

## Constructing Indigenous Oppression and Resistance in Tendulkar's Encounter in Umbugland

Construyendo la opresión y resistencia indígena en el encuentro de Tendulkar en Umbugland

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### ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar's dramatic piece which was translated by Priya Adarkar to English as *Encounter in Umbugland* and originally written in Marathi with the title *Dambadwipcha Mukabala* (1968), is a political allegory that highlights the internal strife within the then ruling Congress party following the death of the late Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. The plot of the play which centres on the struggle for power and authority between Princess Vijaya and the cabinet ministers reflects in the truest sense the kind of challenge and opposition that Indira Gandhi had to face before her ultimate rise to power. While it may be true that after reading or witnessing the play being staged, one would definitely conclude that the concept of gender power struggle seems to be the dominating subject matter, yet Tendulkar through his dramatic abilities has managed to highlight another very important issue which is relevant even today.

**Keywords:** Vijay Tendulkar, Oppression, Indigenous, Violence, Resistance

### RESUMEN

La obra dramática de Vijay Tendulkar, que fue traducida por Priya Adarkar al inglés como *Encounter in Umbugland* y originalmente escrita en marathi con el título *Dambadwipcha Mukabala* (1968), es una alegoría política que resalta la lucha interna dentro del partido del Congreso que gobernaba luego de la muerte del fallecido primer ministro Lal Bahadur Shastri. La trama de la obra que se centra en la lucha por el poder y la autoridad entre la princesa Vijaya y los ministros del gabinete refleja en el sentido más verdadero el tipo de desafío y oposición que Indira Gandhi tuvo que enfrentar antes de su ascenso al poder. Si bien puede ser cierto que después de leer o presenciar la representación de la obra, uno definitivamente concluiría que el concepto de lucha de poder de género parece ser el tema dominante, sin embargo, Tendulkar a través de sus habilidades dramáticas ha logrado resaltar otro tema muy importante que es relevante incluso hoy.

**Palabras clave:** Vijay Tendulkar, Oposición, Indígena, Violencia, Resistencia.

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## Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) was a Marathi playwright. Known for his controversial themes and subject matters, he was considered to be one of the most distinguished playwrights who addressed social issues and dilemmas most effectively and truthfully. Of course, for his ventures he had often gained both praises and criticism. His plays which have mostly drawn inspiration from real life encounters deal with the problem of power dynamics and struggles between the sexes, social marginalization, struggle for identities and most importantly on the subject of violence. His play *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (Silence! The Court is in Session) written in 1963, displayed his dramatic finesse and literary greatest as he was conferred the prestigious Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya award for the best play of the year in 1970. Likewise his other plays shot to fame as well, not only because of the subject matters that he represents through them but also because of the multifarious styles and techniques that he adopts by establishing a synthesis between the ancient and the modern, the western and Indian cultures alike in these productions. One important point however, that knits together all of his dramatic pieces together is the subject of oppression, abuse and subjugation that dominates his plays. His plays show the aspects of power and subjugation where the victimizer- victim relationship becomes the prime issue. In addition he employs various dramatic techniques to exemplify his motive. However, all the victims do not simply succumb and submit to such atrocities. Rather, quite a few muster the courage to fight against such actions. In this context his works may even be examined as plays of protest.

In the paper, I venture to examine the aspects of Indigenous oppression as a theme which has often times been overshadowed and overlooked in the study of the play *Encounter in Umbugland* (Dambadwipcha Mukabala). In addition, the paper draws reference from the oppression of the various tribal communities of India since the British rule and the post independent period while its relevance is identified till the present day. The paper also discusses the resistance of such oppressed groups. While the thematic concern of the play will be analysed, the paper will also try to shed light on how the playwright has used dramatic technique in terms of characterisation, dialogue, imagery etc., to endorse the plot construction.

## Tribal Oppression

While discussing about the custom of releasing the white pigeons in the first act, Prannarayan makes a very important observation by referring to the fact that these birds even when they are released eventually return back to their own pigeonholes. To their release, he sees it as nothing more than a “diplomatic convention.” (*Five Plays* 2014) India too, before and after gaining independence has also seen its fair share of diplomatic conventions. A whole country was colonised and enslaved based on the ideal of civilizing a population which was referred to as a white man's burden. The economy reduced to nothing, social divisions created, people became malnourished and yet a sizable population was made to believe that all this was part of an effort to uplift a nation from the dredges of barbarianism. However, more so than anyone else the Tribal population of the country residing in different parts suffered the worst setbacks as they became victims and targets of the colonizers, the greedy moneylenders and oppressive Zamindars. In the play the Kadamba tribes who are very much part of the kingdom suffer the worse kind of ill treatment as they become victims of such diplomatic moves. They are oppressed and subjugated in the name of development. Their population has been reduced as their living conditions declined drastically with no such rehabilitative efforts on the part of the administration. In the fifth scene of the second act when Vijaya makes a reference to the situation of the Kadamba tribes, she tells Prannarayan,

Do you know in what proportions this tribe exists on our island? It isn't a small figure. It's twenty percent of the population. Fifty years ago, it was thirty percent. This ratio has been reduced constantly by hunger, poverty and diseases. In the riots after father's death, hundreds of its people were killed. Hundreds were made refugees. Hundreds more are in prison. (*Five Plays*, 2014)

Their portrayal by the playwright evokes images of realistic sufferings of many tribal minorities in the country which is home to about 700 tribal groups with a population of 104 million. (2011 census) Although, the playwright's motive about addressing Indigenous oppression is not that obvious yet the plot's compass clearly points in that direction. Many tribal communities, original inhabitants of different areas like the Santhals in Bihar were cultivators whose lands were confiscated. This was done by the British through the Permanent Land Settlement of 1973. What makes it worse was that the same confiscated area was acquired by the zamindars after an auction. To add to the woes of the peasants, the same land was leased out to the farmers for a huge sum. Such an act created a way for the opportunists like the moneylenders, zamindars and officials of the government to levy exorbitant land taxes from time to time. In this way the Santhals were oppressed and subjugated from time to time. The adivasis, tribal inhabitants of other areas were highly extorted by such perpetrators who even dispossessed them off their properties. The confiscation of their land, property and cattle further added salt to injury when they failed to repay the debts owed to their masters. The perpetrators even subjected them to physical abuse and violence while the worst victims were the women who were kidnapped, raped, abused and even killed. Economic instability and deteriorating living conditions forced them to take hefty loans from money lenders who in turn charge exorbitant rates of interest. Furthermore, the European colonizers also actively participated in this exploitative process by making the tribal communities work for their railway projects without any form of remuneration. Other reports of tribal oppression draw in the Munda rebellion of 1899 which was triggered by encroachments made by the Jagirdars and Thikadars who tried to take away the benefits enjoyed by the tribes. The tribes were subjected into forced labor, dispossessed of their assets and isolated. Such perpetration was also an after effect of colonial rule. Such oppressive acts were aimed at creating tribal disunity and to seize ancestral land. History accounts for similar incidents where the ruling administration would forcefully usurp large areas of tribal land by giving the motive a diplomatic coloring and publicly announcing that it was doing so in the name of industrialization and providing development.

The issue addressed by Tendulkar is relevant even today as many indigenous communities are displaced and oppressed as a result of rampant industrialization. Governments have continuously deprived them of their livelihood by intruding into

their natural surroundings that define their identity as guardians and protectors of the natural resources. A reference to the tribes made by Vratyasom reflects exactly the same situation that takes place from time to time. Indigenous communities like the natural environment have become collateral targets to efforts of developments. He says,

A certain tribe is being destroyed because it has no share in the national progress, isn't it? I say, let it be destroyed! Pity is unpragmatic. First think of the other, more developed sections of our society--think how it can be given greater conveniences and comforts, how more and more modernity can be brought into his life, how its standard of living can be brought into line with that of the developed nations. Think of that! Let a tribe destroying itself be destroyed! (*Five Plays*, 2014)

These governments have overlooked the ability of such indigenous communities to exist amidst the natural surroundings and consume what nature provides for them while ensuring a sustainable living environment throughout. The recent Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019 that was passed in the Lok Sabha which seeks to provide citizenship to non-Muslim communities residing in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh was seen by many as a violation of the rights of the indigenous and tribal population of the northeastern states. Many of the citizens feel that the bill would add more to the population of the uncountable illegal settlers from the neighboring country of Bangladesh. This would in turn hamper the security and identity of the tribal population who share a close affinity with their surroundings.

### Resistance

Another important aspect however that Tendulkar also highlights in the play is the protest and resistance that the tribal community display towards their oppressors. The oppressed Kadamba tribes find relief under the benevolent shadow of their beloved queen. Unlike her father and his cabinet ministers she displays a willingness to address developmental projects through which the tribes could be rehabilitated and provided with a better lifestyle. The community though decrepit displayed an essence of strength and courage with a rebellious spirit to fight for what they felt was rightfully theirs. According to her they would "endure death, but won't be enslaved". She narrates to Prannarayan about how the members of the tribes young, old, women, children and other stood up to her and were ready to sacrifice their own lives for the cause. For them this was the most obvious form of resistance. Death was a weapon they were prepared to use against the administrative tyrants. Vijaya provides a very evocative description of the tribes as she tells Prannarayan, "But their eyes, Prannarayan, their eyes are like explosions of light! Their necks are straight. Their heads won't bow before anyone. Their words are measured. Their naked little children seemed to me like lion cubs" (*Five Plays*, 2014).

The resistance movements of the tribal community had even extended to violent forms of fighting back their oppressors. Years of continuous subjugation have empowered them with courage to fight back. In the play we learn about their physical exploits and revolt from a messenger as he informs the ministers about their instigated riots and capturing of military positions. In light of their violent reactions one is reminded of Fanon's concept of violence as a decolonizing weapon (Fanon 1963). Although he admits that he does not outrightly champion violence, Fanon is of the opinion that when a group of people are subjected to innumerable episodes of violent dispositions at the hands of the oppressors, they are dehumanized and therefore lose their identity. The only way they identify themselves with their perpetrators is violence. Therefore violent resistance can be seen as a way to reclaim lost identity.

The resistance movement of the tribes reflects the ground reality that the country had experienced in the years since its pre-independent to the post-colonial period. The frequent oppression of the tribal communities has given rise to violent rebellion witnessed by the birth of many anti-social militant outfits. One prime example is the Naxalite movement an offshoot of the peasant uprising dating back to 1967. The same has since then spread from Bengal to the other states of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Telangana and Chhattisgarh. In addition, the Santhal movement in Bihar was also an outcome of the oppression faced by the peasants in the form of hiked land taxes, forcible confiscation of land and violent discrimination. The Munda rebellion also marked such resistance against rampant exploitation. Resistance was manifested mostly in violent reactions against the oppressing system. Although there were waves of violent rebellions in many parts of the country, passive resistance was also embraced by many overground activists who have utilized the media, literature and social platforms to address such issues. The Citizenship Amendment Bill 2019 imbroglio has also evoked stiff resistance from the tribal strong communities of the north eastern states as social organizations, pressure groups and even state governments who see the move as nothing but a political stunt that may endanger the identity and cultural significance of the tribal communities in the region. Vijaya's effort to rehabilitate and to create a better life for the people also implies the resistance she puts up against the oppressors. Her initiative in the play speaks much about the need to recognize and protect the indigenous communities and recognize them as patrons of the ecological demography of the country. Her actions point to developmental policies that governments need to initiate to ensure that such populations thrive and are given a decent livelihood. One such victory of the resistance movements recorded is that of the Yanadi tribes who were able to finally reclaim back the land which they had lost to oppression. The government of Andhra Pradesh has taken steps and measures to ensure the betterment of the indigenous population.

### Dramatic Representation

Although it may be mentioned that Tendulkar has been in the limelight many a times for the controversial subject matters and outright representations, what makes his works more appealing are the dramatic and literary techniques that he employs in representing them. In one of his lectures Tendulkar stresses on two skills which he feels a

playwright should have, one of characterization and another of the sense of structure. He always believed in the creation of characters that had 'their own voice and expression.' In the play we do not come in direct contact with the members of the Kadamba tribal community in any part of the play. We are informed about them only through the descriptions given by Vijaya. However the use of vivid description in dialogue construction has actually enabled the audience and the reader to actually visualize what a member of the tribal community would look like. The dialogue between Vijaya and her eunuch paints a very clear picture of the situation and the circumstance that they are put in that they become living characters, an aspect that only dialogue in drama could attain according to Tendulkar. In the play, Vijaya actually served as a mouthpiece for the oppressed tribes. On the other hand the fact that the Kadamba tribes were poorly represented in the play reflects the playwright's dramatic technique to enhance the subject matter. Their being denied even a single expression can be translated as his motive to show their oppressed states of being silenced and voiceless. In this respect the aspect of the play draws a close affiliation to Friere's 'culture of silence' (Friere 2005) that identifies silence as a major determinant and symbol of constant oppression. The silence of the tribes speaks aloud about the many years of subjugation, suffering and abuse suffered at the hands of the administrators, as Tendulkar states, 'silence in the theatre can be as expressive as the dialogue or words.'

Besides the use of dialogue and description to enhance the subject matter and theme, Tendulkar employs vivid imagery. There is a certain reference to imprisoned pigeons and rats in the play to depict the idea of oppression and subjugation. While the pigeons signify the idea of restricted freedom and decision making that Vijaya faced at the hands of the council of ministers, the reference to rats by Vrayasom implies the inconsideration displayed towards the Kadamba tribes who have been dehumanized. Their dehumanization comes as a necessity for his oppressors as they attach no moral consideration towards them and therefore feel no guilt whatsoever to even annihilate the members of the tribes. Nick Haslam's (2006) views on dehumanization explains how oppressed populations are attributed with less than human attributes by being considered merely as animals or machines without any notion of feelings or morality. Tendulkar has very cleverly weaved such notions in the dialogues of the oppressors which subscribes to such evaluations.

### Conclusion

Literature has represented life in many ways than one, where drama as one of its genre has propagated such social issues on a text and on stage as well. The credibility of a playwright is not merely to display his creativity and technical expertise in the subject but most important to effect social change and consciousness by addressing such issues. In this regard Tendulkar's ability as a playwright and a social thinker can never be undermined. His works though products of the previous century bear character and relevance to situations that our society and country as a whole are dealing on an everyday basis. The study has shed light on a subject matter that cannot be simply be enjoyed as a piece of literature but allows the reader and audience to introspect and question national development that prides itself over the annihilation of its own people. The play which documents indigenous experiences and oppression complimented with the clever use of dramatic representation is commendable and deserves due recognition.

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