



Epitome Journals

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN : 2395-6968 | Impact Factor = 3.656

VIOLENCE IN CINEMA : A CRITICAL STUDY



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I demonstrate through numerous examples taken from four identifiable Hindi film subgenres queer themes which, though nontransgressive in their native Indian context, acquire subversive value and serve as queer points of identification when viewed from a nonnationalist bias. Originally, studies on violence in the cinema were connected to particular genres or filmmakers. This scholarship often investigated the patterns and tropes of violence as it was identified with genres, such as the western, the gangster film, and horror—or filmmakers such as Sam Peckinpah or Arthur Penn. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, there was a wave of new scholarship on violence in the cinema that often focused on how the form of violence created meaning. And since then, there has been steady publication of new scholarship every year investigating violence in the cinema. This bibliography is organized to represent the different paths of investigation that scholars have

taken. A certain segment of the scholarship is still concerned with figuring out the relationship of violent spectacle to the narrative structure, while others investigate how violence impacts racial or gender identities. Still other scholarship considers the aesthetic qualities of violence in “ultraviolence,” specifically depicted in war films and apocalyptic films. Recent scholarship has also been addressing the rise in a new abundance of torture scenes in film often linking them to post-9/11 fears and issues. This contemporary scholarship has also led to some reinvestigations of genre, the Production Code, and various filmmakers associated with violence, all interpreted through this new lens concerning the aesthetics and structural impact of violence itself.

Keywords : Violence, Media, narratives, films, film makers

Research Paper

I am not really going to elaborate on the subject in terms of social sciences; instead I speak as a playwright. Second, I focus largely on Marathi theatre. Hopefully it will raise a few pertinent questions which are valid for theatre in India as a whole. One can divide modern Marathi theatre into three distinct periods. I would like to begin with the second period, which started nearly a hundred years after the first phase was inaugurated by Mahatma Phule in the mid-nineteenth century. The second phase, known as the golden period of Marathi theatre, started around the 1950s, just when we were introduced to various elements of a modern, independent, capitalist, industrial society, along with the social pathologies and violence that often accompany it. The defining features of modern theatre were formulated in this period in India. One of the playwrights responsible for this, as we all know, was Vijay Tendulkar. Apart from this middle class language based theatre there were other strands that developed approximately at the same time, e.g., theatre related to workers like that of Annabhau Sathe and Amar Sheikh, along with agit-prop theatre, Dalit theatre, street theatre and urban theatre using folk forms. But they have had a somewhat marginalized existence.

Theatre as a whole still mainly remains a middle class activity. I will look at the norms of theatre and ‘theatricality’ that were set by this middle class theatre, and which seem to remain valid till today. I will take Tendulkar as an exemplar as he is considered to be the father of modern – not only Marathi, but also Indian – theatre. Second, his was a socially conscious theatre which did not proclaim itself as being “apolitical,” as some others did and still do. Third, and most important, Tendulkar was intensely concerned about violence, both in creative as well as academic terms. Incidentally, his subject of study for the Nehru fellowship was violence. I am sure that most readers are aware of the main examples of depiction of

violence in European and American theatre as well as novels – Dostoyevsky, Sartre, Camus, Brecht, Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, to name a few. It would be instructive to juxtapose Tendulkar’s vision to these writers’ visions. The best example of this is Gidhade (Vultures), where Tendulkar depicts a family totally consumed by lust and violence that is an inherent ingredient of capitalism. It can obviously be juxtaposed with Tennessee Williams’ Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. But Tendulkar does two important things differently. He “locates” his characters rather vaguely, in terms of history and class, and he does not trace the sociopolitical undercurrents. In an interview I asked Tendulkar about his ideas regarding social violence. His answer revolved around a simple statement: Human beings are part of the animal world; they are as violent as other animals; the sociological factors related to violence are not as important as the biological factors. Even on gender-related violence which he has so vividly depicted in plays like Sakharam Binder, his comment was that it is “specie” related, that every man wants to physically abuse his wife, that this has nothing to do with social conditioning and, most importantly, that “we cannot do anything about it.” Clearly Tendulkar sees violence and the exploiter-exploited relationship as “natural” and “eternal” though he refrains from articulating a clear position. As a creative writer, this prevents him from further theoretical exploration of social and political institutions and ethical norms through which this violence actually takes place and gets perpetuated. This in itself is a position which is status quoist and glorifies what can be loosely termed as “antiintellectualism.”

This attitude of not wanting to intellectually analyze and understand society is a convenient middle class trait to which not only Tendulkar but nearly all the writers, including myself, belong. There is no doubt that Tendulkar was a great playwright whose concern extended to all sections of society. Also, he was the first to shake the middle classes out of their convenient slumber and face the violence and morbidity in everyday life. In fact I choose to write about him, as he was arguably the best amongst us. What I am trying to explore is how we define theatre. II It may appear a truism that theatre is supposed to be “theatrical.” Arguably there is consensus on what constitutes this “theatricality” – that it should be focused, structured and have a unilinear progression ending in a crescendo.

Theatre should be like a pointed sword. What is added to this definition in Indian conditions, barring a few exceptions, is that it should stay away from theoretical understanding and, be emotionally evocative even at the cost of not being thought-provoking. Both these definitional aspects create problems today. Before looking at the third phase, let me first try and briefly list some changes I feel have occurred post-1985 as far as social pathologies are

concerned. In short, in today's globalized and globalizing world, isolation, fragmentation and a total loss of purpose and direction have become the breeding ground of all current social pathologies and the accompanying phenomena of virtually neurotic anxiety and violence.

The social pathologies have become multipolar. I realize that today this position is both rather common on the one hand and severely criticized on the other. To further complicate the debate, I agree with both. I agree that things are not as unilinear as appeared in the past, but I also accept the need to take a clear position despite this. Let me try and illustrate my point by taking examples of three writers from three different eras who were placed in conditions potentially or actually violent. The differences between the violence they faced and which no doubt influenced their writing is self-evident. The first example is of the great Oriya writer Fakir Mohan Senapati who was born in 1843. To start with he had a traditional Hindu name: Braja Mohan Senapati. As a child he had fallen very ill. His devout grandmother prayed to every possible Hindu God. She then turned to two Muslim saints, promising to give her ward up to their religious order if he recovered. Yet though he recovered, the doting grandmother could not bear to give him up. So she struck a deal with the saints: she would change Braja Mohan's name to Fakir Mohan and give him up "symbolically." In addition, the young Fakir would, for eight days of the Moharram, dress up as a fakir and roam through the village mourning and begging from house to house. The money thus collected would be sent to the saints. As the second example we can turn to Tendulkar's encounters over his plays with the "traditionalists," the "casteists," and the morality keepers." This was in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. As compared with conditions throughout the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, the social pathologies had changed; identity divisions had become more fierce. But the issues continued to be unilinear and bipolar in Tendulkar's time.

The third example is that of my favourite Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk. Though not exactly a darling of the West to start with, post his stand on the Armenian question and being a leftwing, modernist liberal, he has simultaneously managed to evoke the wrath of such diverse groups as the despotic but secular army, the Islamic fundamentalists, the communists and the right-wing nationalists (while the West seems to love him now). In short, both the traditionalists and the modernists of all shades and persuasions have made him a target. This is qualitatively different from the relationship between antagonists in the previous eras. Another similar case is that of Tasleema Nasreen. As mentioned earlier, one religion against the other, capital against labour, progressive against the traditionalist – these constituted the binary scenario before the '90s. Now it is capital against a particular faith, capital against racism, and so on. It seems that we do not share any common ground in today's fragmented

world. Under these conditions which are far more complex and non-binary, I feel that theatre cannot stick to its older definitions of theatricality. It cannot be as unilinear and needs to tread in these grey areas without fear, without being antiintellectual. In my opinion literature – especially the novel – seems able to come to terms with this challenge much better than theatre, even in Europe. The reasons are somewhat obvious, but this is not the place to deal with them in detail. III To come back to theatre. Let us take the example of two different plays, one from the US and the other from Europe. The video of the first one, from USA, was shown to some of us in Pune by the noted director Richard Schechner. The lead actor (and writer) of the play was HIV positive, and the audience was made aware of this fact. One of the others actor makes an incision on his back with a scalpel. Towels soaked in this blood are hung on a wire and moved over the heads of the audience. In the next scene he then pokes himself with injection syringe needles – keeping them inside his body at hundreds of places – in his arm, in his closely shaven skull, and so on. The depiction is so violent that a couple of people fainted while watching this film. The second example is from Europe.

Here a Bulgarian actor-dancer (Ivo Dimchevmore), who is gay, has gone through the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and unemployment, is facing ghettoization of the European kind, living abroad and trying to support himself by doing theatre. During the play he starts selling some of props and items from the stage. People realize the metaphor and laugh. He then draws some blood from his arm into a test tube and auctions it. The first test tube is received with a mild shock, but the audience is not too perturbed. As he continues doing that, the second and the third and the fourth test tube makes the metaphor progressively harsher, finally reaching a point where watching him virtually dying on stage becomes unbearable. This example is obviously more starkly political than the earlier one. This is clearly a departure from the universal norms of theatricality. But is it theatre any more? What is the difference between art and real life? Where is the make belief? Can a real life event like a surgical procedure, or an accident where people actually get hurt, or a war where they get killed, be called theatre? IV In contrast what is happening on the Indian scene? There is an increasing emphasis on physical theatre in India too. In most cases it is coupled with folk forms and mythological texts like the Mahabharata. There is an increasing tendency to discard words altogether. I fully appreciate the strength of such kind of theatre and its multi-regional appeal. It also works well as a tool of protest under some exceptional local conditions, like the theatre in the North East (Ratan Thiyyam, Kanhaiyalal, H. Savitri and others). But in my opinion it is not possible to address contemporary social conditions in any intellectual depth without ‘ideas’ and hence without ‘words’. Perhaps it is to avoid these

limitations that 'physical theatre' has gone to the extent it has in Europe. On the other hand, the use of ritualistic folk forms to secure the expression and understanding of contemporary social pathologies through characters like Kunti, Draupadi, Karna and Abhimanyu seems much too restrictive and full of internal contradictions, repetition and absurdities.

It falls pray to anti-intellectualism, maybe for different reasons. What about agit-prop theatre? With most peoples' movements facing crisis, such theatre too is in the same state. I am in favour of agit-prop theatre – even at times leaning towards propaganda. But I am afraid that the tendency to simplify issues, and need to see things in black and white is becoming counterproductive when issues tend to be more in the grey area. I find it absurd when street theatre competitions are held and winning becomes an important goal for the groups. And finally, what is happening to the word-based middle class theatre? I can see three strands developing in Marathi theatre today. First, writers appear to be in harmony with the sensibilities of the older generation. Their lives have changed but their outlook has not. The second set realizes that there is a sea change in the conditions. However, they do not want to deal with the whole picture, preferring to limit their horizon and perspective. Since they do enjoy some support from the audience, this often goes on to create a myth that experimental theatre is regaining its lost glory in Maharashtra. Both these sets of people prefer dealing with any topic as a chunk of reality without locating it within historical perspective. They prefer to concentrate on human emotions like love, hate, jealousy, among others, as timeless and aesthetically interesting elements. If anything, antiintellectualism has increased in Marathi theatre today. Worse, it is largely self-absorbed, so unlike Tendulkar.

The third category has also realized the change and are trying to face it head on, though their success in reaching the audience is questionable. They are struggling to develop new definitions of theatricality. This group, unlike the first two categories, is getting a fragmented response. Whatever the form of violence, I see no way in which either the old idea of theatricality or physical theatre can encompass these pathologies. Something like a collage rather than a linear progression, which does not resemble a penetrating sword but comes across more like a loaded truck hitting the audience, may be required and accepted as theatricality. Instead of emotional evocation, a stretched intellectual provocation which unrolls over a period of time will have to be accepted by the audience. I do find a lot of novels going this way. There may be more than one way of achieving this, and I do see a few experiments and discussions being held like this one.

To summarize, even though I do not often witness theatre which is coming to terms with today's social pathologies in an engaging manner, this effort makes me a bit hopeful. Violence in the media has been increasing and reaching proportions that are dangerous," said Emanuel Tanay, MD, a retired Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Wayne State University and a forensic psychiatrist for more than 50 years.

"You turn on the television, and violence is there. You go to a movie, and violence is there," Tanay told *Psychiatric Times*. "Reality is distorted. If you live in a fictional world, then the fictional world becomes your reality."

The average American watches nearly 5 hours of video each day, 98% of which is watched on a traditional television set, according to Nielsen Company. Nearly two-thirds of TV programs contain some physical violence. Most self-involving video games contain some violent content even those for children.¹ Tanay noted, "Anything that promotes something can be called propaganda." What we call entertainment is really propaganda for violence. If you manufacture guns, you don't need to advertise, because it is done by our entertainment industry." In reality, the number of violent crimes has been falling, but the public's perception is that violence has increased. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, the overall violent victimization rate (eg, rape and assaults) decreased by 40% from 2001 to 2010. Similarly, the murder rate in the US has dropped by almost half, from 9.8 per 100,000 people in 1991 to 5.0 in 2009. Yet the propaganda, Tanay said, makes people feel that crime is everywhere and that guns are needed for protection. Asked about the hundreds of murderers he has examined and possible links to media violence, Tanay said, "Most homicides are committed by people who know each other, and who have some momentary conflict and have a weapon handy. Usually only hit men, who are very rare, kill strangers."

Tanay did acknowledge, however, that some mentally ill individuals are vulnerable to dramatized violence. "They are naturally more vulnerable, because they are in the community, they are sick, and they may misinterpret something." The 2 teenage boys who murdered 12 schoolmates and a teacher and injured 21 others at Columbine High School in Colorado before killing themselves, he said, lived in a pathological environment. "Their lives centered around violent video games." After the 1999 Columbine tragedy, the FBI and its team of psychiatrists and psychologists concluded that both perpetrators were mentally ill—Eric Harris was a psychopath and Dylan Klebold was depressive and suicidal. Other analysts have argued that a possible causal factor may relate to the young killers' obsessions with violent imagery in video games and movies that led them to depersonalize their victims. While the vast majority of individuals afflicted with a psychotic disorder do not commit

violence, Tanay said, “some mass killings have been perpetrated by people who are psychotic.” He cited the example of Seung-Hui Cho, a student who in 2007 shot to death 32 students and faculty of Virginia Tech, wounded 17 more, and then killed himself. “Cho was psychotic. Twenty years ago he would have been committed to a state hospital. . . . Now, we don’t take care of psychotic patients until they do something violent,” Tanay said. Writing about the Colorado tragedy in a July 20 Time magazine essay, Christopher Ferguson, PhD, Interim Chair and Associate Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology and Communication at Texas A&M International University, argued there is currently no scientific proof that the mass homicides can be explained, even in part, by violent entertainment.

Research studies

So what does research show?

A 2002 report by the US Secret Service and the US Department of Education, which examined 37 incidents of targeted school shootings and school attacks from 1974 to 2000 in this country, found that “over half of the attackers demonstrated some interest in violence through movies, video games, books, and other media.”² In a 2009 Policy Statement on Media Violence, the American Academy of Pediatrics said, “Extensive research evidence indicates that media violence can contribute to aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed.”³ This year, the Media Violence Commission of the International Society for Research on Aggression (ISRA) in its report on media violence said, “Over the past 50 years, a large number of studies conducted around the world have shown that watching violent television, watching violent films, or playing violent video games increases the likelihood for aggressive behavior.”⁴ According to the commission, more than 15 meta-analyses have been published examining the links between media violence and aggression. Anderson and colleagues,⁵ for instance, published a comprehensive meta-analysis of violent video game effects and concluded that the “evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior.”

In a Psychiatric Times interview, psychologist Craig Anderson, PhD, Director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Iowa State University, said the evidence for the media violence–aggression link is very strong from every major type of study design: randomized experiments, cross-sectional correlation studies, and longitudinal studies.

In 2007, Anderson's group reported on a longitudinal study of violent video games. The study queried children and their peers as well as teachers on aggressive behaviors and violent media consumption twice during a school year. The researchers found that boys and girls who played a lot of violent video games changed over the school year, becoming more aggressive.⁶ "There now are numerous longitudinal studies by several different research groups around the world, and they all find significant violent video game exposure effects," Anderson said. In contrast, a longitudinal study published this year by Ferguson and colleagues,⁷ which followed 165 boys and girls (aged 10 to 14 years) over 3 years, found no long-term link between violent video games and youth aggression or dating violence. Studies from Japan, Singapore, Germany, Portugal, and the US show that "the association between media violence and aggression is similar across cultures," according to Anderson. "Most recently," he added, "we found that within a high-risk population [incarcerated juvenile offenders], violent video games are associated with violent antisocial behavior, even after controlling for the robust influences of multiple correlates of juvenile delinquency and youth violence, most notably psychopathy."⁸ There is growing evidence, Anderson said, that high exposure to fast-paced violent games can lead to changes in brain function when processing violent images, including dampening of emotional responses to violence and decreases in certain types of executive control. But there also is some evidence that the same type of fast-paced violent games can improve some types of spatial-visual skills, basically, ability to extract visual information from a computer screen. Despite the links between media violence and aggression, Anderson stressed,

"media violence is only one of many risk factors for later aggressive and violent behavior. Furthermore, extremely violent behavior never occurs when there is only one risk factor present. Thus, a healthy, welladjusted person with few risk factors is not going to become a school-shooter just because they start playing a lot of violent video games or watching a lot of violent movies."

One of Anderson's colleagues at Iowa State University, Douglas Gentile, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology, along with Brad Bushman, PhD, Professor of Communication and Psychology at Ohio State University and Professor of Communication Science at the VU University in Amsterdam, recently published a study that identifies media exposure as 1 of the 6 risk factors for predicting later aggression in 430 children (aged 7 to 11, grades 3 to 5) from Minnesota schools.⁹ Besides media violence, the remaining risk factors are bias toward hostility, low parental involvement, participant sex, physical victimization, and prior physical fights. Knowing students' risk for aggression can help school officials determine which

students might be more likely to get in fights or possibly bully other students, according to Gentile, who runs the Media Research Lab at Iowa State University. He said he can get “over 80% accuracy” in predicting which child is at high risk for bullying behavior by knowing 3 things—“are they a boy, have they gotten in a fight within the past year, and do they consume a lot of media violence.”

In discussing their study findings, Gentile and Bushman wrote:

“The best single predictor of future aggression in the sample of elementary schoolchildren was past aggression, followed by violent media exposure, followed by having been a victim of aggression.”

They added that their risk-factor approach can “cool down” the heated debate on the effects of media violence, since “exposure to violent media is not the only risk factor for aggression or even the most important risk factor, but it is one important risk factor.” “We are interested in using this new approach to measuring the multiple risk factors for aggression in additional samples, and also increasing the number of risk factors we examine (there are over 100 known risk factors for aggression),” Gentile told *Psychiatric Times*. He and colleagues have several other studies under way in several countries.

“I am particularly hopeful that this approach will help the public and professionals realize that media violence is not different from other risk factors for aggression. It’s not the largest, nor the smallest,” he said. “If there is any important difference at all, it is simply that media violence is easier for parents to control than other risk factors, such as being bullied, having psychiatric illnesses, or living in poverty.”

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