

Victimization as a Dominant Theme in the Plays *Silence!* the Court is in Session by Vijay Tendulkar

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Vijay Tendulkar has been one of the most renowned as well as controversial playwrights of India. Vijay Tendulkar was a leading Indian playwright, movie and television writer, literary essayist, political journalist, and social commentator. He mostly writes in Marathi language. Vijay Tendulkar can be acknowledged as the precursor of modern Indian drama. His contribution is marvelous and bulky in the development of modern dramatic sensibility. His plays were translated in English as well as more than ten international languages. His plays were performed internationally in different languages.

Vijay Tendulkar's play 'Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe' ('*Silence! The Court is in Session*') was performed for the first time in 1967 and became his finest work. It is inspired by a short story 'Die Panne' (Traps) by Friedrich Durrenmatt. Satyadev Dubey in 1971, made a film based on 'Shantata Court Chalu Ahe' for which Vijay Tendulkar wrote his first screenplay. In 1970 Tendulkar's play 'Silence! The Court is in Session' gets the Kamala devi Chattopadhyaya Award. With success of this play Tendulkar gets recognition on the national scale.

In *Silence*, Benare, a modern, educated and economically independent woman is capable of carrying out her responsibility but her co-actors fail to appreciate her. She is punished severely for the crime that she has not committed. Her soliloquy which occurs in the end of the play not only reveals her mind but also the mindset of the hypocritical and sheepish quality of an Indian society which is dominated by the male dominance and arrogance. She becomes an exemplary figure of women in an Indian society whose voice has been castrated, stifled and muted. In the soliloquy, Benare wants to expose and express her innermost thought about herself and about the world around her. But she fails to understand that everyone around her does not want to listen to her or to take care of her mind and longing but wants to satisfy their sexual urges by having sex with her. So, in the play, Benare's mind and thoughts are not vocalized but her body is vulgarised and corrupted. She becomes a mute woman-speechless and voiceless.

Benare embodies and exemplifies love, innocence and sincerity. Although life offers her nothing but a grief and sadness, she is optimistic and has a positive view of and attitude to life. She loves everything around her, which she is in possession of – her profession, her baby, her pupils and her male-companions without expecting anything in return from them. She has no personal grudge against men, who have exploited, cheated and abused her physically, sexually as well as mentally and bring her life into disaster. She has no hatred

towards those who disown the responsibility of being a father to her baby. She is not aware of the reality around her and remains always unaware of the indifference shown to her by many. In spite of understanding, comprehending and protesting against the cruel nature and attitude of the dominating male world, she dreams, almost romantically.

Benare's position is similar to that of Rama in *Vultures*, who becomes miserable for being the daughter-in-law of a degraded family having people with Vulture-like qualities. *Binder* also exposes women in the same deprived and denied existence with all helplessness and hopelessness in their reverie. Like Benare and Rama, Laxmi appears meek and docile in the end of the play, she incites wrath in Sakham's mind and attitude, which makes him to kill Champa. After Champa's murder Sakham becomes totally a helpless man as he becomes totally a non-entity-wreck less and remorseless. Laxmi takes the full advantage of her life and she gets Sakham completely into her hold or grip and she becomes a woman to tame him or cow him down according to her likes and wishes. Laxmi gets an ambition to extract power and authority. She becomes totally an ambitious woman in dominating men and matters according to her likes and dislikes, whims and fancies. Champa's character, on the other hand, exhibits women's torture at different levels – physically, verbally, sexually, emotionally, and mentally. She suffers at the hands of her mother, her husband, her male-companion and at the end of the play at her female-companion, Laxmi, too. But both Champa and Laxmi share their suffering speechlessly in a muted form. Both of them experience the violation of their privacy and body. The substantial change that has been effected on them generates violation of their body and makes them to be slaves and social victims.

Tendulkar's plays present the life of women in all its ugliness and complexities bordering on socio-political issues, psychological maladjustments and sexual abuses. The tragedy of a modern woman, exile in power and sexual politics, greed for money and fame, man-woman relationship, and psychological depressions on the psyche of a woman become major thematic concerns of Tendulkar's plays. Tendulkar throws light on the relationship within and outside the family. In plays like *Vultures*, *Kamala*, and *Kanyadan*, he thoroughly scrutinizes and explains the blood relationship of people on different levels. In Plays like *Silence!*, *Vultures*, *Binder*, *Kamala*, and *Kanyadan*, it is through the portrayal of women characters in these plays, Tendulkar exposes the vices and wickedness of the society. Women are often projected as exploited and losers. In an interview with Satya Saran and Vimal Patil, Tendulkar admits:

When I show the struggle of a woman, it is not one woman's fight. The individual must have name and identity and caste and background to be credible, but she is not just a woman on stage, in a particular play. I am, in writing of her situation, showing that the possibility of a struggle against it exists [...] By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open, for whatever course the change may take place. When the members of my audience go home and chew on the situation, they might be able to see their daughter or sister in the woman's position and come up with a way of changing the situation for her advantage. (37)

The roles Tendulkar's female protagonists play eclipse those played by the men figuring in them. Leela Benare plays the leading role in *Silence!*. Benare, who is on the offensive in the beginning, finds herself trapped at the close of the play. The innocuous latch which has hurt her finger and drawn her blood (as she enters the place) later shuts the group in and, in fact, takes on the dimension of a barricade. The claustrophobic atmosphere inside the trial hall becomes the kind of a setting where social masks are shed. Women's oppression and inferior status combine in one to cause the most suffering to the victims, both qualitatively and quantitatively, although this suffering may often go unnoticed and unorganized because of the sexiest prejudices of both the oppressor and the victim. The dramatic action of the play gains in intensity mainly because of the presence of Benare. 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.

In this play, Benare's oppression and subordination are linked more with violence based exploitation than with the concept of private property. In physical conflicts, men have an edge over women, and, whenever, there is plunder, either locally or from beyond the borders, women get relegated to the background. With the advent of new technology, women now tend to be thrown out of work or to murky sectors, which men are unwilling to do. Benare can be considered as a political subject in that she fiercely claims her independence as a person.

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 can or can't do? My life is my own. I haven't sold it off 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)

It is this spirit of individualism Benare that leads her to take a bold step of getting pregnant with the man she loves; Professor Damle, though he develops cold feet later on and refuses to give his name to her child. She frantically tries to persuade several people to marry her; so that the child can have a legal name. The game played by the participants in the form of the mock court-trial represents the violent and merciless way in which the dominant establishment deals with

challenges which threaten to rock the very foundations on which it stands. The play lodges a fierce attack on the ideology of glorification of motherhood. It lays bare the sexual politics in patriarchal norms of family and gender relations.

Tendulkar in this play presents a violent vision of human – beings, who are essentially bestial and the human society which is essentially unchanging. Benare, being different from others, is easily isolated and made the victim of a cruel game, cunningly planned by her co-actors. During the course of this so called game, which is meaningfully set in the form of a mock-trial, Benare's private life is exposed and publicly dissected, revealing her illicit love-affair with Professor Damle. Professor Damle is significantly absent at the trial thereby signifying his total withdrawal of responsibility either social or moral for the whole situation into which he has pushed Benare. The people present at the session of mock-trial never miss an opportunity to insinuate Benare with venomous comments as they are extremely envious of Benare's boundless independence. Benare here becomes the imaginative landscape marked by sexuality and violence; an image deeply entrenched in the social imaginary. In the mock-trial, Tendulkar exposes the cruelty that is inherent in the city-bred male counterparts. In Tendulkar's play, gender perceptions form an integral aspect of his ideological positions. His perceptions are rooted in different political understanding of human relations, society and power.

Benare is a modern, educated woman. She is capable of protecting herself and her child, though her male-companion refused to accept the responsibility. She dreams of the child, who, on growing young, will have a father and a good name. However, her dreams are not realized, all her hopes stand frustrated. The public discussion of her private life is not just relished by her co-actors, but she has also been entrapped in the mock-trial that becomes a cruel, cunning game. Thus, she is punished ruthlessly for the crime she has not committed. The inability and complete failure on the part of Benare's co-actors in achieving the desired goal render them all frustrated and violent. In their verbal assault on a helpless woman, their sadist tendencies are clearly noticeable.

The roles Tendulkar's female protagonists play eclipse those played by the men figuring in them. Leela Benare plays the leading role in *Silence!*. Benare, who is on the offensive in the beginning, finds herself trapped at the close of the play. Benare falls as a victim to the false male ego of superiority. While she is bold, self-relevant, successful working lady, having her individuality, her friends Kashikar, Sukhatme, Karnik, Ponkshe, Mrs. Kashikar, the so called gentry of the society, are failures. So to cover up their frustration, they perpetuate violence against her by making her accused of infanticide in a mock trial. They dissect her private life by making stories of her illegitimate affairs in the name of game. She grows conscious of it and cries out.

In *Silence!* the mock-trial becomes an important one in exposing the victimization of a woman by the male dominated

society. *Silence!* is based on a real incident. The stimulus for writing this play came to Tendulkar from an amateur group on its way to stage a play, which was a mock-trial, in a village near Bombay. This play may be called a play-within-play or a play in the form of a rehearsal. In it, Tendulkar has raised several questions related to love, sex and moral values that are prevalent but are most denied in the society. His main aim in writing this play is to expose the hollowness and pretensions of the society and its members. In this play, the main character, Benare, is projected as a rebelling woman against the established values of the basically orthodox society.

In *Silence!*, the character of Benare symbolizes simplicity, innocence, and straight forwardness. Her fellow companions symbolize meanness, crookedness, and cruelty. Her tragedy reveals the fact that in male-dominated society a woman's innocence is crushed and punished and man's violence is not at all noticed. That is why Professor Damle, despite the fact that he wholly disowns his responsibility, is summoned merely as a witness. Benare remains the prime accused and her trial reveals the hypocrisy and double standards of the society. She is isolated and made a victim of a game cunningly arranged by her co-actors. She is cheated twice by her male companions-one time by her maternal uncle and another time by Professor Damle. They love her body and not her mind. Her male companions, who are educated and civilized people, become aggressive and violent. She suffers at their hands for the offence she has not committed by herself.

It is significant that in most of Tendulkar's plays, women are portrayed as helpless victims of the conspiracies hatched by men. Many of Tendulkar's female characters are wiser and craftier than the men they are destined to serve. The condition of women points out the pervasive influence of fate in life, the unending struggle between man and woman who, in spite of their supposed inferior status in Indian society, rebel against all odds and command our admiration. Tendulkar projects women as victims. *Silence!* shows a girl is subjected to the negative reinforcement of her vulnerability to rape and assault. As part of the gender difference that is emphasised right from the childhood, the girl is taught to believe in the importance of family values.

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