



Vijay Tendulkar's Bestial Vision and Animal Imagery in *Ghashiram Kotwal*

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ABSTRACT: The recurrent and powerful animal imagery in *Ghashiram Kotwal* constitutes the very core of Tendulkar's bestial vision of fallible human beings faltering under the influence of inordinate lust or being consumed by revenge, losing their human dignity and falling prey to an excruciating animal existence.

KEYWORDS: Bestial vision, animal imagery, revenge, exploitation, dehumanization

Ghashiram Kotwal (1973) is a strikingly performance-oriented play. The major concerns of the play—machinations of political power play, opportunism, sycophancy, exploitation of the individual and the masses in the form of brutalization and dehumanization, moral degeneration of the society, and the self-destructive revenge motif manifest themselves with unparalleled force in the performance of the text. This enrichment of the text by performance originates from Vijay Tendulkar's vast experience of stagecraft. His innovative use of the human wall, the conventions of the Marathi folk-tradition, multi-functional use of the Sutradhar, mixing of the religious and erotic traditions of folk music and dance and his suggestive and sustained use of animal imagery throughout the play provide the play with its unique richness and complexity of meaning. The ingenious device of the human wall in *Ghashiram Kotwal* has been commented on extensively by various critics, but in my opinion Tendulkar's use of the animal imagery in this play is crucial to giving a literal as well as a visual and dramatic expression to the central concerns of the play in reading and in performance.

The animal imagery pervades the text of *Ghashiram Kotwal*. It clearly points to the superior and powerful status of the speaker and at the same time it intensifies the continuing dehumanization of the oppressed individual or social class. The lascivious brahman who is dying to reach Gulabi, the courtesan's place becomes impatient and abusive when accosted by the lowly but witty Sutradhar. He first calls him 'son of a bitch'[1] (p.14) and thereafter 'you donkey'(p.15). However, it soon becomes clear quite ironically that the Sutradhar is

more clever of the two. It is not only these 'holy' brahmans who have a proactive and promiscuous nightlife, even Nanasaheb, the chief administrator of Poona, himself patronizes such moral depravity. In fact, Nana is the fountainhead of the immoral life depicted in the play. Hence in his nocturnal movement to Gulabi's place he resembles a hungry leopard on the prowl:

The night progresses...

And the Peshwa's Chief Minister,

Nana of the nine courts,

Nana of the wealth and power,

Nana Phadnavis

To Gulabi's place proceeds. (p.18)

Amidst this rampant degeneration and corruption, it is not easy for a rank outsider like Ghashiram Savadas to make his mark. He is robbed of the pearl necklace gifted to him by Nanasaheb, beaten up by Gulabi's musclemen and then unceremoniously thrown to the front of the stage. His position in the land of the Peshwa is sharply defined by a brahman, "Get aside, you dog." (p.22) Ghashiram is humiliated again, beaten up and dragged away to the prison by the soldiers on a fabricated charge of stealing. His dehumanization is further highlighted when one of the soldiers threatens him, "Maybe I should kick you in the balls. You will wiggle like a butchered goat." (p.24) Ghashiram himself sums up the outcome of the brutal treatment meted out to him in Poona, "I came here to find my fortune and lost my reputation." (p.25) Subsequently a soldier "throws Ghashiram out in

audience with force" (p.26), while castigating him as, "Thief, monkey." (p.26) Ghashiram realizes his degradation in terms of the hierarchical arrangement of castes, "I am a Kanauj Brahman, but I have become a Shudra, a criminal, (and finally) a useless animal." (p.26) He pledges to "come back as a boar" (p.27), "stay as a devil" (p.27) and turn Poona into "a kingdom of pigs." (p.27) After accomplishing this feat, he proclaims, "Then I will be Ghashiram again, the son of Savaldas once more." (p.27) Ghashiram's hopelessly tragic predicament is self-evident here as revenge is doomed to be self-destructive for him.

Nanasahib's maniacal sexual lust comes to the fore through the elaborate visual image of a cat on the hunt for its prey. He tries to grab the hapless Lalita Gauri who "runs like a frightened deer." (p.28) Nana then employs the metaphor of hunting to express his disappointment, "We had it in our hands—then the prey fled." (p.29) In response to this, Ghashiram makes his sinister proposal echoing Nana's terminology, "If the hunter is ready, the prey will be found." (p.29) By echoing Nana's words, Ghashiram unwittingly becomes a monster who feeds on his own offspring. Nana's inordinate sexual urge turns him into a sex-maniac as he yearns for Lalita Gauri, "How beautifully formed! What a lovely figure! Did you see? Erect! Young! Tender! Ah! Ho ho! We've seen so many handled so many, but none like that one." (p.29) His wolfish desire knows no bounds as he raves on, "What a bosom! Buds just blossoming...We will squeeze them like this!" (p.30) Ghashiram who is dressed like a servant restrains Nanasahib by using the sword as a phallic symbol, "Put your sword back in the sheath, Majesty. The prey is far away." (p.30)

Soon the chase is renewed by Nana. This time he emerges triumphant through the willful machinations of Ghashiram. However, a visual shock is given to the sensibilities of the audience when they witness "Nana and the girl reappear and dance like Radha and Krishna." (p.31) This thin garb of religiosity is a vain attempt on part of Nana to cover his bestial self. After bartering away the honour of his only daughter, Ghashiram exults in triumph as he will now have the order, "signed and sealed, in my hand!" (p.34), commissioning him as the Kotwal of Poona. But Nana looks at him with utter disdain, "We just raised a dog at our door to the position of the Kotwali!" (p.34) He assesses the new situation in the manner of a cold-blooded, adept politician, "This time, there are two bullets in this gun. With the first one, we will fell your luscious daughter. But with the second we will make the city of Poona dance." (p.34) Nana is in complete command of the situation and looks upon Ghashiram as a mere pawn to subjugate his opponents.

In his new found role as the kotwal, now it is Ghashiram's turn to prowl at night in search of 'wrongdoers'—"Ghashiram Kotwal started making the rounds of Poona at night, after the eleven o'clock cannon." (p.37) He unleashes a reign of terror with his professed desire to "straighten out this adulterous city in six months." (p.40) He arrests, humiliates and

punishes even the innocent citizens as the chorus laments:

Big-headed.

Pig-headed.

Impossible.

There is no limit, no end. (p.42)

The kotwal's permit raj reaches its lowest ebb when his soldiers deny a poor woman her right to carry out the cremation of her dead father-in-law while she bewails in front of the insensitive Nana, "The permit is real, but they call it counterfeit. Sir, the corpse has been lying in the cremation ground since morning. The dogs are gatherings." (p.43) This act of Ghashiram borders on sacrilege and reveals him as a dehumanized despot. Tendulkar further heightens the dehumanization of Ghashiram by recreating the dakshina ceremony scene. Through a cruel travesty of the unfair mythological practice of 'agnipariksha', Ghashiram orders an innocent brahman to go through the ordeal of fire in order to prove his innocence.

The poor brahman "bleats like a goat." (p.46) He falls to the ground like a sacrificial beast as the red hot iron ball is placed on his hands. It is a disturbing visual image of cruel oppression. The brahman curses Ghashiram bitterly, "You have tormented a poor innocent Brahman. You will die without children! ...You will die a dog's death, grinding your heels in the dirt." (p.47) This curse comes true very soon in the play.

The play reaches its climax in the sequence where an infuriated Ghashiram confronts Nana. While the lustful Nana tries to fondle his newly-procured seventh wife, "Ghashiram springs in from the rear like a tiger, sword in hand." (p.52) He questions Nana about the whereabouts of his daughter Lalita Gauri in an intimidating manner. A stammering Nana somehow directs him to Chandra, the midwife. On learning from her that Lalita Gauri is dead and buried secretly in a haste to cover up the matter, Ghashiram "sits and acts as if digging in the soil like an animal." (p.53) It is the most tragic visual image presented in the play—the utterly dehumanized protagonist desperately trying to rectify his tragic error too late in the day. In a fit of rage he hurls words of abuse at Nana, "that devil Nana" (p.54), "that monster." (p.54) Then he callously chokes the midwife to death. The climax builds up as he goes out on the lookout for Nana, shouting, "Nana did all this. Nana, my enemy. Come on, you bastard, come." (p.54) However, what follows is a masterly scene wherein the evil genius Nana subdues Ghashiram "like a tamed animal." (p.54) Nana controls Ghashiram's mind like a ring-master, "Whatever happened, protocol should not be forgotten...Now—bow." (p.54) Then he equates himself with Krishna in a brazenly shrewd manner, "These hands never killed even an insect....In these hands is only the flute of Lord Krishna which made the Gopis forget hunger and thirst." (p.57) Thereafter, he unleashes a long, meandering philosophical speech

about illusion and reality which has the net result of benumbing Ghashiram's mind. His moment of crisis is gone. His anger is diverted away from Nana to the Poona people. In the wings, he smashes someone's face and appears on the stage with blood on his hands. He "becomes addicted to blood" like "a wounded tiger." (p.57) The jails become overstuffed and twenty-two brahmans are suffocated to death. The "Poona brahmans are furious" (p.62) and form a huge mob outside Nana's palace who gleefully signs the order for Ghashiram's execution. It is an extremely cruel order as read out by the Sutradhar, "First shave his head and anoint it with *sindur*. Then run him around the town on a camel. Tie him to an elephant's leg and lastly give him the sentence of death." (p.63) And further, "At the very end, tie one of his hands behind his back and let Ghashiram Savaldas face the mob." (p.63) Overcome by the realization of the wrong done by him to his own daughter Lalita Gauri, Ghashiram exhorts the mob to punish him, "I danced on your chests but I wasted the life of my little daughter. I should be punished for the death of my daughter." (p.65) He pleads, "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." (p.65) He "falls, gets up, falls, growls like an animal. Crawls. Jerks in spasms. Falls and falls again while trying to rise. Death dance.... Finally Ghashiram lies motionless." (p.65) He is finally freed from the oppressive burden of guilt and the bondage of an abnormal, horrifying animal existence. Nana, the wily politician, takes full advantage of the situation and wipes his conscience clean of any signs of guilt or remorse, "A disease has been controlled. The demon Ghashya Kotwal, who plagued all of us, has met his death.... Let the corpse of sinful Ghashya rot. Let the wolves and dogs have it. Let the worms have it." (p.65) While Ghashiram's corpse is defiled, 'the city of pigs' breaks into "festivities for three days to mark this happy occasion." (p.66)

Thus it becomes amply evident that the animal imagery of *Ghashiram Kotwal* is not merely a technical or literary device, it constitutes the very core of Tendulkar's bestial vision—the vision of human beings faltering under the influence of uncontrollable lust or being consumed by revenge, losing their humanity and falling prey to an excruciating animal existence. Tendulkar employs animal imagery as a double-edged sword—it cuts to pieces the weaker, oppressed sections of the society while at the same time leaving some deep gashes on the psyche of the protagonist-perpetrator of the excesses. Even the perfect villain Nana experiences a chilly sensation of fear running down his spine when he confronts his *protégé* Ghashiram Kotwal standing defiant in front of him like a tiger, carrying a sword.

The animal imagery in *Ghashiram Kotwal* also provides the audience with some of the most powerful visual formations of Indian theatre. The image of Ghashiram, the rank outsider bending low on all four with Nana, the powerful chief minister of Poona, resting his injured foot on Ghashiram's back, is probably the most powerful, vivid and lasting visual image of sycophancy in world drama. Ghashiram digging the soil to unearth his lost

daughter's dead body presents a moving spectacle of a father who handed over his own daughter to a monster in his vengeful and dehumanizing quest for power.

REFERENCE

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