

Research Paper

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Feminism in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence!* the Court is in Session

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ABSTRACT

Vijay Tendulkar's Silence! is a critique of patriarchal values and institutions and shows how the judicial system operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the sham moral standards of the so-called civilized urban middle class society of post-Independence India. The frustrated male members try to subjugate women to prove their power in social hierarchy. Miss Benare desperately fights her lone battle against the oppressive power structure.

Keywords : Feminism, patriarchy, power structure, silencing

The term "feminism" denotes a movement in politics and aesthetics which deals with women's rights and their conscious struggle against the oppressive dominance of patriarchy. The word 'feminism' came into English usage in the 1890s and till then it has progressed through different phases. The principal argument of the movement can be encapsulated in the oft-quoted comment of the French philosopher and novelist Simone de Beauvoir who wrote in her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949), "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Society as a whole manipulates this process of 'becoming'.

Vijay Tendulkar, the prominent dramatist of the Marathi theatre won fame in the national level with the publication of *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe*, the English version of which is *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967). Regarding Tendulkar's interest in Feminism, N.S. Dharan comments in his book *The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*, "[...] though not a self-acknowledged feminist, [Tendulkar] treats his women characters with understanding and compassion, while pitting them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious" (p.28). In *Silence*, he presents the futile struggle of a woman in the male-dominated society of post-Independence India. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the sham moral standards of the so-called civilized society.

Tendulkar's *Silence* is a critique of patriarchal values and institutions and shows how law operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. The word 'silence' in the title has different levels of significations. Literally it means the judge's order for maintaining silence in the court-room but metaphorically it implies legally silencing the weaker sex's plea for justice. The urban middle class society which Tendulkar presents in this play enforces law to subjugate women by maintaining a hypocritical moral code.

The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association, an amateur theatre group, arranges to entertain the people of a village adjoining to Bombay by enacting the roles in a mock-trial of American President Johnson who is considered to be the threat to humanity because of his policy regarding nuclear weapons. Miss Leela Benare, a school teacher, is a member of this theatre group. The other members of this group are the Kashikar couple, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponkshe, Karnik, Professor Damle and Rawte. Samant, an innocent and simple person of the village in which the group has arrived, plays an important role in the play. To pass the time of the drowsy afternoon and also to show Samant, who is going to be the

replacement of the absent fourth witness, the procedural intricacies of the court, the members of the amateur theatre group decide to act a new mock trial other than the one to be staged in the evening. The co-actors of Benare deliberately choose her as the accused in the imaginary trial. Here Tendulkar utilizes the opportunity to show the attitude and mental make-up of the members of the group. Benare's descriptions of her co-actors are full of sarcastic comments. As the play progresses, it is revealed that it is not only Benare's personal trait, all the members behind their group-camaraderie, do not miss a single opportunity to belittle others. Thus Tendulkar captures in miniature the entire middle class society in his play.

In the mock trial Benare is accused of a grave socio-moral charge—infanticide. She is going to be trialled under Section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code. She is also accused of trying to seduce every male member of the group into marriage. She is suspected of having an illegal relationship with Prof. Damle who remains absent throughout the play. Society cannot tolerate this unmarried expectant woman. She has been treated as "a sinful canker on the body of society" (*Silence*, p.67). All the members condemn her as an evil influence that would dynamite the social structure but not even once is Prof. Damle condemned for being responsible for Benare's wretched condition. Tendulkar here focuses on the hypocritical double standard of the so-called civilized urban middle class society. In this connection, Smita Paul comments in her book *Theatre of Power*:

The women characters in Tendulkar's theatre undergo a series of sufferings and tortures as the victims of the hegemonic power-structure. In the male-dominated theatre-world they are constantly being 'other-ed'. In *Silence!* the focal point of interest lies in the struggle between women like Benare and her antagonists headed by the orthodox Kashikar and his associates. (p.34)

At the very beginning of the play, 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—"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" (*Silence*, pp.4-5). This voice of self-assertion, this voice of individuality endows Benare with the identity of 'a new woman' emerging against the coercive attacks of patriarchy.

The improvised mock-trial begins enthusiastically but before long it takes a sinister turn. The weaknesses become brazenly personal in their direct references to the accused Benare. They forget the privacy of her life and continually attack below the belt. The members of patriarchy, by force, try to prove her moral laxity. Kashikar, the judge, flouting the norms of the court, enters the witness-box to give evidence against Benare. Following the tradition of the court, they call the witnesses for defence who remain absent. Sukhatme plays the role of both the counsel for the prosecution and the counsel for the accused. The whole trial becomes farcical. All the members gang up against Benare to stifle her voice of protest.

Except Samant, all the male characters try to exercise their power on Benare. Benare tries to resist this by making fun with the characters' personal failures and thus to denigrate their authority. In this context, Kashikar's comment is very shocking:

KASHIKAR. [...] 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. (Silence, p. 52) Sukhatme's accusation against Benare is equally damaging:

SUKHATME [...] 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. (Silence, p.71) Thus the 'fathers' of society give verdict on the behaviour of women and consequently curb their freedom.

The frustrated male members of the society try to subjugate women to prove their power and superiority in the social hierarchy. They praise motherhood with bombastic phrases but try to destroy Benare's infant in the womb. Benare is stigmatized and sacked from her job. But Prof. Damle, the man responsible for her condition, escapes scot-free for he is a male. And Sukhatme, the brief less barrister, puts the final nail in the coffin of womanhood:

SUKHATME. [...] No allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society.' Na stri swatantryamarhati.' 'Woman is not fit for independence.'. (Silence, p.71) Thus the imaginary mock-trial, 'the play-with-in-the paly' gradually grows into a serious affair and the latent sadism of the characters come to the fore.

What is more disturbing is that Mrs Kashikar, the elderly childless woman, who should have supported Benare, gangs up with the male members and severely criticizes her. As a witness she heinously attacks professionally successful women:

MRS KASHIKAR. [...] That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort.

They couldn't care less about responsibility! [...] It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society. (Silence, p.54) Actually, Mrs Kashikar is a dependent woman who is always snubbed by her husband. So, she cannot tolerate the freedom enjoyed by working women.

Before passing the final verdict on Benare, she is given ten seconds to defend her case. Now the motionless Benare stands up erect and says, "Yes, I have a lot to say" (Silence, p.72). Then follows a long monologue in which Benare expresses her zest for life and tells how she is deprived of her wishes:

BENARE. [...] 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. (Silence, pp.72-73) Benare hurls her denigrating attack against patriarchy in this monologue:

BENARE. [...] 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. (Silence, p.74).

In the final verdict Benare is equated with 'criminals and sinners' and the court orders that she should live but the child in her womb should be destroyed. Writhing in pain, Benare, at first strongly resists and then stifled sobs come from her. In this context, L. Rahman in his book Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session 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. (p.70) Though Benare desperately fights her lone battle and clamours that her life and her choices are her own, her voice is silenced by the destructive agencies of patriarchal institution. To conclude, a few lines from a Marathi poem by Mrs Shirish Pai which helped Tendulkar in conceiving the character of Miss Benare, can be quoted:

Our feet tread on upon unknown
And dangerous pathways evermore.
Wave after blinded wave is shattered
Stormily upon the shore.

Defeat is destined as the end.
Some experiences are meant
To taste, then just to waste and spend... (Silence, p.10)

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