
GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND PATRIARCHAL ATTITUDES IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar emerged as a rebel against the established values of a fundamentally orthodox society with the production of *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)* in 1967 and became the centre of controversy. This drama presents a metaphorical trial between the humanists and the anti-humanists. *Silence! The Court is in Session* is in reality a mock trial of simple and straightforward school teacher Miss Leela Benare. She is cross-examined in the Court with full mockery. She is charged with infanticide and having illicit relations with a married person Professor Damale and in this way, her private life is exposed. All the characters like witness Mr. Gopal Ponkshe, Mr. Karnik Rokde, Samant, counsel for the defense and Counsel for the crown Mr. Karnik Rokde. Samant, counsel for the defense and counsel for the crown Mr. Sukhatme and judge, Mr. Kashikar and his wife Mrs. Kashikar all behave in a way of mockery.

Miss Leela Benare is summoned merely as the prime accused being the mother of an illegitimate child and having illicit relations with so many persons. As the trial goes on all the witnesses and authorities become inimical towards Miss Leela Benare on the charge of unmarried motherhood and having illicit relations with so many persons. When the judge, Mr. Kashikar orders the school authorities to dismiss such an immoral woman, Miss Leela Benare tried to defend herself through a long soliloquy:

The parrot to the sparrow said.

Why, Oh Why are your eyes so red?

Oh, my dear friend, What shall I say?

Someone has stolen my nest away.

Sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow! (121)

The jury of the Sangeet Natak Akademi refused to accept *Silence! The Court is in Session* as a play because they were stuffed with colonial hang ups and they considered themselves to be consumers in the entertainment market while Maharajas promoted Indian art and culture in their private dance halls. Vijay Tendulkar, while refusing to conform to such horns of complacency, was accepted by the money-magnets as a trivial, non-serious activity-doer.

Tendulkar's this play is based on the theme of power, its sources and manifestation. The characters fight for authority and power and try to trap each other through a metaphorical mock-court. But peculiarly, the power play that underscores the games, is operated more through the monologues rather than through the dialogues. The play oscillates between theatricalization of private life and privatization of theatrical performance. Leela's portion within the game of the mock-trial is not steady. She swings between reality and illusion and the imaginative and the mundane. While performing the role of a woman in the group, she transcends the limitations of verbal reasoning and tries to spy into the masculine strategies. The charges against Leela Benare are leveled by evidence of reality that marks out the boundaries of what might be called the collective mindscape. Leela differs as to the best way to break the cocoon of charges from this enslavement to collective prejudice because she believes that truth and reality are achieved only when reality is approached in nakedness of mind. Leela's arguments against the body and its mechanical connections and the discourse of emotions save her from dehumanization.

Vijay Tendulkar again and again analyses society as well as social customs and traditions through his various characters. Miss Benare has the charge of infanticide. Mr. Kashikar, the judge inquired of Sukhatme, "Did You notice, also, Sukhatme, that this charge is important from the social point of view? The question of infanticide is one of great social significance. That's why I deliberately picked it. We consider society's best interests, in all we do." (76)

Miss Benare, the female protagonist of the play, is a school teacher. She is totally devoted to her profession. Her popularity has caused the envy of her colleagues at school and even the school management. Initially, When Leela Benare narrates,

she is able to transform the empty scenic space of the proscenium stage into a school situation. Leela's acting changes the dialogic narration into live performance creating a new mimetic space. The characters go back to a completely changed context and situation. Leela's purity and truthfulness glorifies her impact as a teacher for whole the public and other performers dwindle into merely children there:

BENARE : (Suddenly expressive) Shall I tell You a story?

Children are stated. There was once a wolf... (9)

Ultimately, as the game of transformation begins, other performers volunteer to participate in the process. In the Court Miss Benare's crimes of infanticide and illegitimate motherhood are established by the prosecution as crime against society. To Sukhatmke. Kashikar Says,"This case has great social significance, Sukhatme, No joking! I must put aside the practice of court and give evidence."(92) The public prosecutor Sukhatme clarifies that motherhood is sacred and a mother bears the responsibility of bearing her child unmindful of her own difficulties and Miss Benare has brought shame to the holy motherhood by her conduct.

The violence that Tendulkar's later plays are associated with already makes its place in this play also. In the persecution of this helpless woman, fierce psychological violence becomes quite evident. The latent sadism of Sukhtame, Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Ponkshe, Karnik or even Rokde, appear on the surface during the process of the trial. In delineating these characters, Tendulkar has explored their psyches to the extent of revealing the hidden sense of failure pervading their lives- the inefficiency of Sukhatme as a lawyer, the childlessness of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, the non-fulfillment of Ponkshe's dreams to become a scientist, the vain attempts of Karnik to be a successful actor and inability of Rokde to attain an independent, adult existence. The figure of the simple-hearted villager, Samant, is adeptly handled by the complexities of the urban characters.

Leela Benare's defense of herself against the onslaught of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy has become a milestone in the history of contemporary Marathi theatre, securing a high position for its creator. Here, it is important to note that Tendulkar leaves us in doubt as to whether or not Benare at all delivers the soliloquy, thus suggesting that in all probability what she has to say for herself is swallowed up by the authorities. In fact, during the court proceedings, on

several occasions her objections and protestations are drowned by the Judge's cry of 'Silence' and the repeated banging of the gavel. Benare's monologue is reminiscent of Nova's declaration of Independence but lacks the note of protest that characterizes the speech of Ibsen's heroine. It is more a piece of self- justification than an attack on society's hypocrisies. It is poignant, sensitive and highlights the vulnerability of women in our society.

As a matter of fact, many of his female characters are different from the image of women in traditional literature. While the majority of those characters are either rebels or untraditional in their outlook and behaviour, some are presented as the images of conventionally submissive, meek and all too ready to embrace the traditional values dictated for women by the patriarchal establishment. *In Silence! The Court is in Session*, Leela Benare, a young woman, is targeted by men, placed in a situation where she can neither get sympathy nor legitimacy for having the authority of her own unborn child. It is a play about the regretful position in which women are placed in a male-dominated society. Mrs. Kashikar, another woman in the play, is quite submissive and sticks to the traditional norms of patriarchal contrast to the protagonist Benare.

In some of his most significant plays, Tendulkar presents women in pairs; they are quite different from each other in behavioural traits, classes and characters. But underneath these superficial differences lie their lives that resemble each other in the ultimate truth of being commanded by men, for their pleasure and under their laws.

We cannot do better than to begin with Leela Benare, arguably Tendulkar's best known and admired female character and Mrs. Kashikar from *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Leela Benare is young, single, unconventional, full of laughter, full of pride in her dedication to and skill in teaching, and always happy to attack hypocritical facades and watch them crumble. In her view, men are not superior beings by definition. They must prove themselves before they can command her respect. The man she has had a passionate relationship with and whose child she is carrying is one of the few men she has respected for his fine mind and apparent integrity of character. However, she has now discovered his feet of clay. He does not have the strength to stand by him and own his child before society. She had made a

desperate bid to get one or other of the unattached men in her group to marry her in order, to give the arriving child a name. Predictably, not one has agreed to her proposal. It is in this delicate state of body and mind that she is trapped by her colleagues into being the accused in a mock trial.

Mrs. Kashikar, on the other hand, is a middle aged housewife who is conventional and disapproving of "free" and women like Benare. The most important thing about her is that she is childless. She, as much as the men, is keen to draw blood when Benare is put on trial. She has an obvious problem with Benare. She is a single and free working woman, the one who is vying for equality with men in their own ruling world. Her very existence places a question mark against the emptiness of Mrs. Kashikar's life. That is why she offers her help with such alacrity when the men shy away from physically forcing Benare into the dock. They are all middle class men who must not be seen to harass a woman. Tearing her apart emotionally can be perfectly permissible among equals.

Mrs. Kashikar cannot have ever admitted even to herself, that it is because of the sacrosanct institution of marriage that she is open to Mr. Kashikar's constant insults and snubs. He has an automatic right to do so by virtue of being a man and her husband. Notwithstanding the insults, taunts and jeers, he is still seen as a caring husband, as much by her as by others, because he has bought a string of flowers for hair, a token of not just love but romance.

Mrs. Kashikar does not take such suppression of her mind and spirit quietly. She mutters angrily. One suspects that, had she might have protested more actively. However, the way things are, there is no choice for her but to be a participant in the patriarchal system. She chooses to be an enthusiastic one because if she is to retain a shred of self-esteem, the least she must do is to glorify her own state. That is why her testimony against Benare, is such a bitter diatribe, but brazenly parading as a general sociological observation. When she is asked why Miss Benare has remained still single till such an "advanced" age, her response is:

That is what happens these days when you get everything without having to get married. It is all pleasure without responsibility. Let me tell you, in our times, even when a girl was flat-nosed, black skinned or hunch backed, she was married.

Everything goes wrong Sukhatme, when all Nonsense about earning money begins it is under the pretext of this earning business that immorality has become rampant in Society. (99)

When Sukhatme asks what proof she has that this is the reason for Miss Benare's single state, Mrs.Kashikar answers:

Why do you need any other proof? Her behaviour tells you that whole story. We do not say anything because she's one of us. But, however well she may know men, isn't there some limit a single woman must observe in the freedom of her conduct with them? The way she laughs, sings, dances and fools around! And day or night she's out all alone with all sorts of men. (100)

Silence ! The Court is in Session is an open attack on the unreasonable and farcical moral code followed by our own society, code that does not allow birth of a child before marriage, a veritable display of hypocrisy. It is Benare's fear of such a code that makes her crave for marriage, when the man responsible for her pitiable condition just turns his back on her for the sake of his bloody and fake reputation in society. And she is forced to beg the inferior men around her, one after another, to marry her so as to play the role of father to her child, to give him his name so that the child is not called an illegitimate child, a bastard. So that the child may move conceitedly in society and have a safe future. Ponkshe-Benare's following conversation narrated by Ponkshe in the mock court can be taken as an example:

She told me she was pregnant...she made me promise never to tell anyone the name of the man who made her pregnant. She told me the girl's just gone through a shattering heart break, and the fruit of that love is in her womb... she wants to bring up the child. In fact, it is only for the child that she wants to go on living and get married. I said,"Oh Poor girl ! Who's the scoundrel responsible?" she said, please don't call him a scoundrel. He may have been a good man. She may have fallen short..the woman is not the crucial factor. It's the baby that comes first. She felt at my feet and I said,"This doesn't become of you Miss Benare. It's an insult to have asked me this at all. Do you think I'm so worthless?.. She had tears in her eyes.. That made everything quite clear. (105-108)

The structural devices in the play bring forth Tendulkar's dexterity in discussion of certain burning issues. The theme of an emancipated woman being

morally harassed by her counterparts against an urban background is put forth through the expertised plot structure. It is the self-imposed silence of Benare that gives the play its title as *Silence! The Court is in Session*, having a unique significance. Until the commencement of the mock trial, Benare remains a picture of poise and vitality but silence descends on her when the trial begins with Kashikar's interrogative accusation: "Prisoner Miss Benare, under section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code. you are accused of the crime bf infanticide. Are you guilty or nor guilty of the aforementioned crime?"(74) Miss Benare is founded dumb. Further all her attempts at protest are dallowously drowned in Kashikar, the mock judge's imposition: "Silence!" In such a helpless and hostile situation she has no other choice but to remain silent. However, she breaks her silence in a long and brilliant monologue, giving a bitter and elongated thoroughfare of her life. Tendulkar deliberately makes Benare break her silence through a stunning monologue so as to expose the male chauvinists of our society.

The physical, mental and moral health of the members of a family depends to a great extent on its women. They play the key role in erecting and maintaining proper atmosphere in the family. The personality and character of a person largely depends on his or her family atmosphere and background. She keeps the members of the family physically healthy in the capacity of a housewife by making suitable arrangements of health, giving food and drinks while keeping the budget of the house balanced. The economic self-sufficiency of a family is based on not as much earning as on spending. If the housewife, the controller of household affairs, spends the earned money extravagantly and foolishly on tasty and costly but unwholesome meals, the family is harmed in two ways: health as well as wealth is lost. If health and wealth both are lost, characters also may be lost. If a family is facing economic trouble, the mental and moral health of its members is badly damaged and some abnormality develops in their behaviour. They are mostly found resorting to immoral practices.

It is significant that these socio-cultural factors constitute the fabric of Indian middle class families. In post-independence Indian society, the shape and structure of family have not escaped the rapid changes, which define and determine the overall fabric of society. These changes have registered their dominant presence in social, cultural, political, religious and other important spheres of life. They have in recent times, assumed tremendous proportions-population explosion, the problem of

unemployment, rapid advancements made in communication and high technology. Above all consumerism has cast its shadows on the life of every individual in the society. Hence, family as a unit of the vast social structure can ill-afford to ignore these changes. The Sociological concept of a traditional joint family in India has started giving way to the concept of a nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and children. Along with this individualism and the consciousness of one's importance, the terms, like social, economic and political status, are becoming the legacy of modernity and characteristics of the twentieth Century.

Tendulkar's commitment to avant garde theatre explains his understanding of the spectacular changes which have transformed and overhauled the existing notions of a traditional middle class family. He believes a writer must stick to naturalism as a means for creating a lasting impression on the reader-audience and by extension on the society as a whole. What distinguishes his women characters is that they are organs of a family - a societal unit - in a state of flux. This further makes his women characters run with the changing currents of the time. They appear as convincing living human characters pitted against the odds of society. Among the roles a woman has to play, the most vital ones are woman as wife and mother, woman as sister and daughter and occasionally a sister or daughter-in-law. It is not strange that relations within the family are governed by the principle of power more than anything else. Family can also be considered as a ground for the play of power politics although it remains circumscribed within its own boundaries.

In the capacity of a wife and a mother too, she plays a very important role in shaping and maintaining the mental and moral standards of her husband and children. If she is full of love and affection, caring, faithful, true and dependable to them, the atmosphere of family is healthy and the mental as well as moral and behavioural standards of the husband and children are balanced. As a wife, she has to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband, take care of his food and drink, bear children for him and as a life partner has to offer proper suggestions and to cooperate in solving the problems faced by the family.

As a mother, she plays a very important role in forming the character and personality of her offspring's. Children are closer to mothers than to fathers. During infancy, the mother takes greater care of her children. The impressions made on the

early part of one's life are so sharp, strong and lasting that they are rarely erased. These largely shape that child's behaviour and character when he or she grows up into a man or woman and becomes a member of society.

In *Silence!* The Court is in Session, Tendulkar deals with the problem of sexual exploitation of an immature girl by her own relative. Miss Benare was in her teens and her maternal uncle was a grown up man. Benare was physically as well as mentally immature to think of morality, immorality, and the consequences of sexual intercourse. As a grown up man and as the real brother of her mother the burden of morality and responsibility was more on her maternal uncle. But he is not condemned or criticized by society. Rather it is Benare who suffers the agony and tries to commit suicide. Similar is the case with Prof. Damle, who enjoys a respectable position in society. Since Prof. Damle too has inherited the patriarchal mindset, he considers women in terms of her body- an object exclusively made for the use of men. His conscience hardly pricks him when Benare becomes pregnant and bears his illegitimate child in her womb. The indifference and Callousness of Damle is typical of the patriarchal attitude towards women.

Mr. Kashikar who boasts to have undertaken the responsibility of social reforms, including to espousal of women's cause jointly condemns Benare. None of them comes forward to condemn Damle pleading against Benare, Sukhatme says that she has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood -"which is purer than heaven itself."(114)...bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying."(115)...Women bear the grave responsibility of seeding up high values of Society.(115). Nobody asks whether man too bears responsibility or not, or his deed is a blot on the sacred brow of fatherhood as not. The verdict of the Court is,"that you shall live. But the child in the womb shall be destroyed." (116) In this context Arundhati Benarjee remarks:

Interestingly the accusation brought against her at the beginning of the trial -that of infanticide - turns into the verdict at the conclusion, principally because contemporary Indian. society, with its roots grounded firmly in reactionary ideas, cannot allow the birth of a child out of wedlock. (viii)

In Silence! The Court is in the Session, Benare has been presented attempting to commit suicide twice. One after the disclosure of her premarital sexual relation

with her maternal uncle and again during the trial when her pregnancy caused by her sexual intercourse with Prof. Damle is brought to light, which brings about the dismissal from her service. Like Benare so many earning and self-dependent women are committing suicide every day in our society. Tendulkar highlights this matter in order that the Indian community should pay attention to this significant issue and try to get rid of this evil in some way or the other. In the same play, Tendulkar presents the conservative people of the society expressing their wants regarding the marriage of girls before they attain puberty. Mr. Kashikar, the judge of the mock trial, is in favour of reviving the old custom of child marriage:

What I say is, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a full stop. If anyone has ruined our society, it is Agarkar and Dhondo Keshav Karve that is my frank opinion.(90)

Mr. Kashikar is criticizing the Marathi social reformers Agarkar and D.K. Karve who fought for the abolition of the evil of child marriage from our society. Child marriage was and still has been a great evil of the society and many women suffered throughout their lives because of their marriage during childhood. Many of them became widows and were not allowed to remarry. This caused an increase in the number of young widows for whom it was hard to control or suppress their sexual urge. They very often strayed and gave rise to other complicated problems. In order to resolve the problems of Widows; the social reformers advised late marriage and encouraged the re-marriage of widows. No doubt, these measures solved this social problem to a great extent. Mr Kashikar thinks himself a social reformer better than Agarkar and Karve, finds faults with them, and says that they have done wrong. He wants to keep his brain calm for solving social problems."Whatever social problems there may be, corn oil gives me peaceful sleep. If you sleep calmly, your brain is bound to be so. But if your brain is not calm how on earth will social problems be solved?"(90) Considering himself a social reformer greater than Agarkar and Karve, Kashikar says that they have harmed the society by prohibiting child marriage and encouraging widow re-marriage.

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