

# The 'Safar' of a common man: Vijay Tendulkar's travel play *The Cyclist*

Shukla Chatterjee

Matrikiran High School, Gurgaon. ORCID: 0000-0003-3181-2725.

Email: [shuklachat@gmail.com](mailto:shuklachat@gmail.com)

---

## Abstract

'Travel narratives' are primarily narratives or accounts of travel by the traveller or the narrator. With time this genre has journeyed from being just accounts to fictional stories as well. Though the nature of travel writing has taken up several forms, to proliferate the idea of travel through performance texts/plays is a rare to find. This is also because staging literal journeys on stage is a bit tricky. An Indian regional playwright of international acclaim, Vijay Tendulkar, explored this through his experimental play, *Safar* in Marathi which has been translated into English as *The Cyclist*. Beautifully crafted through the staging of various encounters by the protagonist, this play takes the form of a travel account. At the same time, by using 'the cycle' as a symbol, the playwright attempts to treat 'journey' as a metaphor and trace three types of journey – geographical, psychological and allegorical -- which is quite obviously undertaken by every-man in life. This paper therefore attempts a detailed analysis of the play to show how performative language can also be used to create audio visual spectacle reifying the tale of the traveller/narrator on the stage.

**Key words:** travel narrative, travel play, Vijay Tendulkar, *The Cyclist*

## Introduction

'Travel narratives' are narratives or accounts of travel by the traveller or the narrator. We expect vivid descriptions of the places of visit, encounters with different people and culture through travel narratives. Such accounts are common through diaries, journals, memoirs, letters, autobiographies, and so on. With time, 'travel narratives' as a genre has journeyed from being just accounts of travel to fictional stories based on real travel experience. Though the nature of travel writing has taken up several forms, to proliferate the idea of travel through performance texts/plays is rare to find. This is also because staging literal journeys on stage does not have much scope to fulfill the laws of stage performance. Even then, travel plays have been written since the Renaissance. In spite of such attempts, travel plays are rare and to trace them in India by an Indian author is even rarer. This paper attempts to locate Vijay Tendulkar's play *The Cyclist* (*Safar* in Marathi) written in 1992 and identify it as a travel narrative. Unlike Renaissance travel plays, this play, though absurdist in nature, traces three types of journey – geographical, psychological and allegorical -- of the main character. By using 'the cycle' as a symbol, the playwright attempts to treat 'journey' as a metaphor which is quite obviously undertaken by every-man in life. This paper therefore attempts a detailed analysis of the play to show how performative language can also be used to create audiovisual spectacle reifying the tale of the traveller/narrator on the stage.

In Indian literature, the notion of travel is not new. Like the Western literature, a variety of travel accounts are found to be chronicled in epics, folk narratives, and ancient works of literature. Be it the journey of Lord Rama from Ayodhya to Lanka and back in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, or the journey of the cloud messenger (*Meghdootam*) by Kalidasa, travel had always been a major component in the development of the narrative. However it must be noted here that though these works of literature had extensive descriptions of the places travelled by the protagonists, none of these texts were referred to as 'travel narratives'. Nor are these texts still categorized as travel narratives. Yet, these texts are some of the world's best narratives of travel. This trend is continued even in the twentieth century.

### Travel plays

When the narrative of the traveller and his perception about the travel play an important role, it is quite obvious that the best scope for such narration is through diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, short stories and novels. Though the nature of travel writing has taken up several forms; to proliferate the idea of travel through performance texts/plays and depicting literal journeys on stage, following the basic requirement of Aristotle's Unity of Place and Time is challenging. In spite of this technical challenge, playwrights have attempted to write travel plays as well. Since the Renaissance, playwrights and dramatists have tried to explore this narrative within the limited scope of proscenium theatre.

The travel plays from the Renaissance have either tried to build up a plot centering on accounts of real travels or have captured some special moments from travel accounts of famous explorers in a theatrical manner. So, through such plays, only glimpses of real travels could be portrayed. In such a scenario, should one call such plays/drama to be Travel Narratives? Presumably not! By portraying only a glimpse of the real travel, or narrating an episode of the real travel gives no scope for the narrator to narrate the perspective of the traveller. However experimentation with form and content never stops. It is seen that in the twentieth century, playwrights have gone a step ahead to carve out a way so that Aristotle's Unity of Place and Time is followed and at the same time, the traveller narrates his travel. One such play is written by the eminent Indian playwright, Vijay Tendulkar in 1992.

### The Play: *The Cyclist*

*The Cyclist* by Tendulkar is an experimentation of form and content. Translated from the original Marathi play *Safar* (1992) as *Cyclewallah* in Hindi and later as *The Cyclist* (2004) in English, it is again another play of Tendulkar that records his genius and maturity in handling complex issues of life and his quest for an answer to the mysteries of existence, real and unreal, good and bad, right and wrong. At the same time, it is an allegorical play of a journey that discloses at various moments quite implicitly Tendulkar's own journey as a playwright to unravel the exploitation of power and latent violence in human relationships, seeking always a well deliberated resolution. *The Cyclist* can be argued as a travel play as it closely relates to the various aspects of travel narratives through absurdism. The very title of the play in its original version *Safar* indicates that the play is about some journey and that the playwright had written the play as a traveller's narrative to understand deeply the 'journey of life'.

Each of Tendulkar's plays has been shaped as it is from the playwright's personal experience. The very idea of travelling on a cycle came into the writer's mind as he exercised every morning on an exercise cycle:

When I had blood pressure, I had to exercise regularly so I got myself an exercise cycle, and every morning, sitting on it, pedaling, my mind would wander, and that's when the idea came. I didn't start with a specific theme... I wrote a couple of pages, then stopped, went to something else, and finished it in bits....What I found funny was that one was involved in a very hectic but impotent activity – you know, riding in the same place. That thought led to other things and the play happened. (Shanbag Mid-Day June 1990)

Out of this unusual experience emerged a play like *The Cyclist*. The play starts off with a young man out on a cycle tour completely on his own. It ends in transforming this journey of the young man into a dream as the bicycle he was riding had no wheels. So in the end, the protagonist, shorn of clothes, lies on the floor, curled in the foetal position. Critically, this journey becomes the prime concern of the playwright. The sense of travelling far and wide and yet not covering any distance physically becomes the core feature of the play. Hence, the concept of the protagonist's journey evolves through multiple meanings and therefore can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Apparently this dream journey of the cyclist appears to be a journey in geographical terms. On a deeper analysis, this journey of the cyclist can be interpreted as a psychological journey of the protagonist's mind. At the same time, through disjointed narratives of the main character, the play also offers insight into the historical journey and significance of the bicycle. 'Journey' is treated as a metaphor by the playwright in this play whereas 'the cycle' is treated as a symbol of progress. Despite all the obstacles placed in its way, the cycle has developed gradually through various experiments and has contributed to the advancement of technology. The geographical journey on a bicycle that the main character takes up implies the protagonists' desire to explore and open up new horizons of knowledge beyond the limited knowledge gained from books and parental education. Finally the encounters with a number of characters throughout the journey and the way the protagonist handles each situation also shows the gradual development of the 'narrative' of the protagonist's mind from ignorance to experience of life. This gradual development of the protagonist's mind is also the final realization and is the outcome of the psychological journey of the play. So, though the title of the play is *The Cyclist*, the subject matter of the play is not the 'cyclist' but the cyclist's journey and more profoundly the journey of life as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. In this respect, the Marathi title *Safar* meaning 'journey' is far more appropriate than the English or the Hindi title.

It is a fact that travellers, in their act of travel, encounter various people. These people are just passers-by and have no definite identity. Such encounters and the narration of such encounters speak on the protagonist's behalf the perspective of the traveller/narrator. Simply told, in order to portray his experience of life as individual images, Tendulkar probably framed *The Cyclist* not through valid characters and a concrete story. Throughout his journey, the cyclist is made to encounter various obstacles and interact with a number of characters that range from natural to real, and even elevate to surreal characters. It is further noticed that all the characters have been consciously given symbolic names as for example X, Y, Z or are referred as Ma, Pa, Lion Ghost etc. Even the central protagonist is simply called the Main Character and is not given any name. This range of characters in various ways unravels the materialistic world and the latent violence in human relationships. At the same time it reiterates the fact that just as in travel narratives, it is the perspective of the traveller that matters more than the people with whom the traveller encounters.

In *The Cyclist*, there is an extensive narration in the voice of the Main Character who at one point narrates to his audiences the various encounters in his journey. On the other hand, he also takes chance to narrate the history of the development of the cycle at intervals between the

encounters. As the encounters take place, there are dialogues between the protagonist and the characters as well. But these dialogues only help create the episodic images and do not communicate any meaning individually. Taken together, they portray situations faced by the protagonist at different points of time during his journey/travel.

On a close analysis of the various episodes in *The Cyclist*, it can be argued that each of the episodes are not only disjointed images trying to communicate the ultimate of human condition, but are also outward projections of the playwright's state of mind and his life-long experiences. The play begins with the protagonist's conversation with his Ma and Pa and reflects his urge to break the bonds of secured parenthood: "Amma and Pa never let me go. The only child! ... Why go out and waste yourself?" (p. 15) Both Ma and Pa fear that their child would not be able to cope with the world outside as "they are so tough ... violent" (p. 15). This episode on the one hand projects a scathing indictment on parental regimentation and over-protection of children. On the other hand, it can also stand as theatrical representations of Tendulkar's own childhood days, as well as the uncertainty of the traveller/narrator's experience of travel vis-a-vis the anxiousness of the traveller and his near ones.

As the cyclist sets himself out on his tour alone, he is ignorant of the journey and the consequences he might face. Perhaps this is a reflection of Tendulkar's journey all alone to become a playwright. At the beginning of his journey, the main character comes to a junction of three roads that leads him into confusion as to "which is the right one"? (p.11) This is the same question that Tendulkar might have confronted, as without any formal education, he had set out to find a way for his living. There were many choices before him but he had to choose the right one and seek the help of the passer by. But this encounter teaches him that paths may be different in nature – but they all lead to the same outcome. The difference lies in the choice of the right path. Uncertainties are always present in the material world. As a result choices can turn to be good or bad. In order to have a successful journey in life, it is very necessary to make the right choice at the right time.

As the protagonist continues to pedal, the second encounter he makes is with the sage. After a short conversation, the sage finally helps out the protagonist in understanding his confusion: "Why should this road which is going out of the city, again go back into the city? Am I back where I started from?" (p.15) The protagonist is confused but the sage comes to his rescue saying, "Look now. This is you... the way to the outside (of the city)." (p. 15) The sage helps the protagonist find his right way. This episode too perhaps has a link with the author's own life. After toiling through various types of work in the press and as a journalist, he found his right path of making life through playwriting.

Following the sage episode is the crowd episode, where the protagonist suddenly encounters a crowd that charges him of stealing a Murgi turkey. This crowd reflects the cheaters, thugs and therefore a section of society who earns money out of all such vicious plans, duping others for one's own profit. As the Main Character further progresses in his journey, he encounters the Lord of the earth and Lord of Heaven – both surreal characters. Through these encounters, the protagonist comes to experience the corruption prevalent in the world where in the name of God, human beings cash down benefits from anything and everything. After this experience, the following encounters faced by him are with that Bandit, Lion, and Figure which represent the Ghost. Through each of these encounters, the protagonist gains knowledge and experience of the outside world. The encounter with the Bandit establishes the cunning, hypocritical world whereas the lion represents the ferocious and animalist nature of the material world and the figure of the Ghost brings into light the final condition and situation of man full of

unfulfilled desires. All these encounters of the protagonist taken together can be linked with Tendulkar's own life of facing hardships and drawbacks or even obstacles and developing into being a well-known and well-established playwright. These obstacles have taught the playwright certain very important lessons just as in *The Cyclist*, the protagonist gradually learns to successfully handle all the encounters and finally progress towards his destination.

The final encounter that the protagonist faces is with that of a woman. But here the woman is in the form of a mermaid. Unlike other encounters, this last one is strange as the mermaid is found to have swallowed the clothes of the protagonist, leaving him bare to the bone. This mermaid at times tempts the protagonist for sexual pleasure and demands to fulfill her dream of being a mother and rear the child of the Main Character. "He will call you Pa and me Ma." (p. 38) This episode of the mermaid may not have a direct link with any such experience in the real life of the playwright. But none the less, Tendulkar always believed that in the journey of life, a man's journey is never complete without a woman as his partner and that sex is one common biological instinct of human beings. Degrees may vary, but nonetheless it is present in all human beings. So, it is obvious that if Tendulkar wanted to represent the journey of life through the journey of the cyclist, he had to introduce at least one female character amidst all male characters in the play.

Again by introducing the figure of a mermaid as a character in *The Cyclist*, Tendulkar tries to represent sexual and psycho-sexual violence within the human mind. The mermaid, which is half-human and half-fish, is often used as a symbol in mythologies and fairy tales, to embody death and immortality. A mermaid is often symbolized as a seductress calling men to the unknown, and uncertainty. In the twentieth century, post-Freudian thought had exposed the legendary fish-tailed seductress as the personification of the hidden desires of the sexual subconscious, symbolizing primitive castration anxieties and the urge to return to the amniotic waters of the womb. This is exactly what Tendulkar follows as he presents his mermaid figure. The swallowing of the clothes of the protagonist by the mermaid and also tempting him for sexual pleasure ultimately leaving him naked in a curled up foetal position firmly explains how the modern mermaid, which is nothing but an element of the unconscious, powerfully continues to play its role in our culture. The mermaid for Tendulkar therefore embodies themes that are always with us but often not on the surface of our daily experience and perception. Though seductive, mermaids are not accessible as a woman. So its temptations also would lead to masculine frustration, a collective yearning to understand human condition, human origins human vulnerability and morality. Therefore by the very act of swallowing clothes of the protagonist, which gives the man his identity, the mermaid is made to re-present the carnivorous mother-figure sabotaging masculinity and also devouring female desire. The characterization of the mermaid in the context of *The Cyclist* is important as it theorizes sexuality through the Freudian fear of the female as opposed to Tendulkar's blatant representation of sexuality in his other plays. By introducing the 'mermaid' therefore, Tendulkar leaves no gap in his representation of the material world and man's never ending journey in it.

Thus it is found that similar to an absurdist approach, *The Cyclist* presents disjointed images of a traveller's mind and a psychological reality. These images may appear isolated and individual projections of the author's state of mind, but they also attempt to search for an elusive truth. *The Cyclist* is the play about 'journey'. If this journey can be related to the journey of life, then the encounters with several benign and/or malevolent characters, the protagonist had on his way, can be compared to the various lessons or barriers in the life's journey that transcends a human being from the state of ignorance to the state of experience.

It is interesting to note that after all the encounters; the protagonist traveller is left injured and exhausted. So leaving the cycle aside, he lies naked in a curled up foetal position and falls asleep. This is where the play ends. But this ending imposes many questions in the minds of the audience. This is also a kind of ending that renders the play more profoundly to be categorized as a travel narrative. After learning to negotiate with a world of conundrums and odd -ball people through these encounters, the protagonist ends up in a cuddled position. Does this imply that the protagonist's journey is over? If the journey has really come to an end, where does he finally reach and what is his destination? Why does he end up sleeping in a foetal position? These and many more questions are instigated into the audience purposely by the playwright. In an attempt to answer these questions, the audience is led to confront yet another greater question about man's existence and disseminates the knowledge gained by a 'traveller' through his journeys.

In trying to deal with the ultimate of the human condition in terms of communicating a metaphysical truth through a living experience, this play also touches the religious sphere. *The Cyclist* tries to impose on its audience Tendulkar's reading of the eastern philosophy of life. At various moments within the play, the activities of the protagonist and finally the end of his journey raise questions about man's existence through the universal existential question 'Where do I come from, where I am going?' Questions on human existence have emerged in Tendulkar's other plays as well. But unlike the other plays which only raise the issues but do not give any solution, *The Cyclist* ends up with perhaps an implied solution through the concepts of eastern philosophies. Eastern philosophies often claim that life is a journey towards eternal realities that are beyond the realities that surround us. The realities that surround us in the mortal world lead to sufferings and hardships. But there is a path that leads out of suffering – the path according to the laws of *karma* or one's deeds during the lifetime. The path is led in the right direction as the self becomes one with Nature and in accord with the sage or the *guru*. More specifically, according to both Hinduism and Buddhism, the journey of life is symbolically represented by a wheel called 'The Wheel of Life' or the *Dharmachakra*. This 'Wheel of Life' illustrates in a popular way the Four Truths: *Dukkha* (suffering is everywhere); *Samudaya* (there is a cause of suffering, which is attachment or misplaced desire (*tanha*) rooted in ignorance); *Nirodha* (there is an end of suffering which is *Nirvana*); and *Maggo* (there is a path that leads out of suffering); the symbolic six worlds and the twelve interdependent causes and their effects. (Chatterjee, 2012, chapter 6)

Quite surprisingly, all the episodes that take place in *The Cyclist* can be related to one or more of the twelve interdependent causes and their effect on the 'Wheel of Life'. In the very beginning, the protagonist breaks the bonds of his parents to start a journey with complete ignorance of the outer world. This can be related to the first of the twelve interdependent causes where an old sightless man with a stick tries to find his way symbolizing ignorance which is also spiritual blindness. The passer-by and sage episode can again be equated to the second and third illustrations of the interdependent causes. Further the 'sage' suggests spiritual self. So the sage episode even concludes that the 'city' stands for the material world full of luxuries that human beings lust for, but the only way to free oneself from the life puzzle is to take recourse of the spiritual self that can show the right way to the eternal truth. The episodes where the protagonist encounters Lord of the Earth, Lord of Heaven, Bandit, Lion and Ghost are the experiences that the Main Character gains in his journey. According to eastern philosophy again, in our path of life, it is our sense organs and the faculty of thinking that observes and gains knowledge from the outer world transcending our self from the state of ignorance to that of experience. The fourth and fifth interdependent causes in the Wheel of Life illustrate this only. The following six interdependent causes as illustrated in the Wheel of Life represent sensual perception, emotions, desires, sensual entanglement, procreation of new life, and the consequences of procreation. All these are

reflected very crucially though the last encounter of the protagonist with the mermaid, who sexually tries to attract the Main Character and also by swallowing his clothes symbolically suggests that it would help the protagonist carry his generation forward by rearing his child in its womb. In a life's journey, the role of a mother who brings the man to life, the role of the better half who at all odds proves to be the best moral and mental support to a man, and finally the role of a mother who bears the man's child to carry his generation forward, are all played by women. So apart from the character of ma, the mermaid justifies all the other roles required in the life of the protagonist.

Finally the last and the twelfth interdependent cause in the 'Wheel of Life' illustrate old age and death. It suggests that the inevitable end of all the earthly existence is old age and death. Interestingly the illustration of this last cause shows the bearers with a bier and corpse swathed in a foetal posture ready for the next rebirth and further misery in one of the symbolic six worlds. This illustration is very similar to how the journey of life ends. From this it can be suggested that Tendulkar also wanted to hint at the fact that after all the experience of life, one has to end its journey to be ready for a new life and all new experience through a new birth. So purposely Tendulkar makes the protagonist sleep in a cuddled up foetal position representing new birth as for him, the mother's womb is the best protection, the best security, the best warmth, and the only world.

From this standpoint, as every episode of *The Cyclist* is found to closely tally with the illustrated portrayal of the journey of life according to the eastern philosophy, it can be said that Tendulkar too believed life to be a never ending cyclical journey through birth, suffering, death and rebirth. But at the same time it won't be wrong if Tendulkar's representation of the journey of life is seen as a satire against such philosophies of life. *The Cyclist* does allegorically represent the never ending journey of life, but at various points, through very simple and innocent dialogues, seems to question the very concept of life with claims of a cosmic unity. Every life evolves from this empty 'space' and also dissolves in it. But what this 'space' is, the philosophy does not answer. Tendulkar seems to put up his charge of satire at this very point. In the voice of the Main Character, he seems to ask 'Where did I come from?' This is the universal existential question which neither eastern nor western philosophy can answer. It only suggests. A subtle satire hurtles out as the sage, annoyed answers this question – "From your mother's womb! Ignoramus!" (p. 15)

Perhaps Tendulkar wanted to give a way to his kind of solution to this existential question. For Tendulkar, being a human being and the life lived is the ultimate truth. No one knows and can even answer what happens to human beings after death. Neither can anybody define rebirth. So the life which one can perceive and sense is the most precious thing and the mother's womb that actually generates life is the ultimate real world. This is Tendulkar's own philosophy of life.

## Conclusion

*The Cyclist* stands as a wonderful representation of Tendulkar's engagement with the travel narrative genre in both form and content. Though the play has always been referred as Tendulkar's experimentation with the Theatre of Absurd and has never been rendered as a travel narrative, the very fact that it is the narrative of the main character about the various encounters throughout his journey/travel clearly fits into the characteristics of a travel narrative. Also, the use of the 'cycle', often a favourite mode of commute for travellers, as a prop, adds to the form of a 'travel play'. The skillful use of minimal props, the stage directions as well as the plot structure, where the main character travels, yet the travel is only metaphorical and allegorical satisfies every

aspect of Aristotle's Unity of Place and Time. Most importantly, the playwright, through the voice of the main character, renders his audience with the perspective of a common man in his journey or 'Safar' of life. In all aspects therefore, *The Cyclist* can stand as Tendulkar's attempt to narrate his ultimate query of the journey of life and his only answer to the conditions of human nature through the form of a 'Travel Narrative Play'.

### References

- Chatterjee, S. (2012). "Representing Violence in the plays of Vijay Tendulkar", Chapter 3 and 6. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Visva-Bharati University.
- Tendulkar, V. (June 1990). An Interview, Shanbag, Mid-Day, Mumbai:Print.
- Tendulkar, V. (2004). *The Cyclist*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Dr. Shukla Chatterjee is in teaching profession for the last sixteen years. She has extensively worked on Tendulkar's plays in translation and published numerous articles in prestigious national and international journals (such as *Sahitya Akademi*, *The Commonwealth Review*, *SAARC Culture*, *The Soul of the American Actor* etc). As a freelancer she published many articles in *Times of India*. She is currently translating some renowned books from Marathi and Bengali to English.