



FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S *SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION*

K. SENTHIL KUMAR¹, Dr. SUMA ALEYA JOHN²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor & Head

^{1,2}Tiruppur Kumaran College for Women, S. R Nagar, Mangalam Road, Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu.

E-mail: engsenthilgasc@gmail.com¹; sushan87@gmail.com²



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Abstract

The present paper aims at critically studying the status of modern women at modern times through the very realistic and naturalistic portrayal of both women and men by the Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar. The purpose of this paper is to show the realities of life of women in modern India at its grassroots level. A modern, educated, "high-society" woman is presented in the form of Miss.Leela Benare. As usual, Tendulkar raises umpteen number of questions related to Indian women; but, gives no solutions. He only depicts the problems through the innocent and helpless characters which are in no way innocent or free from blemishes.

KEY WORDS: Vijay Tendulkar, Indian, Feminism, Translation, Drama, *Silence! The Court is in Session*

INTRODUCTION

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (7 January 1928 – 19 May 2008) was not only one of the leading Indian playwrights of the late sixties, but also one of the strongest radical political voices in Maharashtra. Apart from writing about social issues, he delved deeply into the politics of the contemporary society and exposed the hypocrisies of both individuals as well as institutions. For instance, the rise of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra in 1970s is presented in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the true incident of a journalist who bought a woman from rural sex trade is shown in the play *Kamala* and the real life incident of the ruining of an actress's career after her same sex affair came to light inspired Tendulkar to write *Mitrachi Goshta*. Due to his plays, he acquired the appellation of 'the angry young man' of Marathi theatre. Vijay Tendulkar revealed himself by saying:

As an individual—or rather as a social being—I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society

(because I am affected by it though not immediately in some cases or not as much as some other are) and in my own way brood over it. Once in a way I even do something to relieve myself of the tensions and anxiety and agitation produced by this brooding. I participate in a protest meeting or a *dharna* or a fast or a *morcha* or a Satyagraha. I align myself with some civil liberty organizations...

As a social being I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end...I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship...I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end.

Tendulkar has become a significant spokesperson for the downtrodden, weak and exploited masses, including the women. Though he does not call himself a feminist, many of his plays present the doleful position of women in the

contemporary *modern* society. Plays like *Kamala* (1981), *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *The Vultures* (1961), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Kanyadaan* (1983), *Encounter in Umbugland*, *Mitrachi Goshta* (2001) and *His Fifth Women* (2004) inordinately analyses the patriarchal values and institutions. He exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the shameful moral standards of the so-called civilized urban middle class society of post-Independence India.

Feminism in India is a set of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal chances for Indian women. It is the pursuit of women's rights within the society of India. Like their feminist counterparts all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality: the right to work for equal wages, the right to equal access to health and education, and equal political rights. Indian feminists also have fought against culture-specific issues within India's patriarchal society, such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation known as 'Sati'. Feminism is the recognition of 'wholeness' of existence that encompasses all three – body, mind and soul. And for this recognition it also forces a rethinking on the idea of masculinity (Jain, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism* 5).

According to 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" (177-178).

According to Jasbir Jain, feminists approach the problems associated with women by questioning, showing suspicion of knowledge as well as history of knowledge. This is a necessary first step, if one wants to stand outside the layers of imposed systems of thought and to comprehend the nature of stereotypes, and to stand outside them. The relationship between women and social structures is far more complicated and more intensely entrenched in society than any other. Education, marriage, family, morality, linguistics constructs, custom, law – all these are important

elements of self- construction. According to her, Feminist theory has several different theoretical approaches and positions but whether it is social-economic, psychological or literary, its two crucial concerns are power and freedom. Both have been conventionally denied to women, placing them on the sidelines. It is these margins which are being redefined or shifted through a shift to post-feminism in literary aesthetics (*Indian Feminisms* 82).

Jasbir Jain considers the first phase of feminist struggle as primarily as the right to equality and political rights and the second with stress on alternative standpoints and epistemological structures. Both of these phases despondently failed to terminate the binary oppositions. The first still held 'man' as central, with woman being a 'no-man' with aspirations to become one. The second privileged differences, motherhood and the self. The third phase, the post-feminist one is at one level an attempt to demolish these binary oppositions and at another an effort to redefine power and freedom (82- 83).

But the growth of feminism/women's movement has not been a tale of linear progression but of struggles (collective as well as individual), interruptions, setbacks, embroilment in religious conflicts, return to patriarchal constructs, especially during the times of national crisis, and even resort to male models of heroism and leadership. There has been a relentless need to negotiate cultural myths which are a part of the socialisation of the girl child and to retell and reinterpret them (Jain, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism* 3).

In the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Leela Benare is a woman, who is modern, independent, self-sufficient, free-thinking, who loves life, but happens to fall in love with a man who only loves her body and gets impregnated by him. It is the most powerful play of Tendulkar which exposes the hypocrisy of the male chauvinists and severely attacks the shameful moral standards of the so-called civilized urban middle class society of post-Independence India. The frustrated male members try to suppress women to prove their

power in social hierarchy. Miss Benare desperately fights her lone battle against the oppressive power structure. It shows how the so called modern society gangs up on a woman who has a child out of wed-lock. There is no sympathy, no help from the people of theatre group, but a sadist tendency to hurt Benare to somehow feel good about their own failures.

Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* 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 implications. Literally, it means the judge's order for maintaining silence in the court-room but metaphorically it implies legally silencing the weaker sex's appeal for justice. The urban middle class society which Tendulkar presents in this play enforces law to subjugate women by maintaining a hypocritical moral code. Though Benare is shown as chirpy and talkative lady, when the mock-trial begins, silence descends on her in due course of time.

The character of Benare yearns to displace and uproot the patriarchal hierarchy. She decides not to pay any attention to what the society says for women, instead lives her own life in a way she desires. She has learnt it from life that when one dies, only that person dies, no one else is willing to give a little of their lives to that person. Tendulkar, through his plays, asserts that gender has been defined by the patriarchal fathers as a social construct. While sex is a biological phenomenon, the traits of the masculine and feminine are constructed through gender paradigms which is to give sense of identity to the individual in a society. Gender politics is a universal problem. Tendulkar shows in his plays the natural instinct of his heroines to rebel when suppressed or exploited. Benare had been raped and thrown away by her maternal uncle when she was just fourteen. Thinking it to be an affair for life, she falls in love with him but sees the true face of life at such a young age. The mock-court session uses this incident to malign the character of Benare. Nobody once mentions the name of the maternal uncle who must have not only tempted her into

that socially-tabooed incest relationship but also after satisfying his sexual appetite, thrown her away like a garbage. All the members only blamed Benare for making such an illicit affair with her maternal uncle. Ironically, no one blamed her maternal uncle for committing such a serious crime. By wantonly projecting this episode, Tendulkar fearlessly peels of the skins of so-called guardians of women folk in India. Also, Benare is suspected of having an illegal relationship with Prof. Damle who remains absent throughout the play. Society cannot endure this unmarried expectant woman. She has been treated as "a sinful canker on the body of society" (Tendulkar, SC 112). All the members convict her as an evil influence that would dynamite the social structure but not even once is Prof. Damle condemned for being accountable for Benare's despicable 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.

Tendulkar in this play very proficiently scrutinizes the power relations in life with the view of breaking them down and showing the extent of patriarchy. The court of law, the magistrate and the judge who are supposed to be honourable men, protectors and guardians of law and justice, fail in their duty to protect the innocent girls, in contrast, convict them only. Although Benare displays her independent spirit in the beginning of the play, once she is harassed by each and every member of the theatre group, she falls to the pattern of the centuries of learnt unconscious. She starts to prove her demeanour instead of attacking those vultures of patriarchy who are mercilessly feeding and having fun on her miserable self. She is made to

feel handicapped only because that she was a woman. Even Mrs. Kashikar doesn't spare her but gangs up with the rest of the *judges* and pass the sentence.

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. (Tendulkar, SC99-100)

In this complex psychological play, Tendulkar has very dexterously handled the depiction of all characters. Contrast to Benare's character, Mrs. Kashikar behaves in a subdued way. She is dependent on her husband and is always snubbed by him. Also the fact that she can't bear any children is a torment enough in an Indian society where the exploiter is in turn the exploited too.

Tendulkar describes the agents of patriarchy as personifications of hypocrisy, selfishness and treachery. Men like Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik whose words and deeds unveils their inherent malice and hypocrisy. Furthermore, a deep psychological study of the characters discloses the reasons for their behaviour. One is obvious, being men, they have to convict Benare who is having a child out of wedlock, and another is their own failures in their life. That is why, they lash out against Benare in the most callous and vicious manner.

The psychological violence inherent in this play is appalling. It is a powerful satire on modern society. The Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik of the play emerge as individuals belonging to the middle-class who prove to be ineffectual and disgruntled. Their words and actions prove, beyond any doubt, that they are neurotic, sadistic, conspiratorial and even treacherous. It is not out of genuine love for drama that they have turned theatre activity, but out of a sheer sense of their own personal failures in real life. Dejected, discontented and still daring, they can only behave cruelly towards one another. To

expect them to be refined, truthful and generous is perhaps to ask for the impossible. The play satirizes the respectable facade of middle class men such as Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik. 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. (Tendulkar, SC 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. (Tendulkar, SC 114-115)

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. The play also satirizes the values they profess. They praise motherhood with bombastic phrases but at the same time, try to destroy Benare's infant in the womb. Benare is stigmatized and sacked from her teaching job. But Prof. Damle, the man who is responsible for her pathetic condition, escapes scot-free because 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.' (Tendulkar, SC115)

Indian tradition talks about motherhood as something divine. Jasbir Jain 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 many 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 (*Indian Feminisms*87).

Many Sanskrit statements in this play have been picked up from the *Manusmriti*. Patriarchy basis its argument on these ancient texts and judges the woman of today, but how accurate are they, is a matter of debate. Arvind Sharma 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" (205).

The monologue of Benare is very significant as it echoes the irony, sorrow and lampoon presentation of the Indian society. 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 is more a self-justification than an attack on society's hypocrisies. It is poignant, sensitive and highlights the vulnerability of women in Indian society.

Though Benare is provided with a long monologue, it is evident that she does not say it aloud. No one hears her. Though she is educated and articulate, she is unable to present her feelings to her prosecutors. The child in her womb, her attempts at suicide, these speak for her. According to Jasbir Jain, women carry out a multiple-act of writing the 'self', through body language, response, action and last of all the act of writing (218-219).

The play is a dramatic exposition of the latent violence, treachery, sexuality, and immorality that characterize contemporary gender politics of Indian society. It is a powerful dramatic statement of the violence that humans are capable of when triggered by envy, lust, inhumanity and craze for power. It is a totally theatrical play set in an environment of intrigue,

hypocrisy, greed and brutality – features inherent in the contemporary power politics. The play dwells on an extremely sensitive social and political issue, namely, the conflict between the male-chauvinists and an individual woman.

Tendulkar is at his best as a dramatist, in the 'mock-trial' he introduces in the play as a 'play-within-the-play' which helps him satirizes successfully the false conventions of the male-dominated society. The dramatist highlights the view that discrimination and gender politics at any level are definitely evil. The male-chauvinists of the Indian society are of the view that everyone has equal right to peaceful life, individual liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the male- chauvinists of the Indian middle-class society's establishment do not grant these goals and thereby perpetuates discrimination and gender politics.

Silence! The Court is in Session reflects seriously the actualities of life and tries to reawaken an awareness of the permanent realities of contemporary Indian life. The victim in this process is always a woman, because love is only an episode in man's life but to a woman it is life itself.

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 (91).

Tendulkar's plays are a satire on the modernism of today's society and the position of women in such a society. He 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. Evidently, there is a conflict between the Indian Tradition and the modern feminist theory. Kapil Kapoor 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 woman (31).

CONCLUSION

To end the discussion, Chandrakala Padia is quoted:

...The freedom for women for which the feminists of today cry is taken to mean *equality regarded as mere sameness*. The *same* opportunities for work to women as for men, -this is the battle cry today. But let us pause for a while and consider whether such a view of equality is workable. Would it make sense if two persons of unequal keenness of appetite and digestive powers are expected to eat the same kind and quantity of food? No one would here say, yes. Equality that is proper and workable is really *equality of discriminating consideration*. What I mean is simply this. Pay equal attention to the different needs and capacities of men and women, and then give them appropriate opportunities for work... (214).

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