



## SOCIETAL CHANGE, REFORM AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S "SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION"

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### ABSTRACT

Social-cultural norms and system of India can be questioned for the unequal treatment of marginalized people especially woman. Indian society is basically a patriarchal one in which women are exploited and harassed. Women are facing violence and harassment everywhere. Women are treated as second class citizens in Indian society. Rigid tradition, customs, orthodoxy and the social ills of the middle class society are responsible for the exploitation and suppression of women. In this paper, I throw light on the social system, gender discrimination, suppression and marginalization of women, and exhibit many taboos that are discernable in the contemporary India and also hit off the hypocrisy, meanness, follies and ills that prevail in our judicial system.

**Keywords:** Gender, Patriarchy, Sexual, Society, Suppression, Inequality, Judicial System.

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India has a glorious history of drama from the ancient times. Drama begins its journey in India with the Sanskrit plays. Indian drama is characterized with the rituals, folks, cultural heritage etc. But the major concern of contemporary Indian drama is the representation of socio-political scenario, marginalization, gender discrimination, oppression, poverty and hunger. A general consensus seems to have emerged that though the social criticism, corruption, oppression, gender discrimination can be found in drama in earlier times, these specific features of drama appear in a pronounced manner in the works of the contemporary dramatists.

Nowadays Indian plays highlight on some current social issues and the problems of everyday life. Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) also manifests the concurrent social issues and the problems in his

plays. He is also a movie and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist and social commentator primarily in Marathi. Tendulkar is basically famous for his plays *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Constable Ghasiram*, *Sakharam the Binder*. *Silence! The Court is in Session* received the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya award. He always tries to represent the social issues through his writings. As his plays focus on the real life problems, he is considered as social critic. He has given the Marathi drama a global fame.

His plays are about the social norms, gender issues, man-woman relationship, domestic problems, political issues, norms of morality etc. His plays raise the question of discrimination, including gender discrimination and social inequalities. His plays not only bring up gender issues and the liberty fixed to women in a patriarchal society, but also

they deal with gender biases and prejudices which influence the lives of woman amongst the middle class educated society. A bit of Vijay Tendulkar's play is not merely to reflect the malfunction of the society but to act like freak mirrors in a carnival and to project grotesque images of all that passes for normal in our world. In his famous play "*Silence! The Court is in Session*" Vijay Tendulkar shows his consciousness of the social system and exhibits many taboos that are discernable in the contemporary India. The play effectively portrays the social consciousness and the gender discrimination of modern Indian society. The play is centered on the tragic story of Miss Leela Benare, the heroine of the play who becomes the victim of patriarchal society for her act of adultery. It is not only the tragic story of Miss Leela Benare, but it is the story of every woman in society whether it is rural or urban. *Silence!* is a play in three acts. It is indeed a mock trial of Miss Leela Benare, the school teacher. Miss Benare is charged with infanticide an illicit relationship with Professor Damle and this is how her personal life is exposed. In the course of the play, she is charged with child abortion and having relationship with so many persons. As the time goes ahead all the witnesses and authorities become inimical towards Miss Benare. On the charge of infanticide and illicit relations, the judge Mr. Kashikar orders the school administration to dismiss such an immoral and impious woman from the school. Miss Leela Benare tries to defend herself but she cannot afford. Finally Miss Benare breaks down, revealing the true story behind this in which there are many men who are to be accused with same crime. By the act of Miss Benare, the hegemony and the hypocrisy of male cast members come to the light, who like their counter part in the society are not blameless themselves, while they find it easy to point out fingers at woman's character. Mr. N.S. Dharan comments in his book "*The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*", "Tendulkar though not a self-acknowledged feminist treats his women characters with understanding and compassion while pitting them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious." (Dharan, 28)

The play also deals with the theme of power - power between Miss Leela Benare and the male cast members of the trial. Miss Benare is charged with infanticide and having illicit relations. All the witnesses such as Mr. Ponshe, Mr. Rokde and Samant ascertain in the court that Miss Benare is immoral. Miss Benare is tried to defend herself through a long soliloquy but she cannot retain herself to the hegemony of the male cast members.

"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!"  
(*Silence!*, 23)

To show the degraded condition of women in the Indian society, Suchismita Hazra rightly states that "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". (Hazra, 1)

Vijay Tendulkar time and again depicts the social inequalities in '*Silence! The Court is in Session*'. Each of the members of the theatre group is different from the other member in terms of age, psychology, gender and social status. They are taken together in the same stage through the device of "mock trial" that they are performing. This certainly breaks the traditional ground of theatricality. It is observed that the theatricality greatly influences the audience of the play.

'*Silence! The Court is in Session*' is a satire against the rigid tradition, customs, orthodoxy and the social ills of the middle class society. The play also deals with the traditional and backward culture of narrow minded Indian. It is an attempt of Vijay Tendulkar to criticize the social ills and follies that prevail in our society. Tendulkar represents a societal reformation through the play '*Silence! The Court is in Session*'. While a couple commits

adultery, it means both the male and female partner are equally responsible. But in the conventional Indian society, only woman is held responsible. Here, Tendulkar tries to represent the ugly aspect of the society and the gender discrimination of the male dominated Indian society through the character of Miss Leela Benare. '*Silence! The Court is in Session*' displays a concern for the pathetic position of women in the male dominated Indian World. Varun Gulati rightly states "Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session: Social Criticism and Individual Tragedy*" that "in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar has depicted the plight of a young woman, who is betrayed by the male dominated society. A traditional male dominated society cannot relinquish its paralyzed values and customs. The society does not like to perceive or receive any social change. Tendulkar presents a treatment of those ugly ways of society in this play. It is a bitter satire against the social ills and an interesting attempt to criticize the follies that prevail in our society". (Gulati, 1-2)

In this play, Tendulkar reveals the issues of gender discrimination, suppression and marginalization. Social norms and cultural elements can be questioned for the inequality against the woman. Here, Miss Leela Benare is the victim of the social system that controls the minds and the actions of the people. In the court, Miss Leela Benare is convicted on the charge of infanticide and illegitimate motherhood that are against societal norms. In traditional male dominated Indian society, women are treated as secondary citizen in all spheres of life. Nowadays, they are given secondary status in houses, offices, social and public places. Women are exploited and harassed in Indian society. Woman is subjected to violence and harassment everywhere. The play '*Silence! The Court is in Session*' raises the questions to the society that treats the women as second class citizens. Tanmoy Kundu opines that "Tendulkar exposes the condition of women of the middle class family in Indian context. Both Benare and Mrs. Kashikar are presented as women who have fallen victims to male supremacy in Indian society. They both are not free to act independently. Benare's attempt to lead an independent life of her own has

been frustrated by the group of men surrounding her during the course of the mock-trial. Her freedom has been mercilessly crushed". (Kundu, 2)

Tendulkar always tries to project the society's follies that are present in the inner self of the society. In the play, he tries to highlight another important aspect of traditional Indian society i.e. complex and value loaded relationship between husband and wife through the characters of Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar. They belong to the middle class society in which male chauvinism gets privileged. Mrs. Kashikar is unfit to Mr. Kashikar as she is a practically illiterate woman and a formal relationship prevails between them. As the couple has no child, they have adopted a boy, Balu Rokde. Tendulkar proves himself as a keen observer of society through the depiction of the relationship of Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar. He has explored the man-woman relationship in various levels. He has portrayed the complications, inadequacy and the problems of relationship very efficiently. Dexterously he has limned up the psychology of the middle class and narrow Indian mind through the characterization of the couple Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar. Tendulkar's projection of man-woman relationship is very contextual to the real life relationship. Varun Gulati rightly points out that "*Silence! The Court is in Session* is not a propaganda play. It grapples with several problems of the Indian society such as the pretentious institutional social service organizations, and forceful male supremacy in Indian society, in a masterful way. However, the fact is that we look at the world and our friends, relatives, et al., and value their roles only from their utility towards our ends. Conventional morality is only an imaginary issue". (Gulati, 4)

*Silence! The Court is in Session* is a bitter satire against the existing judicial system of India. Tendulkar takes dig on the Indian judicial procedure in a satirical way. He dexterously hits off the hypocrisy and ills of the judicial system through the satire. It is an interesting attempt of Tendulkar to criticize the meanness, follies and hypocrisy that prevail in our judicial procedure. He also presents a treatment of those hypocrisy and limitations. Tendulkar displays a concern for the present day court procedure, its degradation, inadequacy,

limitations and its loss of dignity and faith. It is said that there is equality before law. But in reality the picture of equality is quite different. Here just because of being female Miss Leela Benare is suppressed to the supremacy of male. A court should be a symbol of justice, equality, balance, seriousness and decorum. A witness box must have an exact position in the court room. A witness must take an oath keeping his or her hand on some holy or religious scripture during the trial. But in this play the witnesses take oath touching the Oxford English Dictionary. It is considered that a judicial court is supposed to be a symbol of high seriousness and decorum. But, here, the judge Mr. Kashikar jumps into the witness box violating all procedures and decorum and declares his opinion from the witness box. To show the meanness and follies of the Indian judicial procedure Dr. Medikonda Sambaiah and Mrs. Katumala Sandhya states that "Certainly, the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a question against existing legal curriculum. There is no roadmap for the image of reality in the procedure of the prosecution. There is an absence of trial dynamism in the play. The entire trial rotates around gimmick but is not based on evidence. There is no opening statement which tells the jury the plaintiff claims in a direct and reasonable way. It must give the jury an overview of what the evidence will show and what the evidence will be without argumentative hype and individualistic exhibitionism. The foundation for the verdict 'let the witness be himself' is not at all observed. There is no review of the evidence offered by both sides. The rules of the judge are based on what the lawyer presents. It seems that instructions to jurors will directly affect their judgment". (Sambaiah, 3)

Vijay Tendulkar has been successful in his attempt to draw the very burning issues of the society. He has portrayed it very deftly in his play *Silence! The Court is in Session*. The portraiture of every aspect of the society is too delicate, and there are complications as well that need very scrutinizing eyes of critic to unravel it. The play *Silence* strives with several problems of traditional Indian society such as the suppression of women, loss of dignity of judicial system, forceful male supremacy etc. It also represents the injustices done in the name of

gender construction of gender identities-this hierarchy does as much harm to men as to women. Tendulkar proves himself strong as a playwright. He is against the conventional type. He had made a place for himself in Indian English Literature. His protagonist is unlike any other protagonists of other playwrights. In this study, the protagonist suffers from social and moral pangs. The readers and the audience find the story very influential.

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