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## Tradition Reimagined: The Evolving Reception of Vijay Tendulkar's Plays in Contemporary Indian Theatre

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**Nand Gopal** Assistant Professor, Department of English, NMSN Das PG College, Budaun, Uttar Pradesh, India.\*  
Email: [nandgopal4pink@gmail.com](mailto:nandgopal4pink@gmail.com)  
DOI:

### Abstract

*Vijay Tendulkar is one of the most outstanding writers of plays in India who has always brought a twist in the traditional values and norms in his plays, thus providing a critical commentary to the socio-political realities of his era. The paper breaks down the reinterpretation of Vijay Tendulkar's plays in the modern context, with reference to the subversion of traditional narrative and conventions of theatrical production in the contemporary performances. An examination of the major works as Sakharam Binder, Ghashiram Kotwal and Silence! The Court is in Session, the research investigates the approaches that the directors have towards the socio-political themes present in the writing of Tendulkar as well as the challenges directed at them by the directors. These changes are suitable for the modern audience of today, as they include new staging devices and allusions to modern culture, creating different responses to them, which mirror the concerns of the society. The article emphasizes the role of the contemporary performance in challenging the traditional understanding of gender relations and power distribution as well as encouraging the audience to think critically about the intricacies of Tendulkar's critique of authority and morality. Finally, it is evident in this study that the Tendulkar's work remains relevant in modern theatre, and it has the potential to become a subject of discussion and raise awareness about burning social and political issues.*

**Keywords:** *Vijay Tendulkar, modern theatre, subversion, reception.*

### Introduction

The Indian drama has a rich and evolving history, which reaches back upon ancient ritualistic play to the present day experimental theatre. The history of Indian dramatic tradition goes back to classical Sanskrit theatre, in which drama was a unifying art form that combined poetry, music, gesture and performance. Early Indian drama was based on aesthetic principles including rasa and dharma. It was not only a form of entertainment, but also a form of moral and social commentary (Richmond et al. 15-28). This classical tradition over the years blended with local folk traditions—such as yakshagana, jatra, tamasha and nautanki—and localized performance traditions and turned theatre into a viable form of cultural expression in a wide range of communities. All these traditions gave a perception of drama as “a social form of art” (Lal 42-56).

The colonial experience had a great impact on the course of Indian drama. Indian theatre experienced the process of transformation and hybridization with the introduction of western dramatic models, proscenium theatre, and realistic aesthetics. It was also the era of Modern Indian drama in the context of experimental forms and staging techniques like kirtan and

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tamasha in *Ghasiram Kotwal*, which was typified by new themes, forms and audiences (Dharwadker 89-115). It is in this context the Indian English drama grew and was originally influenced by colonial education and the Western literature. Early Indian English drama tended to “imitate European dramatic forms” and catered to elite audiences and gave more preference to issues of identity, nationalism and cultural negotiation. Although the Indian English drama had a little early penetration, it slowly became a platform that could be critical when examining social change and postcolonial realities.

During the post-independence era, Indian theatre, whether in any of the languages, gained an added sense of urgency, with playwrights reacting to the paradoxes of a new-born nation. Theatre was a forum on challenging traditional values, institutional control and social order. Other playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar and Mahesh Dattani updated the Indian drama through a combination of “indigenous performance principles and modernist and realist approaches” (Dharwadker 201-235). Vijay Tendulkar is one of them whose analysis of power, violence and moral hypocrisy in social institutions is uncompromising.

Within theatre, the work by Tendulkar is a break that signified the distortion of the representations of tradition by provoking a critical stance on it. Based on folk modes, historical texts and realist theatre, he reveals the coercive conditions of family, law, sexuality and the state. Plays such as *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, and *Sakharam Binder* do not only represent a social struggle, but they “force the viewers to address the ethical side of the collective complicity and institutionalized oppression” (Dodiya 23-45). By so doing, Tendulkar restructures tradition as a location of opposing instead of continuous action.

Although the thematic intensity and the socio-political criticism of Tendulkar plays have been intensively examined in several works, the issue of reception, especially in the modern theatre is relatively under-researched. Tendulkar's plays get new meanings as they are being performed and redefined as theatrical practices, sensibilities of the audience, and critical discourses keep on changing. To analyse how his plays are still subverting tradition in the reception of contemporary theatre, this paper places Tendulkar in the larger historical direction of the Indian drama and Indian English drama. The study suggests that Tendulkar has been made significantly more relevant than he was originally through a process of textual provocation, but also through the changing life of his plays in the contemporary theatre by foregrounding reception as “a dynamic and interpretive process”.

## **Literature Review**

Indian drama has been studied through the vast body of critical literature which has traced the transformation of Indian drama since the classical aesthetics and the current performance practices. Early studies about Sanskrit drama, including those that interpreted the *Natyasastra*, put drama on firm basis as “a unified art form, a place of performance, emotion, and social morals” (Richmond et al. 28-42). These works highlight the way in which the early Indian drama was a cultural mechanism based on *rasa* theory and shared experience. Subsequent critical literature on Indian folk theatre extends this viewpoint further to include regional performance traditions and their contribution to the preservation of the “popular, participatory styles of drama” over centuries (Lal 98-112).

The shift of the traditional to modern Indian theatre has been discussed thoroughly in the area of studies of the performances of colonialism and postcolonialism. Critical histories of contemporary Indian drama record the ways in which Western theatrical practices, particularly realism, proscenium staging, and scripted drama engaged with native practices to form “hybrid theatrical practices” (Dharwadker 45-78). These writings champion that contemporary Indian theatre did not appear out of imitation but out of “adaptation and resistance,” paving the way to a socially engaged drama in the twentieth century.

Indian English drama takes a very specific place in this academic discussion. Early critical analysis observes its “peripheral position” as compared to regional-language theatre, in large part because of its small audience and colonial past (Dharwadker 156-189). But subsequent research on Indian English drama points out how it has gradually grown into a literary and performance genre. Historians highlight the ways in which authors who wrote in the English language addressed the problem of identity, nationalism, and cultural negotiation, which were part of more general discussions in the field of postcolonial literature.

The work of Vijay Tendulkar has been the subject of many discussions on the topic of modern Indian theatre, and a number of critical books fully dedicated to his dramaturgy were published (Dodiya 1-15). Initial critical research tended to treat Tendulkar in sociological and moral terms with his “provocative sexuality, violence, and deviance”. Such plays as *Sakharam Binder* and *Silence! The Court Is in Session* are examined because of the challenges with middle-class morality, but also due to the uneasiness that they caused both to the audience and to critics (Mukherjee 67-89).

Later book-length works provide a more politically knowledgeable interpretation of the theatre of Tendulkar. Historians who analyse *Ghashiram Kotwal* also stress its “allegory of the past and the critique of the dictatorial rule”. These readings are attracted by the fact that Tendulkar introduces new ways of using folk performance, whereby he believes that he is

changing the old ways into “political satire instruments” (Dharwadker 245-278). These kinds of interpretations represent a transition to ideological critique instead of to moral evaluation, and place Tendulkar as a dramatist who is much concerned with the issues of power and social complicity.

Feminist critical writings have also contributed to the Tendulkar scholarship through the study of gender relations and patriarchal organization in his plays. Feminist books on Indian drama examine the female characters in dramas by Tendulkar as “figures of structural oppression, but not personal tragedy” (Mukherjee 112-145; Tharu and Lalita 234-267). These works conclude that Tendulkar unveils the processes by which the institutions like family, marriage, and law “control feminine subjectivity” as much as his plays do not provide emancipatory solutions.

The other major area of scholarship is one that places Tendulkar in a wider context of Indian political theatre. Comparative analysis of such playwrights as Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, and Tendulkar is revealed as having the common thread of challenging authority but using different kinds of dramaturgical technique (Karnad 15-32). They highlight the “realistic and psychological intensity” of Tendulkar compared to mythic reworking of Karnad and experimentation of minimalism by Sircar, therefore explaining the special role of Tendulkar in the modern Indian drama.

The performance studies have also become focused on the role of staging and embodiment towards the interpretation of the plays by Tendulkar. Indian theatre performance books assert that this is exactly the reason why the drama of Tendulkar “cannot be interpreted strictly” because it is based on the context of performance and the response of the audience (Fischer-Lichte 78-95). The reviews of various productions show the influence of the directorial decisions, space organization and the interaction between actors and the audience on the moral effectiveness of his plays.

Although the reception theory is commonplace in Western theatre studies, the application of this category to the Indian drama was introduced relatively recently. The critical writing on performance reception stresses on the fact that “meaning is created by historical and cultural viewing conditions” (Williams 45-67). Although there are books on Indian theatre that briefly recognize audience response and controversy of the plays written by Tendulkar, a few of them provide a prolonged analysis based on reception. Such a flaw is especially noticeable when modern productions are discussed as Tendulkar in the context of modern issues of gender violence, populist politics, and institutional responsibility are revisited.

According to critical books that have emerged recently discussing contemporary Indian theatre, Tendulkar is still relevant in the modern performance culture. These articles observe that the plays are being re-enacted by directors and theatre collectives more and more as “living documents rather than historical documents” that can be used to deal with current fears (Dharwadker 345-378). Critiques and retrospective opinions incorporated in these studies indicate that the theatre of Tendulkar acquires “a new political urgency” by being reinterpreted and not repeated.

In spite of the rich mass of available literature, there is still a considerable gap in terms of merging reception theory and Tendulkar studies. The dynamics of contemporary reception have been explored inadequately, and most books are either textual, thematic, or historical in their approach. This paper is an extension and addition to the current body of literature in that it foregrounds reception as a critical approach that would help in better understanding the subverting tradition of Tendulkar's plays.

### **Research Methodology**

The current research employs the qualitative, interpretative, and interdisciplinary research approach to determine how plays like *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *Silence! The Court is in Session* written by Vijay Tendulkar are received in the modern theatre. It is a type of close textual and dramaturgical analysis that unites with performance-based interpretation and analyses such aspects as narrative structure, characterization, the appeal of folk and realist elements, and subversion strategies. The reception-based methodology is used to investigate critical reviews, performance reviews, and academic commentaries to follow the change in meaning over both historical and current periods (Fischer-Lichte 112-134). Based on the reception theory and the performance studies, the study anticipates “vivid interaction of the text, performance, and audience as a place of meaning-making”. Comparative and contextual analysis also places the dramaturgy of Tendulkar in the wider context of Indian drama and Indian English drama, which will allow to consider the manner in which tradition is being challenged and reformulated through progressive modes of theatrical reception.

### **Tradition and Subversion in Tendulkar's Dramaturgy**

Tradition has been a traditional trait in Indian theatre which has been associated with preservation of culture, moral teachings and social peace. Tendulkar breaks this illusion by making tradition to be seen as “a tool that often justifies hierarchy and oppression”. His plays are not a denial of tradition in that they dismantle traditional forms and conventions and reformulate them in order to trace out their ideological backdrop (Dodiya 78-95).

In *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, Tendulkar uses the format of a mock trial as a court format that is traditionally linked to justice and reasonableness. Nevertheless, the play shows how the legal language might also be turned into “a weapon of social inhumanity especially towards women” (Tendulkar, *Silence* 45-67). The humiliation of the protagonist in the public highlights the “patriarchal basis of moral judgment” and mocks the conventional respect of the institutional power.

The traditional concept of marriage and morality in a critical way can be seen in his other play *Sakharam Binder*. Even though Sakharam does not accept institutional marriage, the play reveals the process through which his own code of personal “reproduces patriarchal domination” (Tendulkar, *Sakharam* 23-45). Tendulkar is too critical to provide moral closure which makes the conventional assumption about theatre as a means of conveying morality rather unstable.

Folk elements including chorus, music and rhythmic movement are used in *Ghashiram Kotwal* not to praise the cultural heritage but to “criticize the authoritarian power and people, who are ready to follow it” (Tendulkar, *Ghashiram* 89-112). By re-appropriating folk tradition in this way, Tendulkar turns the already known forms into “instruments of political inquiry”.

### **Theoretical Production and Reception**

The research paper relies on reception theory and the performance studies in order to examine how the plays by Tendulkar create meaning in the modern context. In its relationship to the theory of reception, one should highlight the fact that the audience does contribute to the construction of the meaning because the texts are not objectively determined; they are “re-interpreted under the circumstances of historical and cultural conditions” (Williams 112-135). The meaning comes out in the interplay between the work and the readers or the spectators. Reception cannot be separated in theatre and performance. Performance studies emphasise the “eventual quality of theatre” in which sense is created via the dynamic interplay of actors, space and audience (Fischer-Lichte 156-178). The application of this framework to the plays of Tendulkar makes it possible to comprehend the way its meaning develops with the shift in the performance practices and sensibilities of the audience.

This paper transcends the text-based approaches to analysing theatre through a reception-oriented approach to make an analysis of Tendulkar theatre as “a living discourse, which can be reinterpreted and re-energized”.

### **Counter-Reception and Criticism**

Not only was the first response of the readers of Tendulkar's plays usually controversial, censored, and polarizing in terms of critical reaction. The theatrical performances like *Sakharam Binder* were banned because they were “overtly involved with sexuality” and because they did not moralize on male dominance (Mukherjee 145-167). Ghashiram Kotwal attracted a mixed response due to its “irreverent handling of the historical authority” and its criticism of Brahmanical regimes of power (Dharwadker 289-312). These reactions demonstrate how the plays by Tendulkar upset traditional values of theatre as moral affirmation. This uneasiness that they caused reaffirms their “subversive nature,” because they put audiences to face with things they would rather not know about social complicity and institutional violence.

### **Reception and Reinterpretation in the Modern Era**

Today, the plays of Tendulkar are viewed more through the paradigms of “gender studies, political criticism, and experimental performance”. New readings of the work that predict the structural criticism inherent in his work have become possible by changing audience sensibility and theatrical aesthetics (Dharwadker 401-425).

Themes of populism, authoritarianism, and surveillance are frequently pushed in recent productions of Ghashiram Kotwal, and the play conforms to contemporary international political fears. The lack of staging and representation of symbolic movement attracts the viewer to the “cyclic character of the power and the role of the population in oppression”.

At the level of reception, Tendulkar's plays were initially seen as “bold and disturbing”. Early audiences were often shocked by the harsh realism and open treatment of violence, sexuality, and power. For example, *Silence! The Court Is in Session* was appreciated for its innovative structure, but many viewers felt uncomfortable with the way a woman is psychologically humiliated in a mock trial (Tendulkar, *Silence* 12-34). Over time, however, the same play has been reinterpreted as “a powerful feminist text”. Scholars now read the character of Leela Benare not as a victim alone, but as “a symbol of resistance against patriarchal oppression” (Mukherjee 189-211). Modern productions often highlight her strength rather than her helplessness, showing how reception changes across generations.

Likewise, *Sakharam Binder* has had one of the most tumultuous histories in Indian theatre. On its first staging, it was accused of being obscene and even banned for depicting sexual relations and domestic abuse (Dodiya 156-178). Many audiences and critics accused Tendulkar of “promoting immorality”. But in its subsequent performances, emphasis has changed. Nowadays, it is considered to be “a critique of male dominance and social hypocrisy”. *Sakharam* is often seen as a socialised, violent character, rather than a hero. Feminist

interpretations also explore the women's roles, particularly Laxmi and Champa, as a "complex figures who reflect different forms of survival and resistance" (Mukherjee 234-256).

Another case study is Ghashiram Kotwal. At first, it caused political controversy for its apparent undermining of historical figures and cultural traditions. Other groups complained about its depiction of the Peshwa era. Theatre critics, on the other hand, applauded its "innovative use of music, dance, and folk forms" (Dharwadker 312-335). More recently, the play has been understood to be "a timeless commentary on power politics". It is often related to current political issues, demonstrating the corrupting influence of power. The figure of Nana Phadnavis is not just considered a historical character anymore, but "a symbol of manipulative power present in every era".

The responses to Kamala also reveal a movement from a superficial to a critical reading. Initially, the play was seen as "a critique of unethical journalism" as it is inspired by a journalist who "buys" a tribal woman to expose human trafficking (Tendulkar, Kamala 67-89). But subsequent readings explore gender relations within the family more. There is a view that "the real issue in the play is not just the exploitation of Kamala, but also the silent oppression of Sarita," the journalist's wife (Mukherjee 278-301). Contemporary interpretations emphasise how educated women are also marginalised as inferior to men, broadening the feminist dimension of the play.

For Kanyadaan, the response has been mixed. On its initial performance it was applauded for the fact that it raised questions regarding caste and the naivety of progressive families. But many were also troubled by its brutal concluding scene and the failure of its inter-caste marriage (Tendulkar, Kanyadaan 45-78). As time passed, readings have become more complex. Some view the play as "a critique of liberal ideology that ignores ground realities" while others view it as "exposing the deep-rooted nature of caste violence" (Tharu and Lalita 312-345). There are also feminist readings of the character of Jyoti who becomes "a victim of both caste and gender oppression". So, the play is open to debate, and it demonstrates its open-endedness.

Among the above plays, one common feature stands out: Tendulkar's plays are "open to multiple interpretations" because they are not judgemental. This initially puzzled and annoyed people who wanted clear messages or resolutions. But contemporary literary theory appreciates this. Now, this is seen as "a strength, as it allows each generation to reinterpret the plays according to its own concerns" (Fischer-Lichte 201-225).

Another facet of re-interpretation is performance. Tendulkar's plays are not only "texts" but also "living theatre". They are performed differently and so take on different meanings. For

example, *Ghashiram Kotwal* may be staged as either a historical satire or as a present-day allegory. Likewise, *Sakharam Binder* can be presented as a realistic drama with shocking content or "a symbolic critique of patriarchy" (Dharwadker 456-478). These different staging options demonstrate that reception is influenced both by the script and the staging.

Poetics and context also matter. Translations of Tendulkar's Marathi plays bring out different aspects. Different audiences focus on different elements of the play. For instance, in the play *Kamala*, city audiences may be concerned with issues of gender, while village audiences may identify with class exploitation. This "diversity of response adds to the richness" of his plays.

From an academic point of view, the reception and reinterpretation of Tendulkar's plays underline the "interaction between text, audience, and society". His plays are like mirrors that reflect society, but the reflection depends on the spectator. While early analyses might have focused on "morality and obscenity", recent critical works highlight "power structures, gender relations, and caste dynamics" (Dodiya 201-223). It reflects the evolution of critical approaches in Indian literature.

In brief, the interpretation and reinterpretation of Vijay Tendulkar's plays prove their relevance. His plays were initially seen as transgressive and controversial, but later as insightful and progressive. Each of his plays continues to be interpreted in different ways through evolving critical approaches and performance approaches. This makes Tendulkar a significant playwright and an ongoing topic of study. His drama proves that "powerful literature does not offer fixed answers; instead, it invites ongoing dialogue, reinterpretation, and critical engagement".

## **Discussion**

The reception of the plays by Vijay Tendulkar has shown that it is not a fixated textual attribute but "an active process" which can be triggered both by the performance and the response of the audience that subverts tradition in his plays. Dramaturgy by Tendulkar is an outright revolt against moral closure and interpretative certitude, and thus, calls upon every generation of the viewers to address the ideological contradictions embedded within social institutions. The following discussion expounds on how contemporary reception has become an important place whereby tradition is interrogated, reinterpreted and reconstituted.

The main results of this research are that the application of traditional forms by Tendulkar does not presuppose culture affirmation, it is rather its "critical reappropriation". The folk elements of the performance, including chorus and song, are also performed with more irony and visual asceticism in modern productions of *Ghashiram Kotwal* to focus on the "mechanics

of power instead of historical spectacle” (Dharwadker 501-524). The contemporary directors often stress on the communal aspect of violence and complicity, which makes the play relevant to the present-day interests of authoritarian rule and mass acceptance. When the reception of the audience is affected in such a way, the perception of the play as a historical satire becomes replaced by its understanding as a commentary on the enduring political trends, thus the traditional is turned into an instrument of criticism.

Likewise, reception of *Silence! The Court Is in Session* in modern theatre highlights how institutional violence has been changing its definition especially regarding gender. Although the themes of the play, which were the means of a social provocation in the eyes of early viewers, have become more sensitive to the current viewers and critics due to the revelation about “systemic patriarchy and social disgrace” (Mukherjee 334-356). Modern productions often predict the psychological aspects of the experience of the main character through the spatial arrangement, the intensity of the performance, and the use of silence. These interpretive decisions enhance the understanding of the audience about the way apparently reasonable institutions “reproduce marginalization and victimization,” to strengthen the topicality of the play in the current discussions of gender justice and professional responsibility.

The recent amendments in the reception of Sakharam Binder also shows how the evolving socio-cultural sensibility factors affect the interpretation. Being first met with moral anxiety and controversy, the play has been seen as an exercise in exploring the concept of “toxic masculinity and false morality” as a fundamental means of self-determination (Dodiya 267-289). The modern viewer would interpret the personal code of Sakharam as a variation of individualism of radicalism and to a certain degree as the continuation of the patriarchal rule in the form of freedom. This reinterpretation is indicative of larger discursive shifts in the critical discourse, especially the impact of “feminist and gender-based perspectives,” which allow one to have a more structural view of power relations in the work by Tendulkar.

The role of performance aesthetics in reception as another important thing to be discussed is also mentioned. The modern productions are characterized by “minimalist staging, symbolic movement, and non-linear narration” and place the accent on ethical confrontation as opposed to narrative realism (Fischer-Lichte 267-289). The tactics open the spectators to participate in the play instead of drinking it as a moral truth. This lack of definite answers in the theatre of Tendulkar is a fruitful ground of reflection making the viewers question their own role in the authority structures and tradition.

Reception as well functions at the critical discourse level in which players of Tendulkar are started being located in world discourses of power, surveillance and institutional domination. His works are flexible and still relevant as evidenced by the reinterpretation of his works in view of the modern political and social fears. Instead of de-Indianizing their situation, this broadened reception only highlights the fact that the concerns that Tendulkar deals with are “universal,” which only underlines his relevance in the national and international theatre arena.

Broadly, the discussion confirms that the subversive quality of theatre of Tendulkar is maintained by its permeability. In this sense of tradition, it is not a thing that is preserved or dismantled absolutely; it is constantly revisited in terms of the dynamics of performance and reception. This analysis confirms that Tendulkar plays are still “living texts” and the critical power of the plays is re-enacted with every new production and performance, which makes the plays relevant even nowadays in the world of modern theatre.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has presented the argument that the plays of Vijay Tendulkar keep on subverting tradition in their performance in the modern theatre. It shows that Tendulkar's radicalism is not merely a textual provocation but the dynamic of his theatre by examining the audiences' reaction and the strategies of the productions. The idea of reception is becoming a dynamic one because it is in the process of being "repeatedly questioned, negotiated and changed". So, theatre is a vital site for opposition where traditions are tested to the extreme and redefined for different social contexts.

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