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A FEMINIST APPROACH TO TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*

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ABSTRACT

Drama, as one of the highest forms of artistic expression, is not only a delightful source of entertainment but also a powerful vehicle of instruction and illumination. The Indian dramatists have effectively presented contemporary socio-cultural problems and conflicts in their plays. Vijay Tendulkar has continuously raised his voice against injustices meted out to the poor and the victims of structured violence in a brilliant manner. Women make an essential part of the disadvantaged group in his dramas. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the sham moral standards of the patriarchal middle class society of contemporary India.

In the *Silence! The Court is in Session*, a stage-worthy play set in an environment of intrigue, hypocrisy, greed and brutality, the victimized individual happens to be a woman who dared to defy the socio-moral code of sexuality framed by men in order to control the body of women. It is interesting to appreciate the play from the Indian feminist perspective. The play focuses on Indian middle-class life in urban society, male hegemony, psyche of suffering women, and selfish, hypocritical nature of men. The absence of any apparent solution at the end of the play underlines the gravity of the complex situation in which a contemporary educated Indian woman is denied her individuality and freedom.

Key words: Feminism, patriarchy, trial, prosecution, hypocrisy, defence.

Of all the literary genres, drama can be considered as one of the most appealing and splendid form of visual art in which an actual reality can be transformed into an excellent aesthetic experience. As the highest form of artistic expression drama is not only a delightful source of entertainment but also a powerful vehicle of instruction and illumination. Drama in India has a rich and glorious tradition. Being hailed as the "Fifth Veda" it encompasses the "whole arc of life, ranging from the material to the spiritual, the phenomenal to the transcendental and provide[s] at once relaxation and entertainment, instruction and illumination" (Iyengar: 1). The Indian playwrights have delved into Indian myths, epics, legends,

history, folk literature, and Indian as well as Western dramatic traditions, not only for inspiration but also for effective presentation of contemporary socio-cultural and political problems and conflicts in their plays. The influence of Western thinkers and playwrights such as Sartre, Camus, Brecht, G.B. Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov, Eliot, Ionesco, Pirandello, Pinter and Beckett is also evident in Indian playwrights. The synthesis of all the three distinguished traditions namely, classical, folk and contemporary Western, has resulted in the discovery of a new form as well as a new style of production.

In the world of Indian English drama Vijay Tendulkar is among the few playwrights like

GirishKarnad, HabibTanvir, BadalSircar and Mahesh Dattani who write about contemporary issues and themes in a brilliant way. Tendulkar is a keen observer of social reality of post-colonial India with a humanist attitude. He has continuously raised his voice against injustices meted out to the poor and the victims of structured violence and in his dramas women make an essential part of the disadvantaged group. Regarding the dramatist's interest in gender issues, N.S Dharan comments, "...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." (Dharan: 28) The women characters in Tendulkar's plays undergo a series of sufferings and torture as the victims of the hegemonic power-structure. Plays like *Kamala* (1981), *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *The Vultures* (1961), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kanyadan* (1983), *Encounter in Umbugland*, *MitrachiGoshta* (2001) and *His Fifth Women* (2004) bitterly critique the patriarchal values and institutions which are based on the exploitation 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 contemporary India. Very often women from the lower and middle classes play central roles in Tendulkar's plays. They are housewives, teachers, mistresses, daughters, film extras, slaves, and servants thereby bringing in not just variety of social situations but also a broad range of emotions into the plays, "... from the unbelievably gullible to the clever, from the malleable to the stubborn, from the conservative to the rebellious, from the self-sacrificing to the grasping." (Gokhle: 81) However, unlike the activists of the confrontational theatre of the late 1980s, Tendulkar never believed that an evening at the theatre would change the mind-set of the society, but his efforts did raise the hope that an effective play could help create public awareness.

Silence! The Court is in Session, a stage-worthy play set in an environment of intrigue, hypocrisy, greed and brutality, "combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society" (Banerjee: xviii). Here the individual

happens to be a woman who dared to defy the socio-moral code of sexuality framed by men in order to control the body of women. It is interesting to appreciate the play from the feminist perspective, as a drama with the dominating elements of Indian feminism. The play focuses on Indian middle-class life in urban society, male hegemony, psyche of suffering women, and selfish, ambitious and hypocritical nature of men. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender justice in terms of access to health, education and economic equality and demand respect for a woman's urge to have individual identity. In addition to these, Indian feminists have also to fight against culture-specific issues deeply entrenched in the patriarchal society of India, such as religion sanctioned superiority of a male offspring to a female one, dowry system, *Sati pratha* (the practice of self-immolation at the pyre of dead husband), child marriage, etc. Feminism, as a social movement, is also about creating awareness and consciousness among women themselves, along with the society, who need to recognize their right to have 'wholeness' of existence that encompasses all three – body, mind and soul. And for this recognition, the feminists seek to force a 'rethinking' on the idea of masculinity. Jasbir Jain's statement effectively sums up the present state of feminist struggle in India:

...while feminism has generated awareness, created space, intervened in legislation, values and structures continue to be patriarchal and tradition continues to define roles and respectability, especially in traditional societies like ours (Jain: 91).

Feminist concerns are central to the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Smita Paul writes, "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 is the struggle between women like Benare and her antagonists headed by the orthodox Kashikar and his associates." (Paul: 34). The action revolves round the female protagonist, Miss Leela Benare, and her role eclipses the roles of her male

counterparts. In her early thirties, the unmarried Benare desperately fights her lone battle against a typical Indian middle class oppressive power structure in which not getting married at an 'appropriate' age for a girl naturally attracts moral suspicion.

Leela Benare is introduced in the drama as a vivacious character with a spontaneous "joie de vivre", to borrow Arundhati Banerjee's expression, but is transformed into a beleaguered victim under the brutal societal pressure towards the end of the play. She dared to fall in love, and is cheated twice; first, seduced as a teenager by her maternal uncle and later cowardly abandoned by Prof. Damle, her 'intellectual God'. In her first incestuous emotional involvement, the punishment is inflicted in private, but in the other which involved a married man, she is caught in a trap by her own companions, for her love affair has been exposed by her pregnancy. She revolts like Sarita in *Kamala*, Laxmi in *Sakharam Binder*, Vijaya in *Encounter in Umbuglandand* and fights against the male dictates in the name of morality for her self-liberation and individuality. She reminds us of the character of Alka in Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen*, who ignores the social norms and dictates, only to be accused as a 'bad' woman by the orthodox society. Miss Benare is suspected of having an illicit relationship with Prof. Damle who remains absent throughout the play. Society cannot tolerate this unmarried expectant woman, 'a canker on the body of society'. (*Silence!*, Act three) but not even once is Prof. Damle, a married man with children, condemned for being responsible for Benare's wretched condition. It is through her consciousness that the hypocritical double standard of the male-dominated middle-class society and its brutal hostility against women is exposed. In the words of Gail Omvedt, "'Feminism' is not a form of social science nor is it a single consistent ideology. It can best be understood as the developing self-consciousness of women as an oppressed section struggling for liberation". (Omvedt: 177-178) The play with its radical subject of unwed motherhood is aggressive in tone as the accused woman effectively questions the established values of the orthodox society.

Tendulkar has used the technique of 'play within a play' in which the set of actors represent a small cross-section of contemporary society. All the characters have come to stage to perform a play and the play ends before the anticipated originally scheduled play begins. The locale of the play is a small town and all the actions of the play take place in a single room. By using the techniques of dramatic irony and satire the playwright effectively portrays how a young woman undergoes deep mental agony when she is betrayed by her co-artists of an amateur theatre group which claims to perform in order to educate the public with current social problems and issues which affect contemporary society seriously. Ironically, the characters, taking advantage of Miss. Benare's momentary absence from the scene, decide to set a mock trial on her, in the name of a rehearsal, for the 'offence that she has committed against the society'. Quite significantly all these people, except Benare, are a bunch of worthless frustrated beings ready to pounce upon the unsuspecting Benare. They produce her as an accused in the court before the judge Mr. Kashikar, who happens to be one of the prosecutors as well.

Violence that characterizes most of Tendulkar's plays makes its appearance in *Silence! The Court is in Session* at the psychological level. All other characters except Samant have failed to achieve their aims and thus their desired social position. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar remain childless, Ponshe could not become a scientist, Sukhatme is an unsuccessful lawyer who "just sits alone in the Barrister's room at court, swatting flies with legal precedents! And in his tenement, he sits alone killing houseflies" (6). Karnik has failed as an actor and considers himself as an expert on "Intimate Theatre". Balu Rokade remains economically, psychologically and emotionally dependent on Kashikars. In their attack on Benare, their sense of failure or defeat surfaces as they try their best to have sadistic pleasure in her discomfiture. In psychological terms, the defeatism of the unsuccessful, frustrated men forces them to seek vicious pleasure in inflicting miseries on others, particularly those who are weak and helpless. Miss Benare becomes an object of ridicule among her

companions who pose as the upholders of moral values of society. She is accused of foeticide and made to suffer at their hands for the offence she has not committed, and ironically enough she actually gets the punishment of killing the child in her womb. She refuses to comply. In the words of Arundhati Banerjee, "Their characters, dialogues, gestures and even mannerisms reflect their petty, circumscribed existences fraught with frustrations and repressed desires that find expression in their malicious and spiteful attitudes towards their fellow beings" (viii). As they torture a helpless woman the sadist tendencies of these prejudiced men are revealed. These actors represent the patriarchal mind-set of the given society with its blatant double standards. N. S. Dharan rightly says, "Tendulkar brings them together under the banner of an amateur theatre, in order to highlight the hypocrisy latent in this microscopic cross-section of the milieu of the metropolitan Bombay (Mumbai) middle class." (Dharan: 50)

Leela Benare and Samant are the first to arrive at the village hall where the actors are to stage a "Mock Law Court". We hear about her teaching career as she tells Samant: "In school, when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the threshold. I haven't heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my teaching. I'm never behind-hand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too! Not a bit of room for disapproval -- I don't give an inch of it to any one!" (3-4). She tells Samant that because of her efficiency in her teaching work and the enviable attachment of her students to her, other teachers and the management are unjustifiably jealous of her. Her statement is fraught with dramatic irony when she says:

"But what can they do to me? What can they do? However hard they try, what can they do? They're holding an enquiry, if you please! But my teaching's prefect. 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? Throw me out? Let them! I haven't hurt anyone. Anyone at all! If I've hurt anybody, it's been myself. 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! My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those -- no one! I'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide"(58).

[Unconsciously, her hand is on her stomach. She suddenly stops.]

The voice of self-assertion and individuality endows Benare with the identity of a "new woman" emerging against the coercive attacks of patriarchy which tend to control the body of a woman with all its might.

In the mock trial, a deliberate shift is effected from make believe to the real world and Benare's private life is exposed and dissected publicly. The 'mock-trial' offers Tendulkar a lot of scope to comment on the sordid realities and the hypocritical urban life. The urban middle class, with its sham morality, cannot tolerate Benare's strident independent ways, and it is satirically presented through Benare's lone but utterly nonchalant defence of herself in the face of interrogation at the hands of malicious Sukhatme who is bent on making Rokade admit that he witnessed the scene of Benare and Damale making love. All the members launch a concerted attack upon her revelling in the sadistic pleasure of persecution. Benare's private life is nakedly exposed and undergoes a thorough post-mortem throughout the play. One of the characters is made to read aloud pages from the pornographic novel which he was reading as substantiating evidence against Benare. The pressure is such that she finally breaks down and confesses how she was seduced by her uncle and she tried to commit suicide. She also declares her love for the 'runaway' intellectual person whose child she is carrying and at the same time she declares that she is not going to abort the child. But when the court gives the verdict that she should be forced to abort, she collapses down. The game of rehearsal is over and everyone becomes normal except Benare who is wounded to the core. She lies prostrate and the play ends there.

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) If a teenage girl is seduced by her own maternal uncle then in whom the girl should believe? Her uncle praises her and misleads her to a social crime of incest. She admits,

"It's true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother..." But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom every day. He gave me love. . . How was I to know that if you felt like breaking yourself into bits and melting into one with someone – if you felt that just being with him gave a whole meaning to life – and if he was your uncle, it was a sin! Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was . . . I insisted on marriage. So I could live my beautiful lovely dream openly. . . I swear by my mother . . . and my brave man turned tail and ran." (117)

She is too young to differentiate between infatuation and pure love. This relationship shows how incest operates in the traditional society and how the female child abuse always results into her injured psyche. Leela Benare's mother reacts in a typical patriarchal manner and prefers to victimize her own daughter in order to honour the norms of tradition that does not allow the marriage.

About her second affair with Prof. Damle, Benare says,

"Again, I fell in love. As a grown woman. I threw all my heart into it; I thought this will be different. This love is intelligent. It is love for an unusual intellect. It isn't love at all – it's worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual God took the offering – and went his way. . . He wasn't a God. He was a man. For whom everything

was of the body, for the body! ...This body is a traitor! [*She is writhing with pain*] I despise this body – and I love it! I hate it. . . ." (118)

For her sexual relationship with Prof. Damle she is looked down upon and despised in male chauvinistic environment where her body is controlled and regulated by others according to patriarchal dictates. After being rejected by Damle, her feminine desire for motherhood takes her to plead Samant and Punkshe, her co-artists, to marry her so that her child gets a legitimate identity. But she is refused by everyone. As she realizes the sexual urge of the body she calls it as a traitor, but she wants to retain her body only for her child to be born.

A tender little bud – of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life – my son – my whole existence! I want my body now for him – for him alone. (118)

Defending Benare for her unwed motherhood ShantaGokhle remarks:

Men aren't superior beings by definition. They must prove themselves so 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. . . . He does not have the strength to stand by her and own his child. She has made a desperate bid to get one another of the unattached men in her group to marry her in order to give the coming child, a name. Predictably, not one has agreed to her proposal. It is in this delicate state body and mind that she is trapped by her colleagues into being the accused in the mock trial. (Gokhle: 32-33)

Though Benare shows her independent spirit in the beginning of the play and tries to resist the personal attack on her by making fun of their personal failures and thus to denigrate their authority, she falls into the pattern of the centuries of learnt unconscious when she is hounded by each and every member of the theatre group. Instead of attacking those vultures of patriarchy, feeding and having fun on her miserable self, she starts feeling handicapped because of her being a woman. Even Mrs. Kashikar

doesn't spare her but gangs up with the rest of the judges and complements their torturous attitude:

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. (99-100)

Mrs. Kashikar who follows her husband like a shadow is incapable of any independent thinking and is always snubbed by him. Unlike Benare she has readily accepted man-made social codes and rigidity of patriarchy perhaps as a shield for her inability to bear any children that is a torment enough in an Indian society. She is both a victim as well as an extension of patriarchal thinking. The Kashikars represent a conformist couple voicing against the modern onslaught on the traditionally accepted model of the Indian Women. Despite different educational background they are one in their approach to the social problems. Except Samant, all the characters try to exercise their power on Benare. 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. (98)

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. (114)

They lash out against Benare in the most ruthless and inhumane manner. These 'fathers' of society give verdict on the behaviour of women and consequently curb their freedom. The situation exemplifies how the frustrated male members of society try to subjugate women to prove their power and superiority in the social hierarchy. Benare is stigmatized and sacked from her job. Her economic

freedom has been curbed in order to control her. But Prof. Damle, the man responsible for her condition, escapes any judgment for he is a male. And Sukhatme, the barrister, expresses the prevalent double standard of our society that tries to find solution to all ills of society in the crucifixion of its women:

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 striswatantryamarhati*. 'Woman is not fit for independence.' ... (115)

There are several such quotations from the *Manusmriti* in the play. Patriarchy bases its arguments on such ancient texts and tends to judge the woman of today. Arvind Sharma significantly says that "The Manuvada presentation of Manu is for me an illustration of how information without context can lead to, or at least contributes to alienation" (Sharma: 205). The famous rhetorical soliloquy of Benare in self-defence, at the end of the play, is presented in such a way that it creates an impression that she does not say it aloud. Actually no one is supposed to hear her. It echoes the irony, sorrow and lampoon present in the Indian society. Though she is educated and articulate, she is unable to present her feelings to her prosecutors. The child in her womb and her attempts at suicide speak for her.

Benare has become the victim of cultural sadism in which "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman". (Beauvoir: 301) With a bruised self and utter despair she attacks men whose "bellies are full of unsatisfied desires". (117) The tormentors take recourse to the Indian tradition which considers motherhood as something divine. But in her reaction to the biased imposed morality, Benare rejects the traditional idea that "Marriage is the very foundation of our stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure". (118) She is not ready to accept that motherhood is endangered because of her 'misconduct'. Jasbir Jain's comments are very significant in this context when she stresses that "motherhood subjugates the female body and is primarily an asexual relationship without power. The whole burden of tradition is thrown upon Benare

and women like her. She is the sufferer, not the males. She is accused of not being the perfect woman, who has the superhuman ability to ignore the self, like Sita" (Jain: 87).

The play satirizes the so-called values these male-chauvinists profess. They praise motherhood with bombastic phrases but try to destroy Benare's infant in the womb. In his judgement Mr.Kashikar declares, "No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed" (119). Benare refuses boldly to allow it and cries, "I won't let it happen" (119) and then in a paroxysm she collapses with her head on the table. Arundhati Banerjee compares it with Nora's declaration in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. She says that Benare's monologue is reminiscent of Nora's declaration of independence but lacks the note of protest that characterizes the speech of Ibsen's heroine. It appears to be more a self-justification than an attack on society's hypocrisies. It is poignant, sensitive and further highlights the vulnerability of women in our society.

Benare, the heroine of the play reminds us of the narrator in Kamala Das's "My Grandmother's House" whose quest for love has made her wayward. She is driven to the doors of strangers to receive love at least in the form of 'a tip'. Kamala Das asserts how a woman has to move in the maze of male monopolistic chauvinism, and beg for love in the form of change. Benare's situation is even more complicated. Her search for true love has been thwarted by the doctrines of morality and the dictates of tradition. Her feminine urge for motherhood is weighed against her failure to bear the burden of maintaining the moral fabric of the society. She is punished with abject social humiliation and her economic independence is snatched on the pretext that the teacher who is adored by the children will exert corrupting influence on them because the father of her foetus refused to own it.

A feminist interpretation of various symbols used by Tendulkar reinforces the vulnerability of the likes of Miss Benare in our society which is still guided by patriarchal norms. The door-bolt hurting

Benare's fingers and her locking herself into the room suggest the forced confinement of her individuality inside the social trap.G. P. Deshpande, in his article entitled *Shantata! Court ChaluAhe*, significantly points out,

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is highly symbolic in nature. During the court proceedings of the mock-trial, such animals as dogs, a hen, etc., enter the hall. These animals symbolize an imbroglio of innocent, simple and straightforward woman like Miss Benare (i.e., the hen) by cruel persons with dual personality (i.e., the dogs). So, the pursuits of the hen by the dogs symbolically represents Miss Benare's inhuman hunt by her fellow-companions. (Deshpande: 15)

The lock-and-key held by Samant represents the age-old construct in which Benare is imprisoned. The man holds the lock and is also in possession of the key. The imagery gets symbolic meaning as Ponkshe calls her later as "a different prisoner". The exhausted Miss Benare who is on the offensive at the beginning finds herself trapped at the close of the play.

Significantly, Tendulkar offers no solutions as such, only this that women must awaken to their rights and that too does not reach its end in his plays. The play exhibits how women in our society are victimized, tortured and exploited. Evidently there is a conflict between the Indian tradition and the modern feminist theory. KapilKapoor proposes that we should take a look at the validity, applicability and efficacy of the Feminist Theory, and at what it would ultimately amount to in terms of Indian social structure and social goals. We should also examine the foundational sociological thinking, the Dharmasastras, to grasp the rationale of the existing social practices, and also evaluate this thought in the context of changing social reality. Finally, we should look at the contemporary legal and societal position of women (31). As a work of art the dramatist's piercing social commentary entertains while simultaneously making us aware of our hypocrisies.

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