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SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION: A PLAYHOUSE OF VIOLENCE, PROTEST AND SURVIVAL

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Abstract

Violence, almost in all the plays of Vijay Tendulkar, is generated and prepared by intimate partners and other members of society that becomes a playhouse of repressed liberty. The prospective nature of violence of Tendulkar's theatre is discretely different from the violence of Greek tragedy because in Greek tragedy it moves and enriches but in Tendulkar's world of drama it shocks and even it disturbs the ethical question. The pattern of violence occupies centripetal position in the plays of Vijay Tendulkar. Violence and protest are ridden with socio-political and economic conflicts and unrest. Taking violence to deal with his pen, Tendulkar resembles Antonin Artaud who sponsored the 'theatre of cruelty'. In Tendulkar's plays, there is a use of protest on two levels: The first one is personal or subjective protest which aims to secure the self-survival; the second one is social protest that is intensely philanthropic concerned with the welfare of all.

Keywords: Violence, protest, survival, power, theatre of cruelty, patriarchy.

Vijay Tendulkar aims at genuine concern for human values and human beings. So his thematic range varies from his play to play. In his wizardry of theatre, the middle class milieu is of an outstanding importance because they set the trend of any society and simultaneously remain the most representative class of any society. Tendulkar's dynamism of domestic and psychological observations paved the way for him to emerge as the forceful voice of psycho-domestic upheavals, confronting the lower middle class and the middle class society. Wadikar opines that Tendulkar's dimension of "the psychological study explores the shifts and changes that have taken in the modes of human thinking, feeling, and behaving with regard

to Tendulkar's characters among whom we see highly typified as well as individualized men and women" (2008, 97). Tendulkar explores, in domestic territory of his plays, the psychological turmoil of his characters that are torn between contemporary mores and shifting values and notions. In order to understand Tendulkar's power of dramatizing of all these issues, it is necessary to go through Barve's apt remark, "Human existence, the deep understanding of human psychology and expressing them is an obsession with him...Tendulkar is drawn towards the basic and eternal conflict in human life- the conflict between two strong desires to live where ultimately even one's blood relations prove false and brittle. He

traces the roots of this conflict to the social, domestic and psychological levels" (23).

Silence! The Court is in Session is originally written in Marathi by Vijay Tendulkar under the title *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* and was translated by Priya Adarkar into English entitled *Silence! The Court is in Session*. This play reflects the domestic and psychological forms of violence. It remains distinguished among his other plays because in this play Tendulkar has deployed mock-trial technique that provides the verbal violence and mocking commentary on contemporary law courts, plights of women in particular and the double-standard of the contemporary society. The act one of *Silence! The Court is in Session* is an introduction to the socio-cultural and psychological spectrum in which the main trial is proposed to take place. Through the trial of Miss Benare we come to know that Tendulkar "accedes to cast light on the human psyche that is swayed by the social forces of the existing system in society" (Kanade 65).

Act one of the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* opens in an empty hall with two doors. When the act one begins we see two characters on the stage, Samant and Miss Leela Benare. Samant is a rural youth and feeling uncomfortable with a woman unknown to him while Miss Benare appears an extra bold lady with infinite zest and a school teacher with a triumphant look. She nurtures her own dreams, "Let leave everyone behind, I thought, and go somewhere far, far away- with you! (55)". Miss Benare's proposal of fanciful relationship amazes Samant and the nervousness of Samant makes Miss Benare to change the subject. Shifting from the matrimonial subject, Miss Benare reveals her dedication and sincerity as a school teacher, she says: "I haven't heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I am never behindhand with my lessons! Exercise corrected on time, too!" (57) She also reveals the innocence of physical and psychological climate of actions of her students, she says:

MISS BENARE. They are so much better than adults. At least they don't have that blind pride of thinking they know everything. There is no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They

don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards. (Act One, p. 57)

In Act one of the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* we come to know that there is an enquiry going against Miss Benare by the management on account of the slander which makes the audience to believe the authenticity of the charges leveled against her in the later part of the play. But nobody can think in the beginning that she will give in to the accusations and become a pitiable figure as we see her by the end of the play. She feels herself a victim of suppressed male fury but she exhibits her confidence to identify her oppressor and to resist the mechanism of oppression. She declares:

MISS BENARE. My children will do anything for me. For I'd give the last drop of my blood to teach them. That is why people are jealous... What can they do?... They are holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching is perfect. I have put my whole life in it... But is that any kind of reason for throwing me out? Who are these people to say what I can or can't do? My life is my own – I haven't sold it to anyone for a job. (Act One, p. 58)

Unconsciously her hand being on her stomach is symbolic of the fact that she is pregnant and as she is unwed the child in her womb is illegitimate. Her consciousness essentially shares the psychological stress. When she tells Samant that she feels seared when she is alone, audiences is aware of her fragile condition under the cover of boldness. As Miss Leela Benare by her nature is very talkative and jovial, she makes ironical comments on the nature of other characters. She calls to childless couple, Mr. and Mrs Kashikar as Mr. Prime Objective and Mrs. Hand-that-Rocks the Cradle respectively. Shanta Gokhale, a theatre critic opines that, "Miss Benare is young, 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" (32). Miss Benare is seen as lively young woman with the philosophy:

MISS BNARE. Life is not meant for anyone else. It's your own life. It must be. It's a very,

very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious. (Act One, p.61)

As the scene advances, we witness that Samant informs to Miss Benare about the law court where the mock trial is to take place. The trial is about a case against President Johnson for producing the atomic weapons. The 'mock-trial' is originally designed as means to pass time, eventually, becomes a real trial at which Benare's private life is ruthlessly exposed. Tendulkar's idea of mock-trial in play-within-play is very pertinent and innovative mechanism to represent the confrontation of matriarchal voice with patriarchal society. As the amateur troupe has the enough time to perform the rehearsed play, "*The Trial of Lyndon B Johnson*", they plan to have a mock-trial of Miss Benare. It is not out of genuine love that they have turned to have a mock-trial of Miss Benare but out of a sheer sense of their own personal failures in their real life.

In mock-trial the actions move with all the formalities related to the procedures of the Court. All characters appear on the stage except Prof. Damle and Rowte. Mr. Kashikar, playing the role of the judge, occupies the seat of judge with all dignity. Sukhatme plays the role of prosecutor and defence counsel. Without telling Miss Benare that she will play the role of accused in advance, they pick up the charge of foeticide against the accused for the mock trial. All these things have been scheduled to make a mock-trial of Miss Benare in her absence. When Miss Benare returns wiping her face on the towel, Mr. Rokde, on Ponshe's hint, picks up Benare's purse. Meanwhile, Mr. Kashikar comes and occupies the seat of the judge on the dais. Karnik and Rokde, at Mr. Kashikar's hint, silently bring the wooden dock and arrange it quickly around Miss Benare. Sukhatme comes from wings putting on the lawyer's gown and the other go to their places. Without least hesitation Ponshe declares:

PONKSHE. Miss Benare, you have been arrested on the suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature, and brought as prisoner before the bar of this court. (Act One, p. 74)

Dr. Beena Agrawal observes that, "Such statements evidently indicate how trial is organized with the

hidden motives of violence...the approach of Ponshe to announce the order of arrest of Leela Benare is another evidence of cruelty inflicted on women" (70).

Act two of the play opens keeping Miss Benare in the dock as an accused under the Section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code. The witnesses are being presented in the witness-box to present their opinions about the case of accusation. All witnesses except Samant remain crafty in presenting their opinions. They present their opinions not as witnesses but as hunters and ultimately they succeed to trap Miss Benare's private real-life into reel-life. The tragedy of Miss Benare occurs when she becomes the victim of Prof. Damle's 'carnival-fever' and the wound of the victim is being taken as stigma while Professor Damle, who is an appalling cause of that stigma, is neither get any reproach nor any punishment. Thus, Miss Benare's predicament mirrors the facts to reflect the norms of patriarchal society where women's innocence is punished while men's oppression go scot-free. That is why Professor Damle, despite the fact of being a victim, he wholly disowns his responsibility and is summoned merely as a witness while Miss Benare remains prime accused, principally because contemporary Indian society, with its entire root grounded firmly in reactionary ideas, cannot allow the birth of a child out of wedlock. Professor Damle, who went scot-free, condemns Miss Benare as Alec did to Tess, he says, "Where you should go is entirely your problem, I feel great sympathy for you. But I can do nothing. I must protect my reputation" (92). Dr. Beena Agrawal points out that: "Vijay Tendulkar is convinced that pregnancy is the weakest point in femininity and it never permits a woman to nurture her freedom. In male dominated society, there is no torment for the Alecs and Damles; every time Tesses and Benares have to give a proof of their purity...In *Silence!*...for others it may be a mock-trial but for Benare it had been a mockery of her freedom, mockery of her self-respect and mockery of her personal life...Miss Benare at this stage from an individual becomes an embodiment of predicament of womanhood. She is another victim of sexual colonization where she cannot speak without the oppressor." (76)

The mock-trial gradually shifts to be battle of sexes. The contemporary society is also conscious for the responsibility of the mother towards her children but simultaneously same society does not care for the dignity of the woman who harbours the child. Dr. Prasad opines that, "Truly speaking it is not Miss Benare who is the prisoner; she is free from the fear of the society. But the other characters are really prisoners as they are not free from pretensions, hypocrisy, mental disorders, inferiority complex, so on and so forth" (173). During the mock-trial Sukhatme, the prosecutor and defence counsel, becomes the symbol of cruelty and oppressor. Sukhatme assumes that, "woman is no more a mere pretext than she is a man's prey" (Beauvoir 248). The evidences which Sukhatme produces in the mock-trial, do not reflect any justice but are the echo of male dominated society and Miss Benare has been repeatedly snubbed by the gavel of the judge. Samant is summoned as a witness by the Court, seems to be ignorant of the underhand tactics of the Court while Karnik during his witness reveals that crime is imaginary but Ponshe with all his malicious practice confesses, "Only the accused is real!"(90) Sukhatme orders that the entire statement should be noted down as a part of evidence against the accused towards the end of act two of the play.

Act third of the play opens continuing the trial and Mrs. Kashikar, as witness, reaches to witness box. She tries to prove that Miss Benare is a woman of loose morals. She has been after Professor Damle and has also tried to influence Rokde. Soon Rokde is called to the witness box, he alleges that Miss Benare had proposed to him. The next witness, Ponshe tells the mock-court that Miss Benare has told him that she was pregnant by Professor Damle and had proposed to him for marriage. The next witness, Karnik reveals that Miss Benare had an incestual relationship with her maternal uncle. Miss Benare had been in love with her maternal uncle at fourteen when she had not understood what was wrong in falling in love with her uncle. She confesses on oath that, "I was hardly fourteen, I didn't even know what sin was –I swear by my mother" (117). She had no guilt feelings, and she wanted to make this love affair open and even wanted to get married to him but had been denied and her uncle had run

away turning his tail. So we see that in contemporary society male members of the family take advantage of the innocence of the female members and hence establish incestual relationship. The observation made by Sukhatme muffles the voice of Miss Benare, and as a prosecutor he does not hesitate least to make a partial remark about women:

Women bear the grave responsibility of building up the high values of the society... Woman is not fit for independence... that is the rule laid down for us by tradition. Abiding this rule, I make a powerful plea...Miss Benare is not fit for independence. (Act Three, p. 115)

Again, we witness during the mock-trial the tragedy of Miss Benare occurs when she becomes a victim of Professor Damle's 'carnival-fever'. The wound of the victim is taken seriously as a stigma and placing the victim as a public enemy who has made a heinous blot on sacred brow of motherhood. Sukhatme, as a public prosecutor, makes the best propaganda of Miss Benare's private life but simultaneously when he conducts the case as defence counsel, becomes mute against the accomplice, Professor Damle. According to C. Coelho:

In his portrayal of human relations and tensions, Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egotistical man and equally self-centred society... His primary concern in the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is the failure of human relationship due to man's inherent cruelty to his fellowmen. (34)

The most ironic part of the whole trial is that Miss Benare is accused of infanticide which has not been committed at all by her but the mock-trial demands infanticide to be committed in the name of morality and tradition. It is surprising to see that Mrs Khashikar, a woman:

Who acts in the social plays advocating eradication of the evils of the society, also does not sympathize with the fallen woman but joins others to throw stones at her. Though she is a woman, she analyzes the problem of women from the male point of

view only. She does not find fault with Professor Damle for seducing Miss Benare. (Renuka KJES, 1995, 54)

The inability and fiasco on the part of Benare's co-actors in achieving goal render them all crestfallen and violent. In their verbal assault on a helpless woman, their sadist inclinations are clearly noticeable. Arundhati Banerjee aptly remarks:

The latent sadism of the characters, of Sukhatme, of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, of Ponshe, Karnik or even Rokde, surfaces during the process of the trial. In delineating these characters, Tendulkar has explored their psyche to the extent of revealing the hidden sense of failure pervading their lives. (*Five Plays*, IX)

The play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* also throws light on the popular discourses of motherhood, honour, nationalism and social responsibilities as "...the ideal of the nation is often imaged as a woman" (Young 63) whose cause of blot is ignored by Sukhatme. In the last scene of the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, as the defence counsel, Miss Benare's monologue of self-vindication becomes a successful attempt of Tendulkar to do justice that was denied to Miss Benare. Through Miss Benare's elaborate monologue Tendulkar throws light on the oppressive nature of contemporary Indian society. Tendulkar deployed the mock-trial as an objective-correlative to expose the evil consequences of the gender discrimination, double-standard existing within human consciousness and also in the fabric of the patriarchal social structure. Thus, the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* remains a scathing satire against the contemporary judiciary, moral hypocrisy of the middle class. Of men's hypocritical sexual morality, Miss Benare says:

MISS BENARE. Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrase! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires. (Act III. p. 117)

The play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* also reveals the inherent jealousy in human nature. The inadequacy of the characters to face Miss Benare's

personality makes them violent. They have sense of failure which results in:

Prejudices against Benare who treats them with scant respect. The resultant violence manifests itself in their ruthless exposure of Benare's private life. They all gang up against Benare because of the humiliation they suffer at her hand. No wonder they all grow inwardly violent against her. Benare's success reminds them of their inadequacy. Therefore, at Benare's mock-trial, they give vent to their psychological violence born of prejudice against her. (Dharan *The Quest*, 2002, 23-24)

Tendulkar seems to agree with Aditya N. Agnihotri in his projection of protest, he mentions:

Protest as art, like any other art, delights; it delights by not only convincingly exposing the system under study, it delights by satisfying one's sense of disgust and anger against that system... Thus, protest as art projects multiple experiences, agitating, energizing, ennobling and yet delighting all at the same time. (Pandey: 26)

Leela Benare's monologue, in Act third of the play, reveals her inner voice and protest against the patriarchal codes and its hypocrisy. Thus, finally we can say that *Silence! The Court is in Session* explores facets of violence, protest and survival in contemporary life. The play also gives a glimpse of socio-domestic reality of contemporary life and very effectively paints the contemporary society with all kinds of violence, protest and survival.

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