Style and Character in Tendulkar's Gidhade

Gidhade dramatizes the history of a wicked and avaricious family. The members are all a cursed lot, worshippers of wealth who have sacrificed their humanity for greed. * Papa Pitale, the father, is as ruthless as his brother, Saktharam, whom he wipes out of their flourishing joint business through apparently legal means. Saktharam probably had similar plans for Papa but, anticipating his brother's machinations, Papa hastens to outwit his brother and ruins him financially.

The play is presented as a series of flashbacks in the memory of Rajaninath, who is Papa's son by a kept woman. In Rajaninath's mind pass the events of the past twenty-three years of the married life of Ramakanta and Rama, his half-brother and sister-in-law. During those years the dismal history of the Pitale family runs its course. Rajaninath sees Rama as she first came to the Pitale residence—an innocent, lively and attractive young girl—and as she left the bungalow with her husband a moment ago, devoid of all sensation, like a statue in stone, with the hopes of a happy life and desires for motherhood all dashed. The departure of Rama and Ramakanta from the house marks the conclusion of the play and of the ghastly saga of this wretched family.

Ramakanta and Umakanta, the two brothers, and Manik, their sister, together with their father Papa and Uncle Saktharam make up the five villains, the five "vultures" (the title of the play). Rama coming from another family, is not tainted at all; Rajaninath, however, is time and again beset by the horrifying thought that he may

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have partially inherited the "decease" of his family because he shares the same dehumanized father as his half-brothers and sister, Rama, an outsider by blood, and Rajaninath, an outsider in the physical sense since he has been living for the last number of years in the garage and not in the house itself, are the only two "good" characters in the play.

Before the play begins, the aging Papa has already sent his brother to financial exile and divided his estate among his three legitimate children, all of whom, like their father and Uncle Sakhraram, drink heavily. Ramakanta has acquired the house and some other possessions as part of the division. He lets the others live in the bungalow for a fee. The first gruesome event in the play is the aftermath of the return of Uncle Sakhraram, who had fled for life years before, to demand a share in Papa's secret treasure. Papa vehemently denies that there is any and is delighted when Ramakanta frightens Sakhraram away. But the suggestion that their father has some money hidden away sets the three children on the scent, and they plan to get the truth out of him. Pretending to fight, the two brothers, with Manik's help, manage to injure Papa's head. Under a veiled threat of further violence from them, he gives them a cheque for the amount in his secret bank account. After this incident, he feels it safe to run away and save his life. Papa and Sakhraram, the two vultures, thus meet their end.

The two brothers then torment their sister Manik, who, they suspect, is carrying the baby of her rich lover. They decide to blackmail her lover and, in order to prevent her from stirring out of the house to warn or aid him, they break her leg by pushing her down the stairs and have her placed in a cast for a broken leg. The Raja of Honduras, the father of the unborn baby, dies suddenly of a heart attack that very night. The brothers, enraged that their scheme of extorting a large sum of money from Manik's lover has failed, take their vengeance by kicking Manik in the belly and killing her baby. Screaming wildly and bleeding profusely, Manik creeps out of the house. That disposes of the third vulture.

In the meantime, Rama, who has been treated like a doormat and does not have courage to utter a word in real protest against her husband and the other Pitaloes, has been longing to have a child, but there have so far been several miscarriages because of the "diseased seed" of her husband, as she puts it in a moment of desperation. She has been taking tea and snacks to Rajaninath occasion-
ally and generally showing concern for him all along. On one such visit she approaches Rajaninath and becomes pregnant by him. When she is about five months pregnant—a fact indicating that this time the child will survive—Umakanta divulges to Ramakanta his conviction that the baby is really Rajaninath’s. This disclosure occurs during a dispute between the two brothers over the division of Manik’s share of the estate between themselves. At this time Ramakanta is losing heavily in his business, partly because of his dishonest dealings and partly because of neglect due to excessive drinking. He is on the verge of bankruptcy. Ramakanta says that all deals with Umakanta will be made only after Umakanta leaves the house, which belongs to Ramakanta. Umakanta then has to leave the house. The story of the fourth vulture thus comes to an end.

Smarting under the knowledge that Rama’s unborn baby is not his own but his half brother’s, Ramakanta visits such violence upon her that she loses the child. The last vestiges of sensation and liveliness in Rama disappear after this. Since his creditors are about to attach the house, Ramakanta leaves home with Rama, who is dragged along oblivious to everything around her. The play ends with Rajaninath’s commentary on the living death of the five vultures and the awful fate of Rama. Rajaninath’s own doom is predicted as well.

It is a critical common place to say that style is the man. In a very broad sense, style would include a person’s gestures, actions, thoughts and language, but style is used in this essay in its restricted sense of verbal style—the expressive as well as manipulative, the conscious as well as unconscious, use of language by a person. People’s body language and their actions are thus excluded from the stylistic analysis attempted in this paper. The analysis reveals that the verbal styles of the dramatis personae in Vijay Tendulkar’s play Gidhade (Poona, India: Neelakantha Prakashan, 1971) reinforce their natures: The dramatist associates certain verbal devices with certain characters so consistently that these stylistic features can be taken to be the distinguishing or identifying marks of the characters. These co-relations of verbal devices and character traits are consistent and ubiquitous, and that is why it can be maintained that there is a correspondence between style and character in Gidhade.

I have determined the nature or disposition of a character in Gidhade by reader response which is the composite of what the character says and does, of how other characters react to him or her and
the ironic implications of the character's words and action. Since what the individual characters say is one of the two sides of the equation postulated in the hypothesis that verbal style corresponds with character, I rely on the other relevant constituents of reader response to determine the nature of a character, namely that character's actions and other characters' reactions to him or her in terms of their speech and actions.

In determining the audience's perception of the events and people in Gidhade, one finds Rajaninath's commentary of vital importance, since it is through his eyes that the audience sees the world of the play. The gruesome pageant of the scenes marches through his mind. For one thing, he is the narrator-commentator of the play; he sits on the fence as it were, partially outside the main action. His credibility as a judge of the morals of the other characters is established early in the play when he spurns Papa's offer, even though financially beneficial to him, because it is repulsive to his moral nature. Bruised and insulted by his legitimate children, Papa approaches Rajaninath with a scheme to ruin his assailants by means of another predated will naming Rajaninath as partial inheritor. As part of the scheme, Rajaninath is then to take Ramakanta and Umakanta to court on the ground that the disbursement of Papa's property was accomplished under threat to Papa and that his will is the only legally valid document. This incident and Rama's regard for him—Rama who his herself portrayed as good—entrench Rajaninath's reliability as a morally upright character firmly in the reader's mind.

The reader then divides, with Rajaninath's aid, all the characters of the play into two groups—vultures and non-vultures or vicious people and good people. This binary division is significant and rather conspicuous. Rajaninath says there are five vultures in the household; it is this large group of vultures that gives the play its title—Gidhade, meaning "vultures." On one occasion (p. 41) it is not clear who the fifth vulture is according to his estimate: His comment on the fate of the five vultures is ambiguous. The reader cannot be sure whether he includes Uncle Sakharam among them. The ambiguity is further compounded when, in one of his moments of extreme depression, Rajaninath says to Rama that "his blood is curdled and his brain is rotting," as has already happened to other Pitaes. Even so, he disassociates himself from them physically, by living in the garage and not in the house, and psychologically, by
isolating himself from their inhuman greed and wicked deeds: "Your husband is not my brother. I am ashamed to own such worthless people as my brothers." (p. 28) (The translation of excerpts from the original Marathi is mine.) In fact, his isolation from the Pitales is so complete that Rama is virtually the only person he talks to from the household. The only exception is Papa, who comes to him with his sordid and fraudulent proposal, and this encounter is brief.

The audience perceives that the debased characters who have lost their humanity are, then, Sakharam, the uncle; Papa, the father of the family; Ramakanta and Umakanta, the two brothers; and Manik, their sister. There is a parallelism in the two pairs of male vultures: Sakharam and Papa, on the one hand, and Ramakanta and Umakanta, on the other. Each in the pair tries to outsmart the other, though all are alike dehumanized, with Manik being no exception. She is an able and willing co-conspirator in torturing Papa until he signs away his hidden treasure. After the older generation of vultures is disposed of, the remaining three young vultures plot to destroy one another.

The other much smaller group of non-vultures consists of only two members: Rama, the wife of Ramakanta, and Rajaninath, the half brother of the three Pitale children. Until her husband kills her unborn baby, until almost the very end, Rama has been gentle, sensitive and kind, a woman who has retained her humanity, though treated as a domestic servant and thoroughly exploited by all the Pitale vultures and especially by her husband Ramakanta. She, however, suffers in silence the deathly agonies of her situation and complains bitterly only once to Rajaninath, her confidant. She is an arch-masochist while the vultures are all sadists. She lacks the "courage to care for Rajaninath openly", to rebel against all the oppression and end it by leaving the rotten household, the debased Pitales. She knows she is "weak, cowardly, an abject creature". She suffers much but continues to stay with her worthless husband, even after he murders her baby. She leaves the house with him, rather than without him.

Rajaninath is the other character differentiated from the Pitale rabble. He is good natured and sensitive. The very fact that he is a poet wins him the reader's good opinion because the vultures have nothing to do with the fine arts; for them "writing poems is not worth a penny—just a waste of ink". All they care for is material wealth. Rajaninath wants nothing that is polluted by
their touch. He has been living on his own. Even Papa compliments on his self-respect and independence, and Rama alludes to his having long since stopped eating their food. Also, Rama really admires only him. Bringing tea to him is not just a self-imposed duty for her but a pleasant event of the day she can look forward to. All these qualities put him in the class of the non-vultures. But he too has a serious weakness. Like Rama he also lacks the courage, the fiery spirit to revolt against the sub-human Pitaes and redress Rama's wrongs. He is essentially passive, moving away from corruption, not fighting those who spread corruption. He sees Rama's torture, the steady annihilation of her youth and vivaciousness by the ruthless Pitaes but does nothing about it. He is aware of it too (p. 4): Against oppressive characters, passivity is no weapon; isolation is no remedy. He does not extricate Rama from the hell where she is trapped and burning.

These are the natures of the two groups of characters in Gidhade. The verbal styles of all of them or the features of the languages they use serve to distinguish the two groups—vultures and non-vultures—and, among the groups, to individualize each of them. In other words, stylistic apportionment is accordance with character discrimination.

One obvious feature of the language of the play is the pervasive animal imagery. "Vultures," of course, is the dominant image of the play. The feature divides the characters of Gidhade into two groups—those who call one another names denoting birds of prey (or treacherous animals) and those who do not so address others. This division, based on the use of images coincides with "the vultures and non-vultures" division, based on the characters' natures. The five dehumanized characters not only behave like beasts but address one another as ugly birds, ferocious animals or insects. Their animal status is appropriately reflected in their diction. There are at least ten occasions in the play when they use animal images to address each other. On the otherhand, Rama, a non-vulture, is never abusive, nor does she call any of the Pitaes animals, even during her one emotional outburst. Rajaninath does use animal imagery but only to allude to the debased Pitaes, never while directly addressing any of them. In his interview with Papa, for instance, he does not call him an "animal" to his face, even though he hates him and is boiling with rage during the encounter.

Another linguistic characteristic of the sub-human characters
which distinguishes them as a group from that other little group of human beings is their mixture of English and Hindi diction with Marathi. None of the bad characters speaks pure Marathi, while the good characters always speak pure Marathi. Mixed language, as less pure, thus represents depravity or lack of moral purity. Goodness is identified purity of language and culture. Papa mixes Hindi words in his Marathi: Hindi jan for Marathi pran, [meaning "life"] (pp. 9 and 37) and very rarely, English loan words as well breakfast (p. 8) and dance (p. 34). Manik, Umakanta and Ramakanta mix English vocabulary with Marathi all the time: Manik, for instance, uses one thousand (p. 7), poor poor Papa (p. 26) departure, celebrate (p. 35), a mangled linguistic form, and so on. In the case of the two brothers, specific examples are unnecessary because they can only talk this kind of mixed language. Just for a sample of his "pidgin" Marathi, one can cite Ramakanta (The italicised words in the quotes are the English words used in the play):

Crook, sala [a mildly abusive term]! See how soundly he is sleeping. Really fast, sala!
Our old man, brother, looks dead and funny when he is asleep. You know......‘Say Ram,’ sala!


Stupid, sala! ........Are you mad, Umya? Papa
...our Papa after all, you know! Don’t you have any culture, any manners? Our father too! (p. 26)
The same holds true for Umakanta:
No, no, Hondurka Rajaka baccha [Hindi inflection and Hindi lexical item], cheer him! Cheer the bitch—.
Murder, my foot! I vigil for nothing—.
I was doing firstaid and then the bitch Screamed so loud!—.
I know, [she is] afraid of her brother,
though [sees] that Hondurwala. (p. 57)
The speech of the brothers is full of such admixtures.

On the other hand, Rama and Rajanimath speak pure Marathi. They do not mix English or Hindi in their speech except when they echo the words used by the other person as, for example,
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Rama’s use of the word *breakfast* in her answer to Papa’s question about his *breakfast*. On the whole, Rama does not speak much; this restraint is part of the decorum associated with her role of a silently suffering daughter-in-law and traditional Hindu wife. But for once when she lays bare her heart to Rajaninath, she is very articulate and then pure Marathi flows uninterruptedly from her mouth, as if “Saraswati, the Goddess of Speech, were dancing on her tongue.”

As for Rajaninath, he is after all a poet; no wonder he is an architect of words. His is also an unadulterated form of Marathi. In *Gidhade*, the purity of linguistic usage thus functions as a metaphor of moral uprightness, of goodness of heart.

Though all the vicious characters speak pidgin Marathi and use an abusive, vulgar language, they are distinguished from one another within the group by their separate verbal traits. These verbal peculiarities appear regularly and often enough to become their stock-in-trade, the labels they could be recognized by. Papa, for instance, has his favourite obscenities such as *bhadee, bhanchod, chandali, and vesva*. In fact, most of his speeches begin or end with a couple of them. Manik uses base language and has a sharp tongue but, being a woman, does not use obvious profanities. Ramakanta’s language is pure venom, full of barbaric threats. Like a record player stylus caught in a groove, he keeps repeating his threat of physical violence though, ironically enough, he is obese and unable to follow up on his threat:

Manik, pay me my one rupee and thirteen annas and you, [Ramakanta] my one and a quarter rupees and the previous dues of four and a quarter, or else

—. First give the money—pay my dues. Come on—. (pp. 42-43)

I’ll count every coin, Ramya, wouldn’t let go even your father—No joke! Will extract every penny of the twelve and half thousand. (p.58)

I wouldn’t budge until I get every pie [penny], you rogue! (I won’t) let you be till you vomit it all—. (p. 73)

In Umakanta’s threats there is no refinement of speech or verbal etiquette at all, which adroitly covers the pure villainy of Ramakanta’s motives and designs. Even though all the gruesome plans to
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destroy the other vultures come out of his wickedly fertile brain (pp.26, 46, 62 and 86), Ramakanta accompanies their execution with a verbal aplomb, with verbal nuances, unmatched by any other character in the play.

Among the vultures Ramakanta is the past master of ironic languages. He manipulates language as he manipulates people. He uses soft, purring words such as “Rama, darling” and of encouragement to his wife, particularly when he wants to coax money out of her, her “maherdhana”, the money given to her by her parents that is rightfully hers. His sarcastic mocking of his father is phrased in Sanskritized Marathi. When Umakanta, in a characteristically crude manner, suggests that they kill Papa, Ramakanta strikes a sanctimonious pose and scolds Umakanta:

Are you mad, Umya? [Kill] Papa? Our Papa after all, you know! Don’t you have any manners?

jannadana [our own father, “the giver of life”] to us]—! (p. 26)

Similarly, he assumes a superficially respectful attitude towards his uncle (p. 23), whom he forces to flee for life, and towards his father, just before he sets afoot a plot to extort money out of him by a veiled threat of violence:

Dear, dear Papa, how are you, by the way? Carrying on well? Happy?— Papa, when you are happy, I feel fulfilled. It’s my filial debt,

pitru-rana [again, Sanskrit word]. I must pay it. (p. 31)

Ramakanta has a keen sense of irony and he employs it with deadly and chilling effect. It makes his villainy even more distasteful to the audience than either his brother’s or sister’s. A transparent veil of politeness is part of this ironic strategy. When the unwelcome uncle comes to the door, Ramakanta says, “Hello, Uncle, how are you? Very glad to see you after so much time, dear Uncle!” (p. 23). His description of Saktharam’s flight is a masterpiece of polite irony, of double entendre:

This morning I was getting ready to go out to shoot some birds with my airgun. It was daybreak, thought I should check on uncle. You know last night he had so much drink. [I] Went up [and found] his door ajar. As I went in, I saw Uncle sprawling with his eyeballs turned up. I felt I should take a close look.
speeches as, for instance, in the following:

"[Rama] a statue in stone with emotions all
frozen...insentient...followed the
insensitive master...with the dry loyalty
of a sterile animal...a diseased dog's
faithful companionship with a leper on his
way to hell."

[See also pp. 4 and 41 for more examples of verbless structures in
Rama's long speech.] Rajaninath's language particularly suffers
from a plethora of words, from a florid abundance indicative of
helpless effusiveness. The speeches of both Rama and Rajaninath
lack the qualities of brevity, precision and directness which may be
equated with firmness and sap, a strong person's attributes which
lead a rebellious spirit to break out of the hell in which it finds itself
trapped. Rajaninath's awareness of his weakness prompts him
to label himself metaphorically impotent and compare Rama to a sterile
animal. The features of their language can be taken to be an icon or
a metaphor of their minds stuck in a groove, of their lives in a rut.
Their helpless state and passivity come out conspicuously through the
syntactic code.

The examination of the verbal styles of the characters in
Gidhade thus reveals that they fall into two groups of opposing natures:
wicked and kind, aggressive and passive, grasping and self-denying
and that, within the groups, they are distinguished from one another
by their distinct and individual verbal characteristics.