

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ARTICULATING SILENCE AND VIOLENCE IN MOHAN RAKESH'S *HALF –WAY HOUSE* AND VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *GHASIRAM KOTWAL*: A COMPARATIVE EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at describing the process of establishing dominance within a culture, either by brute force or by voluntary consent. It is through the active and passive voices in the plays that one comes to know about the 'subalternization' of women and their 'struggle to signify'. Key terms such as 'resistance', 'subjugation', 'ruling bloc', 'representation', 'patriarchy', 'role-playing' and 'power' acquaint the readers with gender problems in India which take place at national and regional level (before and after independence). This comparative study attempts to evaluate the dimensions of hegemonic values and the contemporary woman's transforming consciousness as a marginalized class in women's own textual constructions.

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I
Vijay Tendulkar and Mohan Rakesh are the most eminent playwright in Indian writing, and plays show, that they were individuals deeply immersed in their times. They were concerned with all forms of operation in society and within the family. The strong visual sense of both the playwrights, tightly designed plots and profound sense of theatrical space, and a sure insight into dramatic characterization. This is what makes both Vijay Tendulkar and Mohan Rakesh important figures in Indian theater as both of them experimented with something or the other, whether it be one man playing different roles (in *Half-way House*), or a silent human wall (in *Ghasiram Kotwal*). Both the playwrights through the women characters in their plays have shown

the hegemony of traditional power structures in society. While Tendulkar presents this on social level, Rakesh presents it on a domestic level. Two key terms, silence and violence are enough to portray the women characters in *Ghasiram Kotwal* and *Half –way House*. The women characters in both the plays mirror the actual state of women who are living in a society which is dominated by males. The truth that emerges from the plays, both in reading and in performance, is that the onus of tragedy lies with the women. Therefore, many astute readers and critics have termed these plays as anti- woman. In both the plays there is a class where all human bonds of love and concern for one another have been replaced by very mundane and materialistic compulsions. Whenever bonds of love

and concern are replaced by materialistic compulsions, hell is inevitable.

Half-way House is the English translation of Mohan Rakesh's Hindi play *Aadhe-Adhure*, which means incomplete. In the play every member of family is out of his joints, and each one of them drags over each other making a home not a home but a hell. In *Half-way House*, the women characters are active in their role as well as characters. Mohan Rakesh in his play has presented women as rebels, independent, active and modern. On the other hand, he has presented men as passive, dull and male-chauvinists. There are three women characters in the play namely Savitri, Binni, Kinni – who play a very active role in the play, and resist the male dominance. The women characters in *Half-way House* refuse to be silent, and are ready to resist the violence. Savitri, Binni and Kinni are such characters who cannot be silenced as they are new- women of the post-Independent era, whose foundation is based on the principle of egalitarianism. It is the refusal of male dominance that creates wedge in relationships, and mirrors the problems of domestic-household. In the play it is seen that Savitri is sole-provider of the family, and this fact makes her arrogant and aggressive towards her husband Mahendranath. Both Mahendranath and Savitri drive over each other in other to dominate the family; but both subsequently end up fighting which affected the mind of their three children –Binni, Ashok and Kinni. It is because of the domestic-violence that Binni, their elder daughter, had run away from the house and got married to Manoj, which later proved to be an unsuccessful marriage. The conflict between Mahendranath and Savitri also affected Ashok as he became a loiterer doing nothing useful but passing time here and there, and not helping the family economically. As for Kinni, she became a spoiled brat due to lack of parental control and supervision. In the tug-of-war for authority and power, the family gets fragmented, disintegrated, devoid of love and affection. Mohan Rakesh has created a woman who is ahead of her time, a woman who is a rebel, a voice of those women who have been the victims of the domestic-violence and in turn have been silenced. Savitri represents the predicament of this rising new woman which

becomes clear in her encounter with Juneja towards the end of the play:

The Fourth Man: Because today he thinks he is helpless. You've made him believe that, despite the circumstances, he has no other way of life open to him, no other solution, except to remain with you. And haven't you done everything to ensure that, if nothing else, you should at least be able to hold this wretched pawn in your hand?

The Woman: Why can't you stop? Go away... and keep him with you forever. There's no need for him to come and live in house. And I too... I've absolutely no need for this 'pawn' as you say, this man who neither moves ahead himself nor permits anyone else to do so!

The Fourth Man: (watches her in silence for a few seconds and the desperately) All right. He won't come back. He is weak, but not that weak. He is attached to you, but not that attached. He is not as helpless either, as he thinks. If he'd looked around he would see that the whole world is before him. I'll try and open his eyes to it.

The Woman: Do, please do. You will not only help him, you will also be helping me. (Rakesh,77).

The above lines convey that Savitri is a modern woman who is not dependent on their husbands for their living. By asserting her individuality Savitri also asserts that a woman is not merely a wife, mother and daughter, but also a free human being who has her own dreams, ambitions, aspirations, goals in life. Savitri asserts during her climatic exchange with Juneja, that all men are alike, with different masks, meaning thereby that all men are the true descendants of Manx, for woman is the slave of her husband and by extension of the family:

The Woman: Haven't I said that's enough! All of you... every one of you... all alike! Exactly the same. Different masks, but the face...? The same wretched face... every single one of you!

The Fourth Man: And yet you felt you had a choice...? Was there really any choice? Tell me was, there? (76)

Mohan Rakesh wrote a long speech for Savitri, to be spoken towards the end of the play, in her encounter with Juneja. But the charge that the play is anti-woman is not withdrawn because Juneja forcefully demonstrates that Savitri, because of her unlimited ambitions, unrealistic aspirations in life,

and a string of extra-marital relations is responsible for ruining the family. Juneja's speech is valorised because it has logic on its side. The readers can see two Savitris in the play. One the traditional, homebound, family bound woman and the new woman, who is conscious of what she has been doing for the family, who has seen the glitter of material world, with opportunities and better life and who has come to believe that her self-fulfillment lies in walking out of the family and fulfilling her desires. This is the new Savitri. She is beset by problems because she is also driven by desire for personal fulfillment by her enormous appetite for life which does not accord well with postulates of a patriarchal society. She is woman more sinned against than sinning. Savitri is as helpless as Mahendranath when it comes to leaving the family. She cannot leave the family because there is a tradition-bound 'self' which will not allow her to do so, however she may fret, fume or beat her head in frustration.

Savitri metaphorizes the cultural schizophrenia for the urban-middle class, which forever attempts to juggle standing on two stools – they remain in notions of morality and traditional values on one hand, and, on the other hand, aspire to join the ranks of the rich and the wealthy in the process lose out on their peace of mind and happiness because what they want is impossible. A detailed study of women characters in *Half-way House* shows the genesis of complexities in the man woman relationship which arises out the emergence of a new economically independent woman and the changed equation of power between the sexes within marriage. What Mohan Rakesh has shown is a kind of role-reversal and subverted the traditional power structures in his play. Savitri, as well as her husband, Mahendranath, absorb the patriarchal culture and observe it. It makes them think that man is a bread-earner and that woman is a housekeeper. Though the patriarchal culture is common to all, individual differ in their perception and absorption of it. In this context, Savitri is more assertive than her husband. This is, contrary to the patriarchal cultural norms of sexiest role, Savitri has more controlling power than her husband. So, Mahendranath meekly yields to the demands of his wife and

purchases furniture by withdrawing his share of capital from the business. Savitri takes up a job and feeds the family, which Mahendranath idles away without helping her with her house work. This upsets the cultural norms of the patriarchy. Mahendranath wants to be manly and refuses to take up house work; but he does not try to find some employment or other.

Savitri play a masculine role of earning the bread for the family and the feminine role of keeping the house, without being appreciated for dual burden. She seems to enjoy more freedom than a traditional wife, but she cannot break the patriarchal fetters completely to realize her dreams. Mahendranath can neither play his masculine role successfully nor break himself free from it. Both of them lack the faculty of spontaneity to have to come into a direct conflict which has created a crisis in their family. A critic named Chaudhari aptly observes: "the crisis of identity and breakdown of communication in human relation and the resultant tragic effect of boredom and despair constitutes again the theme of next play *Aadhe-Adhre*."

Through the women characters in *Half-way House* he has brought to our kind notice the issue of gender injustice which is quite predominant in a country like India, where women are not completely emancipated from the bonds of society, and are still confined to the four walls of place called 'home'. The discussion of women characters in both *Half-way House* and *Ghasiram Kotwal* aim at creating feminist awareness of female suffering in a patriarchal society. The technique of one actress for 3 characters plus the same name for them contributes remarkably to the feminist theme of the play. It also suggests that women are denied their individual identity and existence in a male dominated society. Savitri manages to convey the impression that her life is a curse, and that her husband, Mahendranath is the curse of her life. Savitri exemplifies the needs of women – to marry a man who can help her go up the ladder of social-economic hierarchy. Mohan Rakesh has depicted marriage as a social prison where the condemned life with no exit. Mohan Rakesh depicts the deformity in the personalities of man and woman caused by gender distinction of

the patriarchal culture in Half-way House. The domestic violence and the silencing of women help the readers to analyze the fragmented personality of the modern human being. Rakesh himself says: "Every one of us is living a life, a life in fragments." We are actually born whole human beings, but the division of labor based on gender breaks us into male and female fragments. Each fragment retains only half of human potential. The two polarized, deformed fragments are called men and women. These gender deformities are, thus, caused and gradually canonized by social-cultural programming of sex roles. One can see division of gender on the basis of work in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "For nothing lovelier can be found in woman, than to study household good, and good works in her husband promote" (*Paradise Lost IX*, line 634-635, Worldview ed.) The woman characters in Half-way House act as the voice of freedom and argument in oppression to the social and legal inequalities commonly imposed upon women by the patriarchal culture. It is the questioning of male authority and the shift of power from male to female. The assertion of women and their quest to attain freedom is shown inside the four walls of the Half-way House. Mohan Rakesh's *Half-way House* is one of the significant dramas that powerfully echoes this modern malady, transcends time and space and symbolizes eternal human predicament. Each of the characters experience a sense of isolation, loneliness, alienation, the absence of communication, loss of identity and loss of values. Critics agree that the essence of Half-way House is constituted in the alienated individual's group in the pervasive meaningless.

II

Where Mohan Rakesh depicts the domestic-violence of women who are confined to the four wall of a place called 'house', Vijay Tendulkar depicts social-violence which is applicable not only to domestic life, but to society. While Rakesh depicts Savitri as a modern Draupadi who questions the main authority and impositions laid by it, Tendulkar depicts Lalita Gauri as Sita who believes and accepts male dominance. The play *Ghasiram Kotwal* shows the suffering of women in Indian society. She is only used and thrown as a tool. The position of Indian women, right from the very

beginning has been in a very precarious condition. They are disowned and banished of their rights in their parental property. From the play one can observe that in this male dominated society, 'obedience' and 'silence' are the only weapons of a woman. If any woman dares to raise their voice against male authority, then they were considered as a threat and were severely punished. Sexual misconduct is the worst crime that a woman can indulge in and the remedy lied in passing a death sentence on her. While in *Half-way House* women characters are shown as assertive and active, in *Ghasiram Kotwal* they are shown as passive, commodity and slaves. The women characters in *Ghasiram Kotwal* are Lalita Gauri (daughter of Ghasiram), her mother and Gulabi (a prostitute). It is only Gulabi who exercises power in the play and her brothel acts as a center of power in the city of Poona. Her brothel is a state owned institution that promotes the ruling class ideology.

Ghasiram Kotwal is a true story of the use and abuse of women. The readers see how Ghasiram sacrifices her daughter Gauri for his personal ambition and revenge. Ghasiram is aware of the consequences of his action as a father. He cries in anguish:

Look! I've given my beloved daughter into the jaws of that wolf! Look. Look at this father. Putting the child of his heart up for sale. Look at my innocent daughter –a whore. That old overripe bastard! Look at him, eating her like a peach... Spit on me. Stone me. Look, look, but I will not quit. I'll make this Poona a kingdom of pigs. (Tendulkar, 51-52)

He has forsaken not only his daughter but his own soul too. Gauri is just sacrificed just like a goat is sacrificed on a ritual ceremony. Her silence is not just a silence, but acceptance of male dominance which shows her as voiceless, powerless and victimized by this male dominated society. In Savitri's case she is silenced by the members of the society, but in Gauri's case she is already silent and does not question the authority of her father's decision. Lalita Gauri is a symbol of exploitation of female sexuality that was exploited by political purpose. According to Samir Bandyopadhyaya, "in Ghasiram power is defined horizontally in terms of individuals against individuals, from humiliation, to

revenge in assertion, to eventual victimization; played out against the background of political and moral decadence and degeneracy, with sexuality impinging on strategies of power.”

While Gauri and her mother remain passive and victims of the society, Gulabi, a prostitute, is active and a person who we can view as somebody who enjoys power in the society. Gulabi exercises power in the society and is not at all ashamed of being a prostitute. The readers see her as a person who has mesmerized the men (Brahmans) of Poona as well as tempted them to come to her ‘Bavannakhani’ (brothel) and spend their riches on her. She has not even spared the Maratha chief minister Nana Phadnavis. Gulabi has no consideration for the wives of the Brahmans who spend all their nights waiting for their husbands assuming that their husbands are working hard, but in reality they are enjoying themselves ‘Bavannakhani’. They leave their wives only to make them wait and struggle:

Sutradhar: (to the beat of dholki drum)

Night comes.

Ponna Brahmans go

To Bavannakhani.

They go Bavannakhani.

They go the cemetery.

They go the kirtan.

They go to the temple –as they have dome every day.

The Brahmans go to Bavannakhani.

Sutradhar: (as the singing is going on at the back).

The Brahmans go to Bavannakhani

And the Brahmans wives stay at home.

They stay at home.

Oh! They stay at home.

They wait.

They cannot sleep.

Do you know what’s happening in Bavannakhani in the house of Gulabi, Gulabi the courtesan? (35- 36) Act I of the play marks Gulabi’s introduction as well as end of her role. The reader could see Gulabi dancing with Ghasiram Savaldas (Brahman from Kanuj) who is currently assisting Gulabi in her dance shows as well as doing her household works. When Nana’s ankle gets hurts then Ghasiram supports him, and for this he is rewarded with Nana’s

necklace, this makes Gulabi a bit greedy and possessive by nature. After Nana’s departure from ‘Bavannakhani’ Gulabi steps forward to claim her rights on the necklace, but Ghasiram refuses to give it:

Gulabi: (harshly) Give me that necklace.

Ghasiram: This is mine. Nanasahib gave it to me. It is mine.

Gulabi: I hired you as a dancer. That’s why you could get as much as a glimpse of Nana’s shoes. I should have that necklace. (41)

This refusal makes Gulabi angry and she snatches the necklace from Ghasiram and gets him beaten up by her bodyguards. Ghasiram has been suspended from his job; he is unemployed and does not know what to do. One can see Gulabi has no concern about Ghasiram’s unemployment who is new to the city of Poona and who has come here to earn his livelihood. If Gulabi was a victim then she would have happily let Ghasiram keep the necklace; but instead of all this she snatched the necklace from Ghasiram and got him beaten. The readers can say that it is Ghasiram who becomes the victim of Gulabi’s greed. Gulabi demonstrates her power through her bodyguards who get rid of all the problems. Most of us say that the prostitutes are the victims of the society because they are forced to sell their body due to some problems, but in Gulabi’s case we can conclude that she is one of those persons who enjoy power in the society.

Religion, sex and politics operate as different but complimentary devices of power in our society and Tendulkar has presented it very well in the play. If one looks at the play from the feminist point of view, it presents a very moving, even shocking picture of ruthless suppression of feminine consciousness. Tendulkar shows how vulnerable Indian women are in our patriarchal society. Sex has come to occupy such a place that no quest is full without it. Sexuality, especially the female sexuality has been used to represent loss and destruction in struggle for power. The combination of power and sex are lethal. The father, Ghasiram does not hesitate in bargaining the chastity of his only daughter for the satisfaction of his own political ambition. For Nana Phadnavis, woman is an object of sexual gratification only:

Nana: Oh, can we? Can we find her? How beautifully formed! What a lovely figure! Did you see? Erect! Young! Tender! Ah! Ho ho! We have seen so many handled so many, but none like that one. None her equal. We wonder who she (Gauri) is."

Nana: Just one more time, Ghasiram. Just one more time, you bastard.

Nana: But –a few more days... After that, we ourselves will see that she is married well to one of our men. (49, 52, 53)

The women characters in *Ghasiram Kotwal* show that the gender based inheritance laws and practices deprive women and girls in many countries of their economic, social and cultural rights. Violence against women and violation of human rights of women are well pictured in the play *Ghasiram Kotwal*. Towards the end of the play, we see Ghasiram being punished for the hideous crimes he has committed.

"Ghasiram: Hit me. Beat me. Beat me some more. Hit me! (Suddenly Ghasiram shields his face as if a stone hit him.) Why stay so far away? Come on, you cowards. Still scared? I spit on you. Beat me. Come on, beat me. Come on. Come on. Stone me, cowards. Pig shit! Come on and beat me. And you are scared! Come on, beat me. Crush me! (The mob yells.) Ghasiram Savaladas! Ghasiram Savaladas! I danced on your chests but I wasted the life of my little daughter. I should be punished for the death of my daughter. Beat me. Beat me. Hit me. Cut off my hands and feet. Crack my skull. Come on, come on. Look! I'm here. Oh, that's good. Very good."(81)

By showing the fatal end of Ghasiram in the play, Tendulkar does not want to suggest that Ghasiram has ended for ever. He rather wants to draw our attention to sociopolitical factors responsible for the growth of such a crisis in our society. The play reflects the image of those modern days where sex had become a weapon to gain power.

III

The experience of contemporary life within the universe of the present discourse is the experience of finding oneself caught in a cleft-stick, which is an experience of agony and helplessness. With Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar Indian drams makes a departure from pseudo-modernism and traditional symbolism to the drama of 'non-

communication' –the modern man's failure to understand him or to understand the other persons and their mutual failure to understand each other, which is the real tragedy of modern life. Modern man has shrunk in spirit; languish in confusion, frustration, disillusionment and alienation. Through the women characters in *Half-way House* and in *Ghasiram Kotwal* one comes to know that women are trapped in the contemporary social pattern which makes them slaves and gives them a sense of incompleteness. Moreover, the emphasis is on human situation which has been projected through a set of human beings and no so much of those human agents themselves, however interesting individually each one of them might be. From the women characters in both the plays the readers also come to know that, the central, radical, or "essential" focus of all kinds of feminism is the unjust discrimination between men and women, when they are both human beings. Here we may explain the difference between 'sex' and 'gender' feminist insist, and insist rightly, that while 'sex' is real and biological, 'gender' is nothing real but only a social construction. A woman is not born but made –made by the patriarchal society with its concept of all the do's and don'ts for women which ensures subordinate status for them. This is the central issue and all kinds of feminism that take their roots from it and develop themselves in various directions according to their circumstantial concerns and requirements. Gender inequalities and oppression's manifest themselves differently in different societies and at different times. This is what Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar show in their works. Women suffer a double exploitation as women and as members of working class. The central root of the problem is the system of patriarchy which leads to all kinds of discrimination against and devaluation of women. Politico-economic questions are not the roots but only auxiliaries. The concept of gender is the real villain and has to be demolished.

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