an eminent Marathi playwright, electrified the conservative audiences with brutal themes and ruthless character observation. He carefully examined the socio-cultural, psychological, sexual and moral degeneration of contemporary society and presented it in his plays without moralizing and preaching. In his plays, he deals with the themes of alienation and individual isolation in a highly polarized and violent society. While exploring the deeper truths of human psyche and its complexities he exposes the hypocrisy, lewdness and hollowness of traditional value systems of middle-class morality. Tendulkar’s plays stage the physical torture and mental anguish which arise out of individual’s confrontation with inimical surroundings. He depicts not only the conflict between societal norms and individual freedom but also modern man’s complete bankruptcy in comprehending himself or others in the society.

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar shows the regression of an independent and free-spirited woman Leela Benare into a morality-conscious submissive sinner who is psychologically tortured and punished for defying patriarchal authority and institution. Leela Benare is a modern educated woman who wants to live life on her own terms. She is a part of an amateur theatre group which arrives in a village to perform a consciousness raising play about the dangers of atomic warfare. At the very outset, she is shown as carefree and cheerful like a child. But her very innocence and simplicity fall prey to the selfish and savage people of the

society who persecute her by exploiting her body and also by jeering, joking and taunting her in a mock-trial. Characters like Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Karnik and Rokde gang up together and torture her mentally in the mock-trial. To gratify their puny male egos, they enact the trial to punish Miss Benare who is a threat to their patriarchally conferred superiority because of her rebellious nature. In this mock-trial, the charge of infanticide is levelled against her. But when these morally upright members of the society fail to prove the charge, they go to the personal and private affairs of her life and make an anatomy of her past illicit relation with a married man, Prof. Damle. She is also chastised for being a licentious woman who is always ready to sell her body to anyone. Her past incestuous relation with her maternal uncle is also dug up during the trial by these pseudo conscience-keepers of the society. On the basis of these promiscuous relationships, they deduce that Leela Benare is an immoral woman who has conceived without marriage and is carrying the child of Prof. Damle in her womb. These Kashikars, Sukhatmes and others bring to light the hypocrisy and hollowness of patriarchal morality as no one questions Prof. Damle for transgressing the marital as well as moral boundaries. The whole responsibility of morally upright behaviour is forced upon Miss Benare. Being a rebel against the established values of the society, she is easily targeted by these hypocrite men who are failures in their own lives. Suffering from sadism and inferiority complex, they try to project themselves as morally superior to Miss Benare. Sukhatme is a flop lawyer, Mr. And Mrs. Kashikar are childless, Ponshe is an inter-failed scientist, Karnik is a failed actor and Rokde lacks an independent existence. This mock-trial is the only way through which they can authenticate their superiority over an independent woman like Leela Benare. People like the Kashikars, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Rokde and Karnik represent the herd instinct of the failed and the powerless who try to cover up their weaknesses and failures under the guise of morality. Anyone who does not conform to the herd morality must be shown the way and normalised, even if the process includes torture. This is a trial to silence the rebellious voice of Miss Benare. Her long monologue at the end is not just an attack on the hypocrisy, the affectations and the covert violence embedded in middle-class morality but it is also a meek self-justification which poignantly describes her tragic plight in this deplorable world. This meek surrender shows the latent undercurrent of fear of social conventions in her character. She is entangled between desire of personal freedom on the one hand and the burden of social conventions on the other. Without any pretention she openly admits her moral weakness and tragic dilemma. The dichotomy in her character divides Leela into two parts- one is the confident, assertive and lively woman, and the other is tolerant, docile and submissive. The conflict between the claims for personal freedom as an autonomous person and the demands made by society spell her ultimate doom.

Tendulkar's another play *Sakharam Binder* jolted the prudery of Indian society with its open proclamations of private truths about morality, sex and violence. Sakharam Binder is a Brahmin who hates his strict upbringing and lives in a society which he abhors. But, he does not hesitate in taking advantage of its unjustness. He brings to his shanty, women who have been "discarded by their husbands" and gives them "a roof over their heads, two saris a year and food in their belly." In return, they have to perform all the "wifely duties", including satisfying carnal desires of Sakharam. He is impenitent about his sexual appetites and is ferociously violent during his demoniac rages, when he gives the women "what they deserve". Unfortunately, in a world which brutally subdues women, he finds women who are desperate enough to agree to his diabolical terms. But quite audaciously, Sakharam questions the shallowness of the "bond" of matrimony. Subjugated in the name of societal norms and cultural traditions these women stoically accept the cruel demands of their husbands on their mind and body. Sakharam, on the

contrary, believes that he is generous and bountiful when he gives the women in his life a way of release, when they are tired of this distorted alliance. Tendulkar's play is about this self-indulgent libertine. Sakharam, though ostensibly boorish, blunt and violent, has his own ideals of morality. He is a man who is essentially honest and frank. This outspoken personality is in itself a stinging assault on the hypocrisy and double standards of middle-class morality. He is candid about his way of dealing with helpless women such as Lakshmi and frankly puts forth his terms for sheltering them. Yet his violent and barbaric attitude towards them exposes him as a contemptible despot. He flaunts his machismo to compensate for his inner vulnerability and wretchedness, only to discover its transient nature in the latter part of the play. The drama in his life begins when he brings first Laxmi and later Champa into his home. The gently bred Brahmin female Laxmi is a trembling leaf of gratitude and compliance and begins to worship Sakharam like a wife would. Champa, on the other hand, is a brazen whisper of feministic change in the male-dominated household. Her lower-class background makes her frank in her speech, open about her physicality and candid about her choices. Her sensuality makes Sakharam dance around her. But, she has been tortured sexually and thus needs to be in an alcoholic haze in order to endure Sakharam's sexual demands. When Laxmi returns to his house, Sakharam's world unravels. Survival instinct and sexual violence create a situation which turns the aggressive Sakharam and the timid Laxmi into an antithesis of what they are. Lakshmi, the embodiment of the ideal Indian woman – loyal, docile, religious, hard-working, self effacing and tender hearted – turns out to be wily and vicious when her survival is threatened by the presence of Champa. Sakharam, the tyrannical ruler of his personal kingdom is bewildered and lost after killing Champa for her infidelity.

The play weaves an intricate matrix of interrelationships between its characters. Sakharam, who scorns and abhors the institution of marriage, indulges in contractual cohabitation, based on convenience, with destitute women who have either been abandoned by their husbands, or have walked out on them. He turns religious and domesticated when he is with Lakshmi. Yet, in his association with Champa he transforms into a sensuous, lewd drunkard, who is totally obsessed with sexual enjoyment. Interestingly, the simultaneous presence of Lakshmi and Champa in his life has a strange effect on Sakharam as the two different facets of his character come into direct confrontation, creating psychological turmoil and resulting in temporary impotence. Driven by Sakharam's impotence Champa develops a sexual relationship with Dawood. Sakharam's masculinity is doubly hurt by his inability to satisfy Champa, and her consequent involvement with Dawood. Unable to bear this threat to his masculinity, he murders Champa in a sudden act of rage. The murder of Champa and Sakharam's reaction to it reveal Sakharam's mental landscape. His aggressive boastfulness and animal behaviour is a mask to cover up his victimization at the hands of others. A loner and alienated human being, he is treated like dirt outside and 'othered' everywhere. As a child he ran away from his house because of frequent beatings from his morally upright father. He was a victim of oppressive heterosexual patriarchal violence. Thus, he projects his self-victimization onto women. Sakharam's masculinity is a weak and regressive force, prone to violence and corruption. Sakharam's murderous fury, at the end, not only turns towards Champa but also towards himself revealing the inner self of a lonely and alienated human being.

### **A Study of Selected Plays of Balwant Gargi**

A front-runner in Punjabi experimental theatre, Balwant Gargi projected, in his plays, the physical and mental landscape of rural Punjab. For subject matter, he explored the economic,

social, psychological and sexual layers of Punjabi rural life. His plays are a blend of social realism and psychoanalysis. He employed dramatic and poetic elements to lay bare raw feelings and unbridled emotions born out of social and cultural suppressions.

Gargi's first play *Loha Kutt* (English: The Ironsmith) presents a stark picture of the Punjab country side. The play's protagonist Santi is a woman who was in love with a man named Gajjan, but she suppressed her love for him and married Kaku, the ironsmith under the pressures of patriarchal authority embodied by her father. She is a woman who has internalized culturally propagated role designed for her. She is a true woman and an ideal mother focussed entirely on the desires and will of the husband and the family, rarely allowing for her personal needs. It is significant here that her husband is an ironsmith who gives desirable shape to iron by forceful beatings. Kaku's role exemplifies the oppressive ideals of patriarchal authority which has the power to mould a woman's life with violent force. Gargi presents a tilted world which makes men incharge of their destinies but give subservient role to women like Santi. She has silently accepted these reductive ideals of femininity propagated by a feudal set-up based on suppression of human desires. The way Santi re-enforces these role options on her daughter Baino, shows how women under the pressures of authority perpetuate stifling gender ideals instead of supporting and encouraging each other. In fact, Baino is surrounded by stereotypes who try to influence her path and mould her character. But Baino is a foil to all these conforming stereotypes. She questions these models of ideal women and chooses a different path. Unlike Santi whose whole world is confined to her household, Baino finds the atmosphere at home stifling. The smell of ash and burnt iron from the furnace, the courtyard and bolted door of the house create deadness around her. She wants to sing and laugh but her father wants to chain her desires in social suppressions and constraints. In the midst of this social oppression, she becomes frustrated. In her desire to live by breaking the deadness around her, she acts out against role expectations, seeking various methods of escape and finding out a way of release. Contrary to the demands of her mother and father, she refuses to be coerced into a sham marriage devoid of love and warmth. She decides to take her destiny into her own hands and realize her love. In her final rebellion, she puts on her bridal 'jutti'<sup>1</sup> and drapes the green 'dupatta'<sup>2</sup> (a symbol of her love and passion) and elopes with her lover, Sarban. On her way to the realization of her desires when she is confronted by her father Kaku, she challenges his power by brandishing a sickle. Here, she embraces the power of 'Durga' and Kaku's hollow authority is terrified of her. He submits to Baino's fierce fury and comes back with the same green dupatta in his hands. Santi is initially filled with hatred and contempt for the 'sin' committed by Baino and asks Kaku to dig a grave in the courtyard and bury that green dupatta in it. This ritual mirrors the entombing of desires in Santi's heart. But Baino's realization of her love prods Santi to ponder over her own entrapped existence. Baino becomes an active agent in her life. The spark of rebellion ignited by Baino, rekindles the flames of desires in Santi's heart. Memories of Baino flash in her mind and catechise her for the mute acceptance of defeat against the oppressive system. Earlier, Santi was a self-contained woman but now she longs for more. Baino's elopement makes Santi aware of her own personal passions and desires. Baino's memories become so overwhelming that she almost assumes the identity of Santi's psychic 'other' who articulates the silenced cravings of

<sup>1</sup> Jutti is traditional Punjabi footwear made of leather and embellished with extensive embroidery.

<sup>2</sup> Dupatta is a long, multi-purpose scarf worn arranged in two folds over the chest and thrown back around the shoulders, typically with a salwar kameez, by women from South Asia.

Santi's psyche. The awakening of her repressed desires, contrary to what society has created her to be, creates a great deal of inner debate in her character. All these years, she was sleeping and dreaming, but finally she wakes up to realize her love for Gajjan. Rather than remaining a dupe to illusions of a happy life, she prefers the path of happiness through self-awareness. Love for Gajjan pushes her to embrace freedom from her subservient role. She embraces her own individuality, drapes the same green dupatta and elopes with Gajjan to seek fulfilment of her passions. Kaku becomes a mute spectator to this journey of self-realization. He fails to stop her as he has lost his power and authority against the rebellious selves of Santi and Baino. Through *Loha Kutt*, Gargi glorifies women like Santi and Baino who affront hypocrisy and false tradition to realize the truths in their hearts.

In *Saukan* (English: The Rival Woman), Balwant Gargi probes sexual perversions in the lives of men and women. In this play, he focuses his attention on triangular relationship between mother, son and daughter-in-law. The play reflects upon the conflict between mother and daughter-in-law for the economic and physical possession of the love object, that is, son. On a deeper level, *Saukan* is a stringent critique of the biased society which denies women their sense of self and makes them dependent on their fathers, husbands and sons. The woman who assays the role of mother is one such woman who has dependency issues. After the death of her husband, she devotes all her life to her son and in return she expects that the son remains tied to her umbilical cord. But when the son gets married, she sees the daughter-in-law as another contender for son's love and affection. Powerful taboos of the society forbid her from physical possession of her son. The intra-psychic conflict born out of clash of repressed perverted passions and taboos of the society give birth to guilt and shame. When this guilt over repressed desires is internalized by the mother, she starts exhibiting hysterical behaviour. Hysteria is the exteriorization of her latent desires and her perversity. In her hysterical state, the mother expresses her unacceptable desires and defends herself against the conscious recognition of those desires. To vocalize her latent desires she assumes the pseudo-self of her dead daughter. She claims to be in demonic possession of her daughter's spirit and project herself as a victim of the spirit that has taken and directed her 'self'. Mother's hysterical condition, which manifests itself through anxiety attacks and fits of rage, has origins in the oedipal phase of development. The unconscious desires that produce neurotic conflict in mother's psyche involve triangular oedipal rivalries. Her conflict revolves around forbidden or frightening desires towards the incestuous object, the son. The phallic-oedipal fantasy of replacing her daughter-in-law and being phallically penetrated by the son generates in her mind a fear of the rival woman, that is, the daughter-in-law. The relationship with her daughter-in-law is seen as a competition for the possession of love object. When the mother learns that her daughter-in-law has physically possessed her son, the competition between them comes out in the open. To win this competition, mother again assumes the pseudo-self of her dead daughter and starts dressing up like a young woman. Defending her desire for the son she exerts all her youthful strength both in proclaiming and justifying that desire. The battle for the son culminates when the mother, in a sudden surge of powerful emotions, kills her daughter-in-law whom she calls her 'saukan', the rival woman. The killing of daughter-in-law by the mother for the possession of son portends a universal collapse of life. Driven by economic, social and sexual forces the mother fails to find any release. Her hysteria is not a form of emancipation but a declaration of defeat that there is no way out for her.

The present study infers that the plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Balwant Gargi concentrate on different aspects of society and human life. They deal with the complexities of

human relationships in a subtle manner. Their plays show how the society which victimises the individual, who violates its norms, is itself full of evils. They satirise the ills afflicting the society and makes the reader-audience introspect itself by showing the society as it is, in all its ugliness and crudity. An analysis of the plays of Tendulkar and Gargi brings to our notice their intense awareness about the various domestic, social and political problems and the hypocrisies prevailing in people's mind. Their plays expose the orthodox society by attacking its various evils such as hypocrisy, violence, promiscuity and greed. While tracing the anatomy of society, their plays hold a mirror to the desires, dreams and despairs of the ordinary people engaged in their day-to-day struggle of life. Both the playwrights delve deep into the human psyche to find out the causes of misery and suffering, and depict human lives stagnating in the mire of lust, greed and violence.

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