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VIJAY TENDULKAR AND DEPICTION OF REALISM IN POSTMODERN INDIAN DRAMA: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar stands as one of the most powerful and controversial dramatists in modern Indian theatre. His plays revolutionized Marathi and Indian drama by questioning social, moral, and political structures while redefining theatrical realism. While many of his plays appear grounded in the conventions of social realism, Tendulkar uses the very tools of realism—authentic dialogue, psychological depth, and social settings—to undermine its limits and expose the violence beneath social respectability. This paper examines how Tendulkar both employs and subverts realism in Indian drama through his themes, characters, and dramatic techniques. Focusing on major plays such as *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, *Sakharam Binder*, and *Kanyadaan*, it explores how realism in his works becomes a means of radical critique rather than mere representation.

KEYWORDS: Vijay Tendulkar, Indian drama, realism, subversion, gender, caste, theatre, modernism, social criticism, Marathi theatre.

INTRODUCTION:

Vijay Tendulkar (1928–2008) occupies a unique position in post-independence Indian theatre. Emerging from Marathi theatre, he reshaped the idea of dramatic realism by merging it with political awareness and psychological complexity. Traditional realism in Indian drama—especially after independence—sought to depict the “real” life of common people, often highlighting social evils like caste discrimination, poverty, and gender inequality. However, Tendulkar refused to use theatre merely as a social mirror; instead, he turned it into

a sharp weapon of critique. His plays such as *Silence! The Court Is in Session* (1963), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), and *Kanyadaan* (1983) are grounded in everyday settings and employ ordinary language, yet they reveal layers of cruelty, hypocrisy, and violence hidden beneath social norms. Tendulkar's theatre thus shifts realism from representation to revelation. He uses realism only to question its assumptions—exposing how “reality” itself is constructed by power, gender, and ideology.

Realism in Indian Drama:

The rise of realism in Indian drama coincided with the sociopolitical changes following India's independence in 1947. Earlier Indian theatre—especially in regional languages—was dominated by mythological, historical, or musical performances. With playwrights like Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, and Vijay Tendulkar, a new phase of modern Indian drama began. These writers turned their attention toward the social, political, and psychological realities of contemporary India. Realism, as a dramatic technique, was adopted from Western theatre traditions (like those of Henrik Ibsen or George Bernard Shaw), but Indian dramatists reinterpreted it through the lens of Indian social contexts—caste hierarchies, patriarchy, corruption, and moral decay. However, realism in India was not merely about imitating life; it became a tool for social reform and moral reflection. Vijay Tendulkar entered this tradition in the 1950s and immediately challenged it. While his plays appeared realistic—set in ordinary homes or public spaces, using everyday speech—they revealed the violence, hypocrisy, and repressed sexuality that realism often failed to confront. He believed that theatre should not only “reflect” life but should also expose its distortions.

Tendulkar's Approach to Realism:

Tendulkar's realism is psychological, social, and political. He does not construct simple moral narratives where good triumphs over evil. Instead, his characters are driven by complex motivations, suppressed desires, and conflicting emotions. His realism therefore captures the inner turmoil of individuals trapped by society's expectations. In *Silence! The Court Is in Session* (1963), Tendulkar creates a courtroom mock trial that turns into an emotional dissection of a woman, Miss Benare, revealing society's cruelty and hypocrisy. The play uses a very realistic setup—ordinary people rehearsing a play—but quickly transforms it into a terrifying metaphor for patriarchal judgment and collective oppression. Similarly, in *Sakharam Binder* (1972), Tendulkar uses the realism of domestic life to question moral hypocrisy. The protagonist, Sakharam, lives with women without marrying them, openly

rejecting social norms. Yet, the play exposes how even rebellion against morality can replicate the same power hierarchies it seeks to defy. Tendulkar uses realism here not to affirm “truth” but to question who defines it. Thus, his realism is subversive—it destabilizes the viewer’s comfort with moral certainties. He uses realistic dialogue, plausible characters, and familiar spaces only to make the audience confront uncomfortable truths

Thematic Subversion of Realism:

Tendulkar’s plays subvert realism by showing that what is considered “normal” or “realistic” is itself shaped by violence and power. His realism does not reproduce social order—it exposes its brutality. One major theme of subversion is gender politics. In a patriarchal society, realism traditionally centered male experience as “universal.” Tendulkar breaks this by placing women at the center of emotional and moral crises. His female characters—Miss Benare (*Silence!*), Laxmi and Champa (*Sakharam Binder*), Jyoti (*Kanyadaan*)—are not passive victims. They challenge, suffer, and assert individuality even within oppressive conditions.

Another theme is moral ambiguity. Realist theatre often aims for moral clarity, but Tendulkar’s plays refuse easy categorization. His characters are neither heroes nor villains—they are deeply flawed human beings. For example, in *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), both the oppressive Brahmin ruler Nana Phadnavis and his servant Ghashiram embody corruption and victimhood simultaneously. Realism becomes a mirror that distorts, revealing the cyclical nature of power. Tendulkar also subverts social realism’s optimism. While earlier dramatists portrayed society’s ills to inspire reform, Tendulkar depicts violence as inherent and recurring—not easily erased by good intentions. His realism thus becomes tragic and existential rather than reformist.

Structural and Dramatic Subversion:

Apart from thematic challenges, Tendulkar also subverts the structure of realistic theatre. Instead of following a linear narrative with exposition, climax, and resolution, he often employs meta-theatrical techniques, breaking the illusion of reality. In *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, the play-within-a-play structure exposes the theatricality of justice and social morality. The “rehearsal” gradually becomes indistinguishable from real judgment, suggesting that all of social life is a kind of performance governed by oppressive scripts. In *Ghashiram Kotwal*, Tendulkar combines folk theatre (*Tamasha, kirtan*) with Brechtian distancing techniques. The play’s stylized dance, chorus, and music interrupt realism,

creating a political allegory about power and corruption. The use of folk forms not only “Indianizes” realism but also undermines its Western conventions, proving that realism itself can be a colonial construct. Similarly, Sakaram Binder uses confined domestic space as a psychological arena where realism collapses into absurdity and violence. The play’s naturalistic setting becomes claustrophobic, reflecting how social norms trap individuals in self-destruction.

Ideological Subversion: Questioning the “Real”:

Tendulkar’s greatest innovation lies in his ideological subversion of realism. He questions the assumption that theatre can ever present “objective truth.” For him, what society calls “real” is a construct of power—especially patriarchal, casteist, and capitalist systems. In Kanyadaan (1983), the liberal father Nath Devlalikar believes in bridging caste divides through his daughter’s marriage to a Dalit poet. However, the marriage collapses into violence and humiliation. The play dismantles the idealistic liberal realism of post-independence India, showing that emotional empathy cannot erase historical violence. The “real” social structure continues to determine personal relationships.

CONCLUSION

Vijay Tendulkar’s contribution to Indian drama lies in his dual role as realist and subversive. His plays begin within the familiar world of social realism but soon destabilize it, forcing audiences to see how reality itself is constructed through power, gender, and ideology. By employing everyday speech, domestic settings, and credible characters, Tendulkar anchors his drama in the real; by using devices like play-within-a- play, ambiguity, and psychological intensity, he breaks realism’s limits.

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