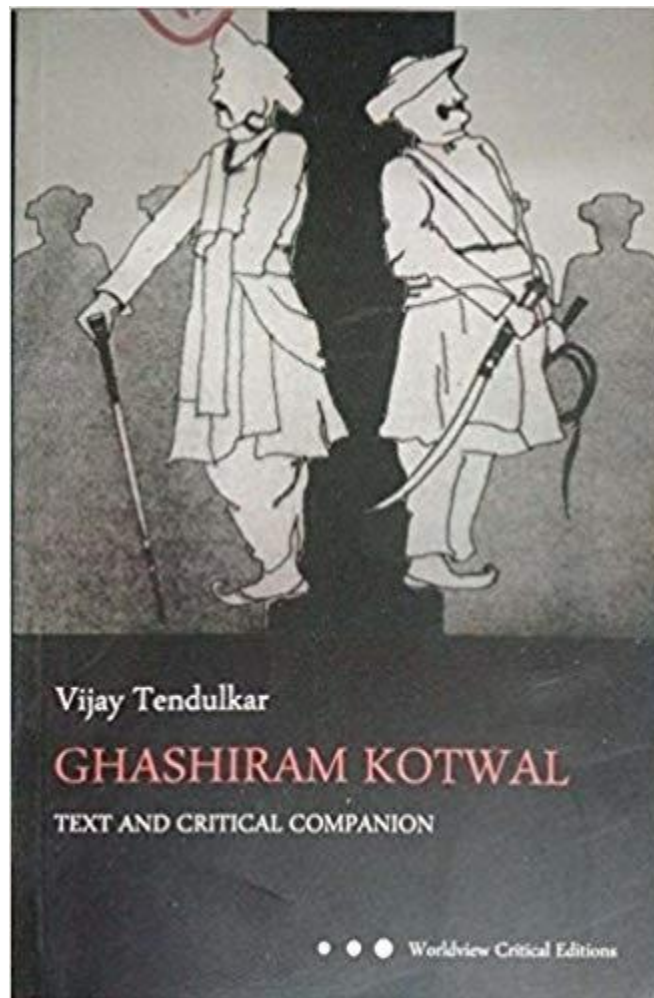


## Woeful Women: A Feminist Reading of Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*

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### Abstract

The present paper intends to represent feministic approach in Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal* in the context of postcolonial gender study. In this play Tendulkar sketched a few female characters that have almost no voice at all throughout the play. His female characters are weak, marginalized and above all victims of patriarchal socio-political oppression and repression. Though

the play is set in a particular socio-political background of colonized India to develop the idea of authority or power, the interpretation and reinterpretation of the text makes it more relevant about the subjugated condition of women in contemporary Indian society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, gender study, hegemony, subjugation, authority, power, other, Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal*

## Introduction

Vijay Dhondo Tendulkar (1928 - 2008) is an eminent Marathi playwright, screenplay writer, journalist and social and political commentator. He has 28 long stage plays, 20 children's plays and several one-act plays to his credit. He first came into prominence in the 1950s and 60s with one-act plays like *Ratra*(1957) and *Bhekad*(1969). His plays are based on real life incidents and deal with various social issues. His best-known plays are *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Kamla*, *Safar*, *Kanyadaan*, *Fifth Woman*. He has also translated plays from other languages, among them Girish Karnad's *Tughlak*(from the original *Kannada*) and some of the plays of the American dramatist, Tennessee Williams. He was awarded and honoured many times during his long career for five decades including Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Award in 1970 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1971. He received the Maharashtra state Government award nine times. He was a recipient of the Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship. In 1984 he was awarded with Padmabhusan.

## Concerned with Social Issues

Tendulkar is a playwright who is concerned with the social issues. He is not a feminist but his plays in general shows the atrocities and cruelties perpetrated by the male characters. Through his large number of plays Tendulkar has shown that male hegemonic social order has not only silenced the ignorant women but also the educated and the economically independent women. Simone de Beauvoir's words are fully applicable in case of Tendulkar's women characters. "*They have gained only what has been willingly to grant; they have taken nothing, they have only received.*"(Beauvoir, xv) Leela Benare and Mrs Kshikar, Kamala and Sarita, Laxmi and Champa, Gulabi and Gauri – all of them are victims of socio-political patriarchal hegemony in one way or the other. As an iconoclast in Indian drama, his plays deal with not only on the tabooed topics like sex but also depict the violence on women by the patriarchal codes, rituals and habits.

## *Ghashiram Kotwal*: A Feminist Reading

*Ghashiram Kotwal* (1970) is an always popular, contemporary and controversial play by Vijay Tendulkar. It is a Marathi play in its original form. It was translated into English by Jayanta Karve and Eleanor Zelliott. The play is remarkable and interesting because of its historical setting and treatment of Nana Phadnavis in a totally different way from the historical Nana Phadnavis, a good Maratha administrator, often referred as Maratha Machiavelli. The play was performed nineteen times by the Progressive Dramatic Association. The play created furore in the then society and the President of the Progressive Theatre Association banned the play on the grounds of being anti-Brahman and demeaning the legendary figure of Nana Phadnavis. The performance of the play resumed in 1974 and since then the play is an all-time hit with more than 6000 performances in its original and translated version in India and abroad – a classic in Indian theatre in depicting power politics. The play is set in Poona in the late eighteenth century during the rule of the Peshwa, Baji Rao II. But it goes beyond all times and climes because of its relevance in contemporary Indian society. According to Shukla Chatterjee(Mondal) in the play 'time' is conceptualized as 'wheel' that rotates forever and "*the play therefore suggests that the players can change from Nana Phadnavis to Shivsena and probably to some Mr. X in the future, but the situation and the game of power politics*

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Trailakya Roy, M.A. (English), NET

Woeful Women: A Feminist Reading of Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*

289

remain the same.”(Chatterjee, 224)The present paper is an attempt to figure out how the concept of gender has evolved in it.

The play begins with the first arrival of Ghashiram Savaldas, a Brahman from Kanauj and his ill-treatment by the Poona Brahmans, the elite class who falsely accused him of theft. This caused anger in Ghashiram and swears to come back to Poona and take revenge on the city for making him a Shudra, a criminal. Ghashiram is in search of an opportunity and it comes in the form of Nana Phadnavis’s demand of his daughter, Lalitha Gauri. Ghashiram without thinking gives his daughter and compelled Nana to appoint him as the **kotwal**<sup>1</sup> the city. And then Ghashiram’s reign of terror begins making the city a hell. These include allowing people to work exclusively under permit, falsely accusing a Brahman of theft, humiliation of a respectable woman as being a prostitute and inhumane punishments like pulling out of nails from fingers and chopping of heads. While Ghashiram is enjoying his reign of terror on the city and its Brahmans, Nana is relishing with the youth and charm of his luscious daughter. However, Ghashiram wakes up lately from his addiction of power when he learns that his daughter is dead, and Nana is marrying for the seventh time. He is angry with Nana, but he is convinced by clever Nana to go with his duty of the kotwal. Again, Ghashiram’s reign of terror resumes and it reaches to its climax level soon. Twenty-two men are killed by suffocation in a small cell for stealing fruits and the city demands justice. The Poona Brahmans are furious and demand Ghashiram’s death warrant. Nana casually signs the order for Ghashiram’s execution and as crowds gather Ghashiram’s motionless and lifeless body is seen. Then clever Nana appears on the stage as a Messiah to cure a disease that plagued them all. To mark this a success, he orders festivities for three days.

The outline of the play makes it clear the play deals with social issues, a universal theme. The play is a political satire and has historical elements it. However, it is Vijay Tendulkar’s signature style that he uses traditional folk elements of theatre in a historical setting and very carefully deals with a contemporary and postcolonial issue. Tendulkar himself asserts, “*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.*” (5)

Women are the marginalized characters in the play. Very little space is given to them in the form of dialogue. Ghashiram, Nana and the Brahmans take up whole of the play. Lalitha Gauri hardly gets a chance to speak. She speaks a few words in her first encounter with Nana when he tries to touch her in front of **Ganapati**<sup>2</sup>. After that she is mute amidst her loss of youth, honour, and when she finally loses her life with a baby in her womb. Ghashiram’s wife is absent from the action. Ananya observes the absence of the marginalized, “*Gauri has no identity of her own, she merely plays out Nana’s imagination. At the moment where Ghashiram is digging out her body, she has no physical presence on stage, for Nana’s illusions have moved past her.*” (*Feminism In India*) The other woman speaks in the play is Gulabi. She tries to show some authority over Nana when she calls her men to beat Ghashiram and snatches the necklace given to him by Nana. But her status as a public woman, a plaything for men’s pleasure reveals the hollowness of her power and authority. Chandra, the mid-wife appears for a moment and she is not given a full sentence to complete. She merely utters, “*There- we buried her there...*” (75).

### **Voiceless and Powerless**

In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the playwright has made the women characters insignificant throughout the play except as sensual and sexual objects. All the women characters in the play are marginalized and victimized by patriarchal socio-political forces. They are portrayed as the weaker sex. This is clearly indicated in the use of words. Ghashiram’s assurance of giving his daughter on

condition reflects this- *“If the hunter is ready, the prey will be found.”*(49) Again reference of Nana as ‘wolf’ (51), ‘beast’ (51), ‘devil’ (74), ‘monster’ (74) and Gauri as ‘deer’ (48) and ‘peach’ (52) reveals that she is weak, vulnerable and fragile in his power. Nana’s description of Gauri- *‘How beautifully formed! What a lovely figure!’* (49) and *‘What a bosom! Buds just blossoming... we’ll squeeze them like this!’* (50) indicate she is nothing but a sex-object in hands of men of power like Nana.

A close reading of Tendulkar’s *Ghashiram Kotwal* reveals the fact that all the women characters are voiceless and powerless in the patriarchal hegemony. The men are the main characters who hold power and authority and take decisions at their whims. In this play, Lalitha Gauri, a young and innocent girl is commoditized between the desires of a power-hungry father, Ghashiram and a luscious ruler, Nana Phadnavis. The father barter his daughter with Nana for the **kotwali**<sup>3</sup> of Poona to fulfill his personal vendetta to tyrannize the Brahmans against his humiliation while Nana uses Gauri to satiate his perverted lust. Nandana Dutta in her ‘Introduction’ to *Ghashiram Kotwal* remarks, *“They display an equal degree of selfishness and a similar willingness to use people to reach their own goals and Tendulkar’s ethical concern is most prominent here – in his understanding of one’s relationship to others who are different from oneself, belonging to a lower economic or social status or opposite sex.”*(7)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, *“The ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant”* (Spivak,32) and this ideology is prevalent throughout the play. In Poona the Brahmans enjoy the highest social order and power. They belong to the ‘Centre’- the symbol of power. The postcolonial view, the idea of powerful, dominant West with masculinity and submissive, weak and obedient East with femininity is clearly manifested. Women are considered ‘Other’- simply taken to be granted. They have no power and social status except the traditionally prescribed roles-wife or sex-partner. Nana Phadnavis symbolizes the patriarchal hegemony that keeps women subordinated in all places and situations. Lalitha has no choice but to be bartered as a sex toy to Nana. Neither she nor her mother speaks any words against her father’s opportunistic decision. They are colonized - they are conditioned not to think or take decisions as if they haven’t any intellectual ability.

In this play women are dominated, exploited and inferiorized by patriarchal oppression and repression. The women characters are denied of their personal and intellectual abilities and capabilities. It is the male characters who take decisions on behalf of them. Women are treated in any way by the men as if they are the owners. The fate of Gauri lies in the hands of two males. Nana wants to relish the youth and beauty of Gauri and Ghashiram wants to climb the power ladder. And Gauri fulfills the immoral aspirations of both of them. She is a colonized woman- voiceless and powerless. Her silent acceptance of her father’s dictates reveals the fact that in patriarchal society a woman has no choice at all except accepting male dominion. The Brahman wives are not happy with their lecherous husbands, but they are silent in solitary confinement. Nana’s wives have ‘become’ women- voiceless and powerless. They have nothing to do with Nana’s decision whether his playing with an innocent girl kills her or in his decision of marrying another girl. They are just ready to accept whatever he does or decides without any comment.

### **Manipulation of Power**

In patriarchal system, males manipulate power in their own way to satisfy their immoral wants. During the **puja**<sup>4</sup> ceremony of Ganapati, Nana comes but he is not listening to the **kirtan**<sup>5</sup> rather she is looking *‘unblinkingly at a pretty girl’*(48). When he comes close and touches her, she pulls back his hand and reminds him that *“He (Ganapati) will see.”* (48) But lustful Nana tries to convince her using religion as a weapon to hunt his prey and says *‘he won’t say anything’* (48) as

Ganapati has two wives. When she finally escapes from his hand, he leaves no opportunity to slip finding the '*Erect! Young! Tender!*' (49) girl. To have 'the prey' in his hand Nana fulfills Ghashiram's demand for the kotwali in exchange for his daughter. Nana enjoys his perverted sexuality with her and throws to die when she is pregnant. She dies but even a death ceremony is not provided to her. Ghashiram is angry with Nana for killing his daughter but he is soothed by Nana's philosophical speech. Then 'Sab Theek Hain' - everything is fine, and Gauri is lost from both of their imagination.

In the play all the male characters are dominant and powerful. They are given enough space in the play to defend their decisions and actions. When **Sutradhar**<sup>6</sup> catches a Brahman going to the red-light area, there is a long conversation between them and the Brahman moves his words this way and that way though it is clear that he is going to Bavannakuni. Ghashiram exchanges his daughter with Nana for the kotwali of Pune and there is long exchange of words. Nana's long monologue is a defense on his behalf – "*This time, there are two bullets in this gun. With the first one, we'll fell your luscious daughter. But with the second we will make the city of Poona dance.*" (55) As the women characters are weaker, no space is given to them to decide. They are just puppets in the hands of men who make them dance and crush their body and roast their individuality like youngling chicks.

In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, all the women characters are colonized by dominant masculine hegemony. Men are the masters. They have social, political and military power. They belong to the elite class. It is their natural right to rule, control and exploit the women- the 'other'- the servant class. They can do anything with them on their whims. The women are the resources, and their exploitation serves multiple purposes. The exploitation of Gauri gives Ghashiram power to rule- '*Gauri dances, Nana dances, Ghashiram's reign has come*' (58) and pleasure of sex to Nana. The Brahmans make their wives suffer 'solitary confinement' while they lose in relishing the prostitutes of Bavannakhani. Ghashiram uses his own daughter to become a kotwal and he humiliates a respectable woman as a prostitute taking her out from her home. He chokes Chandra, the midwife to death though he knows the real culprit is Nana. Nana has several wives of different ages but again Nana's acquisition of '*a tender blossoming bride*' (70) with a deal of hundred gold coins and big portions of land indicates that women are mere resources and materials that serve only to satisfy the male ego. Here the institution of marriage is used as a tool to subjugate the socio-economically poor women.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that Vijay Tendulkar in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal* has dealt with the harsh realities of the contemporary society. The play from a feminist perspective makes it clear that in a patriarchal society, women are considered almost insignificant except as sex-objects. Women are used, abused, sold, humiliated and suffocated by the amoral ideologies by patriarchal hegemony. They have no pleasures in life but are used as objects of pleasure for the men. Happiness is not even an occasional episode in their lives. They have no voice and choice of their own. The male dominated society is indifferent to their role of taking decisions. They are just conditioned to behave at the wink of a finger as prescribed by the patriarchal hegemony. The play is a brilliant political satire written against the emergence of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, but re-reading and re-interpretation of the text makes it a chronicler of male dominance and violence on women in contemporary India.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>**Kotwal** – an official of law and order, equivalent to a police chief.

<sup>2</sup>**Ganapati** – Ganesh, one of the Hindu gods.

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Trailakya Roy, M.A. (English), NET

Woeful Women: A Feminist Reading of Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*

292

<sup>3</sup>**Kotwali**–the office and work of the kotwal.

<sup>4</sup>**Puja** – religious prayer ritual or the act of worship.

<sup>5</sup>**Kirtan** – Religious song/chant in praise of gods/goddesses, sung primarily in chorus.

<sup>6</sup>**Sutradhar**–Narrator who holds the ‘sutra’ or thread of a story.

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