

## ***Silence! The Court is in Session : Vijay Tendulkar's Satire on Gender Discrimination and Social Hierarchy***

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### **Abstract**

Silence! The Court is in Session of Vijay Tendulkar is a satire on Indian society. It is a critique of gender discrimination and social hierarchy that exists even in the present day social structure. The playwright has given ironic treatment to the legal system. The judiciary, instead of justice, becomes an instrument of injustice and silences the voice of women. Through this play Tendulkar has tried to bring forth the existing marginalized condition of women in Indian society. The playwright has dealt well with the plot. The characters are created keeping in view the human psyche. There is a group of frustrated sadist men who try to suppress women in every possible way. They do this to keep their position high in social structure. The leading women character Miss Benare fights against oppression, discrimination and injustice. All forces try to victimize and torture her but she remains strong against all odds. With an indomitable spirit, she proves herself to be a new woman. This paper views to study how Vijay Tendulkar has dealt with the issue of gender discrimination and social hierarchy through his drama.

**Key words:** Hierarchy, Injustice, Judiciary, Oppression, Sufferings.

### **Introduction**

Vijay Tendulkar was one of the most well known of playwrights of India writing in English. He wrote in Marathi too and was greatly recognised. "Even the English Language press which recognises Indo-Anglian writing as the legitimate Indian creative writing, or so it would appear, seemed quite conscious of the fact that the man and his work were quite extraordinary on the canvas of Indian belles-lettres."<sup>1</sup> He has written a large number of pieces of literature. More than one hundred short stories are to his credit. He was a renowned journalist and screenplay writer. He wrote a few novels. He started writing dramas too. "He came on the scene in the 1950s and was writing well into the late 1980s."<sup>2</sup> Often in his dramas, he gave away the values of urban middle class. He felt that those morals were a mixture of upper caste and Victorian mores. His early plays were impressive but at times they were opposed because of his revolutionary ideas. When he wrote *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*, Marathi play in 1968, it brought a new phase in the theatre of Tendulkar. This play was translated into English in 1978 as *Silence! The Court is in Session*. This play was a big success. In his dramas Vijay Tendulkar has dealt with the theme of isolation of the individual and his conflict with the hostile surroundings. Because of his revolutionary writing, he faced great opposition too. But he faced them all. He spent his best moments with people connected to theatre and young playwrights. "Tendulkar was a phenomenon. It is not easy to explain the appeal of the man."<sup>3</sup>

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Vijay Tendulkar has presented the sufferings of a young woman. Leela Benare is the victim of male chauvinism. It is difficult for a patriarchal society to surrender their superior hold which has been established since ages. The social transformation is not readily acceptable. Tendulkar has presented the bitter ills of society in this drama. This play is a satire on gender discrimination and social hierarchy that still prevails in our country. "Inequalities and diversities define Indian society. Various pre-colonial social reformer movements, the British state, the nationalist and feminist movement have always had to negotiate with this."<sup>4</sup> The selection of male characters has been done by the playwright from varied backgrounds. These characters are the representative of the weaknesses of present judiciary system. They represent the judiciary which, at times, has the defects of not only subjectivity and familiarity but ethical defects too. The major male characters of the drama like Sukhatme, Balu Rokde, Gopal Pokshe and Karnic represent present day judiciary. There have been recurring cases where women internalize the rule of men over women. Mrs. Kashikar is the right example of this. She treats male chauvinism as a natural phenomenon. She also plays her part in suppression of women by supporting men to continue their dominance over women. Thus she too plays an active part in trying to suppress Miss Benare in every possible way. Tendulkar's art of characterisation is remarkable to meet the end of his purpose to satirise the social evils. "Without consciously trying, he had an ear for the speech habits of people and also an eye for their mannerisms and personal peculiarities."<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that although Miss Benare boldly faces the oppression that she undergoes, but had she been on a higher position with greater economic independence, she could have established herself more strongly.

In this play Tendulkar has voiced his concern for women. He has taken into account the oppression of women and their protest against it. Tendulkar views about Indian women that "They are victim of circumstances and have no hold on their lives or fate."<sup>6</sup> Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a critique of social hierarchy and male dominance. It shows how the voice of women is silenced with the instrument of law. The word silence in the title is itself suggestive. Literally this word is used by judges to silence people in the court room. But in this play, it has metaphorical significance. It indicates at silencing the voice of a suffering woman with the use of legal weapon. In this play, the people of urban middle class are presented. They are hypocrites who try to suppress the voice of a suffering woman. Thus the dramatist has attacked the hypocrisy of those who talk of moral conduct but in reality they miss it in their own life.

The play begins with a theatre group of Bombay. The arrange to entertain the local villagers in the hinterland of the metro city. There is enactment of different roles in the mock-trial of American President Johnson. Johnson's policy of nuclear weapon is considered to be a threat to humanity. One of the members of this theatre group is Miss Leela Benare. She is a school teacher. The other members of this group are Mr. And Mrs. Kashikar. Rokde. Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik. Prof. Damle and Rawte. Another important character is an innocent villager Samant. He is hired in place of a character who is absent. He is given the role of fourth witness in the court procedure. In this imaginary trial, the other characters deliberately choose Miss Benare to be the accused. The dramatist has very well presented the attitude of the other members of this group. The playwright has used satire to describe each one of them. These characters not only attack Miss Benare but also each other. Thus, through them, the writer has presented the typical middle class society.

Sukhatme is a lawyer who adores women for their patience in his words. Philosophically he expresses that motherhood is an act of nobility and it is always pure. He says, “We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind.”<sup>7</sup> But contrary to this, whenever he gets an opportunity, he attacks on women. Several times Miss Benare is insulted by him. He assassinates her private life during mock trial and thus gives her pain. Thus men project themselves differently socially and act differently in real life situation. Similarly, gender discrimination victimizes another female Mrs. Kashikar. Many inhumane remarks are passed on her for not having a child. A childless lady is always socially discarded. Her male counterpart may be responsible for her this state but gender discrimination is seen every where. Men are never held responsible for their infertility. Similarly, the social structure is such that the voice of women is always unheard or suppressed. Women are often insulted by men but have no freedom to retaliate. The society expects a lady to silently accept all the ills coming from men. We see that Mr. Kashikar insults his wife many times but she silently bears him. Similarly insulting comments are passed on Miss Benare but she too bears. We often see that women become a victim of physical assault too. The refusal of Miss Benare to come to witness box leads to the action of torment by Mr. Kashikar who uses his force to bring her. In Act Two, all the members of the group are not serious for the rehearsal. But it is Miss Benare alone who is targetted. Mr. Kashikar does not say a word to men but keeps accusing the lady.

There is recurrent attack by men on Miss Benare and she is always targetted. The male counterparts of the group are always hyperbolic in accusing her for everything. She is seen in the college hostel room of Professor Damle by Rokde. This clue is enough for all to draw excessive conclusions about her morality. There is no valid evidence against her. But conclusions are drawn regarding her immoral relationship with Professor Damle. The Professor is not questioned at all. No remark is passed against him. Rokde calls Miss Benare as a woman of fallen character.

In Act Three we find how Miss Benare is totally taken into clutches by all men collectively. There is an analysis of Miss Benare’s private life which is highly derogatory. This leads to hurt her extremely. She suffers utter mental torture. Though she objects to it, but is given no hearing. Her marital life is being discussed. Her womanhood is questioned. It is really astonishing that it is not only men who are working against women but there are many women who act as a force against women only. We can very well see it in the comment of Mrs. Kashikar who says,

What else? That’s what happens these days when you get everything

without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn’t care less

about responsibility! Let me tell you – in my time, even a girl was

snub-nosed, sallow, hunchbacked or anything whatever, she could

still get married! It’s the sly new fashion of women earning of that

everything that makes everything go wrong. That’s how promiscuity

has spread throughout our society.(9)

Karnik and other characters too target Miss Benare. In the witness box Karnik openly discusses the personal discussion that went between Miss Benare and Rokde. She is being blamed for persuading Rokade for marriage and also for instigating him to leave the guardianship of aged Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar. It is sad to note that women are treated as an object of sexual pleasure by men. Out of Professor Damle's relation, Miss Benare becomes pregnant. But he shirks the responsibility. The feelings and emotions of women is not given any consideration by him. Thus we see that in a male dominated society women is treated to be just an object of physical gratification and for bearing up children.

Our social institutions are always in favour of men. They work against women and play their role in the oppression of women. In this play too we see that the institution of judiciary works against women. The court plays its own role in creating suffering for Miss Benare. Conducive atmosphere is being created where all men dominate her. They put false blames on her and give her immense pain. She is being charged with infanticide. In the beginning of the mock trial action is taken against her to prove charges. During mock trial her condition becomes more sorrowful with the biased contribution of Mr. Kashikar. Although he is on the position of a judge who is expected to establish justice, but he does the contrary. This increases the sufferings of Miss Benare. Mr. Kashikar does not give hearing to both the sides. He gives his attention only to one side and gives his verdict. This prejudiced verdict brings injustice to Miss Benare. Mr. Kashikar gives his irresponsible generalised comments on women. He says that all women deserve to be punished. He gives his biased comment, "Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed." (71) Thus the elders of society give verdict on the conduct of women and consequently restrict their freedom. This is a clear picture of gender discrimination. During proceedings of the court, there is always a search for evidences against Miss Benare. The basis of judgement is morality. Reality and emotions are fully ignored. It is recalled by Miss Benare how men cheated her ever. In all her actions, there had ever been participation of men too. But it has been fully ignored by the court. The court does not hold men responsible for anything. Men are fully exempted and she is being punished. Thus we see the bias of law against women. Sukhatme, the lawyer says, "No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society." (71) He further says, "Woman is not fit for independence." (71) Thus the imaginary mock-trial, the play-within- the play, gradually grows into a serious affair. The latent sadism of the characters come to the fore. "In the persecution of a helpless woman, a fierce psychological violence becomes evident. The latent sadism of the characters, of Sukhatme, of Mr. And Mrs. Kashikar, of Pokshe, Karnik or even Rokde, surface during the process of trial."<sup>8</sup>

The play also observes the unwritten code of conduct expected out of the institute of marriage. Sukhatme, the lawyer puts a question mark on Miss Benare for being unmarried till the age of thirty four. It is her personal life. Why should anyone question her choice? Such questions are never put on men. But a woman is always victimised. Sukhatme even expects a clarification from her regarding how she could remain single for such long. It is hinted by him that her choice is for having freedom to have relations with men. Another point to be considered is that of Miss Benare being unmarried but

pregnant. The society considers it to be a crime. She is treated as “a sinful canker on the body of society” (67). Women is ever blamed for this. The man involved in this is never questioned. Here also charge of infanticide is put against Miss Benare alone. It is ironical that such charges are not put against women who are married. Physical relationship and motherhood is permitted to married women. It is sad to note that the pregnancy of Miss Benare is the outcome of her love, a relation of purity. But this finer emotion is given no value. The result of her love is considered to be a crime in the cruel hands of law. Gender discrimination is also evident in various other institutes. Education system too exploits females. Miss Benare was a school teacher. When her pregnancy is disclosed, she is being dismissed from her job. The main culprit is Professor Damle who is not blamed for anything. He continues with his job honourably. Thus we see the gender bias by various institutes of society. Miss Benare comes out as a strong lady who tries her level best to fight her struggles. When the play begins, we find Benare as a lively, emotional but a self-assertive woman. She is deeply committed to her profession. But there are latent hints of her suppressed sufferings. She says, “They’re holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching’s perfect. I’ve put my whole life into it. I’ve worn myself to a shadow in this job! Just because of one bit of slander, what can they do to me? ... My life is my own—I haven’t sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own” (4-5). This strong self-assertion and individuality gives Benare with the identity of a new woman taking stand against the coercive attacks of patriarchy.

Benare is given ten seconds to defend her case before the final verdict. Benare gets numb, stands up erect and says, “Yes, I have a lot to say” (72). Then a long monologue follows. Benare expresses her zest for life and tells how she had ever been deprived of her desires and happiness, “My life was a burden to me. [Heaving a great sigh] But when you can’t lose it, you realize the value of it. ... There’s great joy in a suicide that’s failed. It’s greater even than the pain of living. ... I swallowed that poison, but didn’t even let a drop of it touch them! ... I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair, and I taught them hope. (72-73) Benare puts her denigrating attack against social hierarchy in this monologue: “These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces - how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires.” (74). In the final verdict the court equates Miss Benare with criminals and sinners. The court orders that she should live but the child in her womb should be destroyed. Miss Benare is full of pain. At first she strongly resists. But later she gets stifled and starts sobbing. In this context, L. Rahman comments, “Once Benare finds her voice couched in quotidian language does make no truth-effect, she begins to sob with the idea in mind that though the field be lost, all is not lost; she has a mind which remains and will remain unconquered by the oppressive patriarchal ideology.”<sup>9</sup>

This brief analysis of the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* shows that the focus of the play is on gender discrimination and social hierarchy established from ages. Our society reinforces the responsibility of morality on women. Even if men are wayward, it is excused on the pretext of being due to their natural trait. The offences of men are always forgiven. But it is contrary in case of women. She has no excuse even for her minor mistakes. The sexual needs of males is well accepted. But the sexual needs of females is ever denied. Her existence has no meaning to society. She ever faces physical, mental and psychological violence. This leads, at times, to lower the self esteem of women who ultimately become sufferers. Vijay Tendulkar had deep concern for this pathetic condition of



women. His dramas present his deep insight into the sufferings of women and their oppression. Like some of the problem plays, Tendulkar has left the solution of this problem of gender discrimination on the intellectual readers. Tendulkar has presented the gender bias, superiority of men over women and submission of women in general. A single woman is particularly victimised. She incessantly needs to struggle for her survival. In this play also we see that how the protagonist suffers and is victimised by society. She takes a bold stand during her struggles. Though she is attacked from all, yet she faces it strongly like a new woman. Throughout the play we find a subtle sympathy of the playwright for her. "Tendulkar ... became the centre of a general controversy, with the production of *Silence! The Court is in Session*. He was marked out as a rebel against the established values of a fundamental orthodox society."<sup>10</sup> Thus with the means of satire, the playwright has voiced against gender discrimination and social hierarchy.

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