



The Journey of the drama Ghashiram Kotwal from Stage to Screen: A Critical Discourse on its Adaptation Fidelity

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Abstract:

Ghashiram Kotwal is one of the most memorable plays of Vijay Tendulkar. The staging of the play created such remarkable response from the audience that Tendulkar adapted it on the silver screen to reach general masses as a screen writer. The theme of the play is very unique in establishing the principle that 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. The Plot and characters drew enough attention to promote several debates among the literati round the world. It also showed how cinema could become a medium to present literary and cultural elements. Carrying some strong social and political overtones, the play was to prove its motif on the silver screen as well. First staged on December 16, 1972 by Progressive Dramatic Association, the play found its space in the world of cinema when it was directed by Hariharan and Mani Kaul with the association of 16 graduates of Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1976. It was definitely a special challenge for Tendulkar to ensure the safe passage of text from the original play to the nuances of the screenplay. This article attempts to display the differences and similarities between the two.

Keywords: play, text, cinema, adaptation, fidelity.

Main Article:

Vijay Dandopant Tendulkar (1928-2008) was a legendary figure of Marathi literature and Indian Cinema. He had an extraordinary alchemy to craft and create a good number of classics in the history of Indian literature. His fame as a playwright crossed the boundaries of Marathi culture and literature. In time, he also found his predilection for cinema, television writings, literary essays, political journalism, and social commentaries. Before his death in 2008, his oeuvre had got him a special place in the annals of Indian literature and also won him many literary and movie awards.

The Marathi play *Ghashiram Kotwal* (Ghashiram, the Constable, 1972) has given him an enviable place among the glittering personalities of Marathi literature. The play, besides getting him immense eminence, brought him enough controversies. Structured as a political satire, the drama shows the evils of established social systems and beliefs. Despite the mounting disputes and oppositions, the play went on to arouse ground-breaking responses from the critics and audiences worldwide.

The play symbolizes the proverbial saying: *Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*. It conveys the opinion that with power moral sense diminishes and it creates monster of a man. With its subtle suggestions and metaphors, the play created an adequate amount of waves amidst political, social and literary spheres of the nation. Not only does it unveil the ghastly side of human nature but it also powerfully symptomizes the malady of corruption. As a keen observer of men, manners and cultures, Tendulkar probes the real world of humans as it is and reaffirms his beliefs that people play astute political games to exploit the weak and the innocent. Tendulkar based his drama on the truth that class struggles have existed in Indian society for ages and that the nation has been a hot bed of innumerable political stratagems and social conflicts. In all this manmade mayhem, the most familiar sufferers are the common masses. Tendulkar establishes the fact that, in general, the weakest classes of the society face the political and moral decadence of the ruling classes. They are constantly at the risk of being subjected to ignominies due to their place in social hierarchy.

The plot of the play is divided into two acts and revolves around the person of Nana Phadnavis, the corrupt *Diwan* - (Chief Secretary) of Poona. Ghashiram, the titular character, is a *Brahmin* from *Kannauj* (an ancient city in a northern India). Ghashiram is shown working with a *lavani* dancer, Gulabi. In his visits to Gulabi, Nana Phadnavis is much impressed by the sycophancy of Ghashiram. Having got the post of a *Kotwal* [constable] from Nana, Ghashiram becomes a cruel autocrat and begins to enforce strict rules in the city. He starts imprisoning people for the smallest offences. However, the time comes for Ghashiram to face his own fate. He must now taste the fruit of the tree he had sown. Lust for power had corrupted the soul of Ghashiram, the Kotwal. Ghashiram is to be killed in the most derogatory way possible. The play thus uses the historical characters to stage his drama. However, there are hardly any historical proofs to prove the plan of the play. The plot and the characters serve the theme very well though. The play is notable for the use of the "*Tamasha*" form in Marathi folk theatre. Singing and dancing are used here to good effect. "*Abhangas*" (devotional songs) are mixed with "*Lavnis*" (love songs).

The film adaptation 'Ghashiram Kotwal' (1976) was conceptualized and co-directed by K Hariharan and Mani Kaul together into a Marathi film. The movie was the debut film of the great Indian actor Om Puri. The screenplay was written by Vijay Tendulkar himself. This film also had the cooperation of 16 graduates of the FTII [Film and Television Institute of India] - Yukt Film Cooperative Society. The adaptation is for the most part an inspiration although the script of the film was written by the playwright himself. The movie does not seek to follow the text of the play in toto. On the contrary, the filmmakers have chosen to stay quite different. However, in making the movie, Hariharan and Kaul wanted to say something of Ghashiram, the Kotwal. Hariharan in his interview with Shai Heredia in Berlin Film Festival 2014 remembers,

“We went to see the very successful experimental Marathi musical play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, directed by Jabbar Patel, in a nearby theatre. The sheer production scale, with more than forty actors singing and dancing on stage, and the complex layers of meanings articulated by playwright Vijay Tendulkar, albeit in a very entertaining manner, made a strong impact on each of us. We were actually witnessing a sort of narrative revolution along the lines of the famous plays of Bertolt Brecht... None of us spoke Marathi, the original language of the play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, so the playwright, Vijay Tendulkar, was kind enough to rewrite his own play with our input for the screen version.”

The original play by Tendulkar seeks to illustrate the political and social turpitude. It stages subtle shades of longstanding social divides and acrimony and comes out very hard against the hegemony of ruling powers. Tendulkar herein tries to hold cudgel against popular establishments and beliefs. Although the story is set in a specific period of Indian history, Tendulkar has assumed several liberties to transform his primary theme and concern into an amazing theatrical pattern never witnessed before on the Indian stage. Surprisingly, the film does not try to fully incorporate these theatrical templates. According to the directors, one of the most important elements perceived was the fact that in real world, the politics of dictatorship always looked very attractive. It cleverly conceals all the hatred and intrigues involved in driving power. The filmmakers believed that the character of Nana Phadnavis resembled the political power of modern day bigwigs— extremely brilliant but devious to the core. This was the theory on which the character of Ghashiram Kotwal, an ordinary police inspector, was to be developed. He would be cast as a man hungry for some clout. This ambition of his would be shrewdly exploited by Nana for his personal gains. In this game of power, Ghashiram would take his boss more seriously than himself.

The movie starts off entirely on a different note. Despite being faithful to the main plot, the script of the movie does not, on most part, focus on Ghashiram and his acts alone. It is quite interesting as well as enigmatic approach from Tendulkar as the scriptwriter. He moves away from his own original text and creates a different cinematic imagination. Instead of using the original design of the play, Tendulkar rather goes with the presentation to briefly describe the then political scenario. Thus, the movie starts off with the historical ascendancy of Nana Phadnavis as Peshwa of Poona. The screen has successive shots of different locations of India to indicate the historical developments of the time. In all these passing scenes, we get the intermittent glimpses of *lavani* [A traditional folk dance in Maharashtra] to suggest socio-cultural overtones. This clearly proves how Tendulkar moves away from his own motif of the stage to script a different structure for the film.

Hariharan (2014) says,

“We did some more research on the historical aspects of that period and used the silent cinema style of inter-titles to contextualize the historical plane of the film. In our study we found more details about a Ghashiram Savaldas, an immigrant from Kanauj in northern India. We realised the importance of how and why wily administrators use outsiders as safe ‘fronts’ to attack their own people. And so, inside an old traditional house walled with mirrors, we decided to stage one of the most memorable scenes in the film, where Mohan Agashe, playing Nana Phadnavis, transfers his punitive powers to Om Puri in the role of Ghashiram by making him his beloved mirror image. We attempted several scenes in single takes in which we could delineate a foreground, middle ground and a background as different temporal zones of political action / inaction or oppression / resistance.”

While the play revolves round the ambitions of Ghashiram, the movie does very little to discuss this part of the play. The playwright has created a thrilling plot involving blood and murder in the original text. It constantly attempts to lambast the social order enormously dominated by the privileged community. Ghashiram is denied any fraternity with this community despite the fact that his birth allows him natural kinship. According to the local folks, he does not have any locus standi in Pune. He is an outsider and does not belong to the place. This is where Ghashiram earnestly looks for parity. He devices devious plans to find his place among his equals. First he gets the attention of Nana and then offers his own daughter for Nana’s unrestrained lechery. In return, he manages to get the position of the ‘*kotwal*’- a powerful office in the city then. In no time, Ghashiram is able to enjoy the taste his vested power. The position of the Kotwal tempts him

to become a cruel administrator. While Ghashiram continues to evolve as a devil incarnate, Nana consciously chooses to remain ignorant of his atrocities because this gets his job done- crush the rebellions and maintain the order in the city. Nana is at the top of it all throughout. Ghashiram is blinded by his newly achieved power. He fails to see through the political strategy of Nana.

Surprisingly, the movie does not use any of these stirring scenes of the drama. On the contrary, Ghashiram remains a minor character throughout the movie titled after his character. It remains a dubious fact why Tendulkar never chose to highlight the most exciting parts of his drama. These gripping scenes of the play are not highlighted or worked upon in the movie. Ghashiram, in the play, is a rare character that gets the audience's attention in no time. He is a round character full of complexities. In the movie, however, Ghashiram is dull and flat as Nana Phadnavis takes the centre stage. Ghashiram becomes secondary in the cinematic representation as long as he is merely shown as a spy to help Nana's attempts to uphold his superiority. Definitely, the film shifts the paradigm to suit cinematic imagination of the filmmakers. There is a marked shift of focus from Ghashiram, the *Kotwal* to Nana, the *Diwan*.

Lalit Mohan Joshi (2008) while paying tributes to Tendulkar after his demise remembered how Tendulkar himself spoke about his writing,

"Give me a piece of paper, any paper and a pen and I shall write as naturally as the bird flies or a fish swims. For the last 50 years, I have been writing ... at roadside restaurants and on the crowded local trains. I have written on the sick bed in the hospital in spite of the doctor's advice... It was a great relief. It was joy."

It is this passion for writing that Tendulkar never shied away from changing his own text to suit the demands of the script of the movie "Ghashiram Kotwal". He was an invisible director for his scripts. He kept making a variety of suggestions to the original group of directors K. Hariharan and his co-directors Mani Kaul, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, Kamal Swaroop. The sensitive spectator and ruthless critic in him walked along the directors throughout the making of the movie. This is why he enforced a lot of shift from the play. Without betraying the motif and spirit of the play, he guided the creative team of the movie. The adaptation does not honour the text when it goes on to discuss Nana's political affairs. In the drama, Tendulkar stages how Ghashiram embodies the corruption of power and the audience can genuinely feel the social tension and discord which consistently affect the life of people in the city. In the movie, Tendulkar moved away from his historic archetypes and allows the movie to veer into the theme of class struggles which drew a lot

of attention then in the nation then. Hariharan and his team chose to add a song which highlighted the pains of the exploited lot. The scene in the quarry shows labourers in their squalor. Tendulkar consciously finds himself in the questions of class and struggles and symbolizes the original motif- the divide between the owner and the owned.

Aparna Dharwadker in her analysis *Modernism, " Tradition," and History in the Postcolony: Vijay Tendulkar's " Ghashiram Kotwal* published in Theatre Journal [2013] asserts that Tendulkar's social self is idealistic but his creative self is passionate about creativity. In his creation he is detached and unsentimental. He projects postcolonial abjection and death. There is dystopian society and he wants to speak about it. His perspectives want to transcend the prevailing social condition which is biased and divided. So, the adaptation had to portray the images as could be understood by the common people as well. The narrative could not be set entirely in distant past. The illustration of the theme and the metaphor of power and corruption needed the support of ongoing issues of society. Obviously, he shifts from his own historic figures and portrays the same themes in the then scenario of the time. This looks like a realistic adaptation of his original play in the sense that he is faithful to his themes.

Nevertheless, it is only towards the end of the movie that the filmmakers are faithful to the text source. The directors finally decide to show some resemblances by bringing similar kind of tragic end for Ghashiram. Just like in the drama, the predominant class of the society wants an end to all the power of Ghashiram. They stand firm in persuading Nana in getting rid of Ghashiram. Nana Phadnavis, having succeeded in his motives, considers Ghashiram a burden. The filmmakers have followed the text in this part of the plot. The shameful death of Ghashiram symbolizes the establishment of the socio-political narrative that *once the ends have been met the means must be discarded*. Ghashiram's end is a typical example of social paradigm that is essentially in practice to sustain socio-cultural exclusivism even to this day. The character of Ghashiram is a reminder to common masses of how socio-political chauvinists of our time dispose of the means when the ends have been met. Tendulkar as a scriptwriter is successful in establishing this motif even in a different scenario and time.

Furthermore, the movie does not follow the structure of the play. The play is a folk musical divided into two Acts. The first Act is an exposition that prepares the ground for Ghashiram and for his whims and fancies. In Act II we have a different Ghashiram who wields power to its extreme end. This is not visible in detail in the movie. The film starts with Phadnavis and the

whole action mostly revolves around him. On being questioned about the historicity of the play, Tendulkar very firmly stated (Dutta 2004),

“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. Although based on a historical legend, I have no intention of commentary on the morals, or lack of them, of the Peshwa, Nana Phadnavis or Ghashiram... the decadence of the class in power (the Brahmans, incidentally, during the period which I had to depict) also was incidental, though not accidental.”

Most notably, there is a ‘*Sutradhar*’ [Narrator] in the play and the movie. It plays a very prominent role. The film adaptation, however, minimizes its importance. Not only do we miss the vital role of the *Sutradhar* in the movie but we also do not get to taste the usual banter and the repartee that is so integral to the play. It is a big treat to watch the narrator posing moral questions on the stage. So, not having him on the screen is like taking away the soul of the text. Then, there is the role of the chorus in the original text. This is a versatile theatrical device by Tendulkar. It contributes to the establishment of the atmosphere and serves as a barometer that registers the change in the city of Poona. The Greek tragedies had chorus which played a central part in the making of dramas. They commented on the actions of the stage and their moral philosophies had a lot to do in reaching the end of the plays. Their commentaries showed deeper connections between the actors and the themes. Tendulkar has masterfully crafted the drama by employing the personages of both chorus and the *sutradhar*. In following the *Tamasha* tradition, he delighted in using their presence on the stage. The folk music and literary bindings of Maratha culture helped Tendulkar in staging the play. All these techniques and conventions do not find importance in the adaption on the screen though. This is indeed a clear shift from the original play. It looks as if there has been deliberate attempt in constructing a different approach in this regard.

Kavita Nagpal while reporting for India Today (1977) observed that the investigation and creative application of folk conventions has added significant new dimensions to contemporary Indian theatre. Of all the folk devices in popular use it is the chorus with its variegated mode, character and form of expression that has lent itself to the most fascinating interpretations. Playwrights and directors working in regional languages have explored the functional attributes of the *sutradhar* and deftly incorporated this tradition in plays with a completely modern message...The scope and extent of the chorus, the function of its constituents is so wide that there are almost limitless ways

in which this device can be used. Vijay Tendulkar's use of the chorus as a human curtain in Ghasiram Kotwal and the brilliant interweaving of the *sutradhar* with the main action is well known.

Similarly, the portrayal of each character in the drama is very dynamic. In the depiction of each individual character, Tendulkar did not create false or fictitious situations. One can perceive how each of them is an integral part of grand design of existentialism. The characters display absurd and existential strains and project deeper questions of existentialism. The development of the character is natural and each of them is responsible for its existence. The play is able to create a natural bond between the characters and the audience. The role of Ghashiram is so spirited that he leaves certain imprints in the mind of the audience. Sadly, the film concentrates more on the challenges faced by Nana Phadnavis and the filmmakers have made conscious efforts to display those challenges and the surrounding situations. Amidst all these changes in the adaptation, Ghashiram and his self-motivated character misses the mark. The screenplay gets rid of those nuances which helped the play on the stage. The metaphor of Ghashiram's character and the motif of the misuse of power somehow get lost in the newly created scenario of the film. Clearly, the film does not delve in the characterization aspects but mainly deals in highlighting the problems of the time. In all, the movie is a specter of the original drama.

Shailaja (2008) observes that Tendulkar as a playwright took care of his individual characters but then from their individual existence, he also moved to their social relevance. He places each character in typical social issues of real life situations. His characters do not isolate themselves from public life rather they voice their concerns through social phenomenon. However when he adapted his own play for the screen presentation, he certainly kept in mind how cinema works and therefore he allows the characters to speak in social colours. The journey of his characters from the stage to the screen is indeed noteworthy. In all this he does not miss the flavour of the play.

While recalling his memories of the play and the movie, Dr. Mohan Agashe who played the role of Nana Phadnavis said (Times of India, 2012),

"I remember how the audience sat through when we staged the Marathi play 'Ghasiram Kotwal' during the '80s in Kolkata and there was a long applause afterwards."

Despite the adaptation, the play Ghashiram Kotwal couldn't be entirely transformed into images on the screen. It was a sheer fate that Tendulkar himself was an important part of this brilliant venture. As a play, the entire staging has been described as an iconic piece of art and therefore it wasn't very easy for the film makers to do justice to each space of the drama on the screen. A faithful adaptation of a well known drama into movie requires well-thought plan of a grander structure. Tendulkar as the script writer in the team, there were always certain possibilities of discussions and debates. Eventually, the drama couldn't find its total strength and space on the screen in toto. Rather, Tendulkar convincingly was of the opinion that the journey of the motif is essential but it couldn't be only thing in the presentation of the spirit of the story.

Linda Hutcheon (2006) speaking about the adaptation of a play into images of a movie says,

“When we work in other direction - that is, from the telling to the showing mode, especially from the print to the performance - a definitional problem potentially arises. In a very real sense, every live staging of a play could theoretically be considered an adaptation in its performance. The text of an actor does not necessarily tell an actor about such matters... it is up to the directors and actors to actualize the text and to interpret and then recreate it.”

To conclude, the adaptation by Hariharan and Kaul has not tried to be truthful to the drama in many respects. While the play came to out to be historic on its own, the movie couldn't carry the same fervor to the screen. The journey of the text was only symbolic and the film makers clearly avoided the core of the play. This certainly weakened the dynamics of characterization and the grandeur of the stage failed to find space on the screen. In portraying the social ethos of the time, the film adaptation betrays itself on the questions of fidelity to the text.

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