

## **Silencing the Subaltern: A Study on Viay Tendulkar's Silence! The Court Is In Session**

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### **Abstract**

As stated in *The Bible*, Eve was created from Adam's rib, so a woman must always be grateful, dependent and subjugated to a man (Genesis). In eastern rather to be specific in Indian culture also women remained subjugated under the dominance of a patriarchal society. They are supposed to remain under the care and guidance of their father, husband and son. This paper aims to analyse how a modern educated independent woman tries to defy the societal norm and how power operates through judiciary and it also exposes how through some hypocritical male chauvinists the voice of an independent woman is silenced.

### **Keywords**

patriarchy, marriage, institution power structure, silence

The word “violence” is a much talked about term in the present era. Generally, the most of it is the physical manifestation which is concrete, evident and the effects are visible from outside. Men and women both are its victims. The history of violence in literature can be traced back from Seneca’s time. The Revenge Tragedies invented by him and afterwards used by his followers are perfect example of violent emotions and actions. They are related with murder, blood-shedding, taking revenge and these require a number of murders onstage. Again some of Shakespeare’s tragedies are bloody such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* etc.

Down the ages women have been treated as a mere plaything in the hands of the patriarchal society: sometimes it is the father, sometimes the lover or husband and sometimes her own son. Women become the objects of pleasure to the masculine gender, an instrument of their bodily satisfaction. There are innumerable unwritten social rules and regulations for women; their lives have been clogged by doctrines and dogmas. Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court Is in Session* (1967) (henceforth referred as *Silence!*) is such a play which portrays the protagonist, Leela Benare’s unspeakable miserable plight and the façade of sympathy behind which there lies scratches of mental and spiritual violence- this cannot be seen but can be felt from within.

In Indian society (and in literature also), the condition of women are tougher than those in the West. Though we had Lopamudra, Apala, Gargi, Maitrayee in Aryan civilization but situation degenerated from the time when Muslim rule began in India. Women were sent behind the curtains, they were prohibited from any kind of intellectual exercises. They were even barred from taking any decisions about themselves. They became “role bound possessions whose sacrifices preserved the sanctity and well-being of the family.” (Chatterjee 42)

The attitude of the Indian society towards women is somewhat paradoxical. A typical Indian male, traditionally, does not recognize women as their equal and therefore exploit them. But we have many goddesses in our religion whom we worship as mothers. This ambiguousness has always structured men’s response to the problem of women. Patriarchy in India is never liberal towards women and treats female sexuality as a potentially destabilizing force. Men do not recognize the freedom of women; they propagate the ‘sati-savitri’ image to tame the ambitious women for the benefit of their own. The traditional picture of women in

literature is that of a domesticated commodity. Her sanctioned role by the patriarchal society is that of an ideal daughter, wife and mother.

This attitude began to change with the emergence of some female writers. Ashapura Devi in her trilogy – *Prothom Protishruti, Subarnalata and Bakulkatha* – shows the emancipation of women. Satyabati, Subarna and Bakul follow each other in their efforts to become independent and self-reliant. In the field of drama, however, this emancipation of women is first seen in Marathi theatre during 1950s. Tara Vanarase Kaksha shows the emergence of the New Woman. She questions the moral codes set by the paternalised society and demands liberation from the oppression – Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence!* also propounds the same idea. He is uncompromising in his idea about the middle class being hypocrites and this comes out strongly in their outlook on women.

*Silence!* is a play about a middle class educated urban group of men and women who are actually amateur theatre actors and who come to a village to perform a progressive play. To spend the excess time, they decide to perform a mock trial. Things start taking an ugly turn when an unmarried female teacher is put in the dock and vicious questions are put to her about her personal life whether she has had an abortion. Eventually, even those who balked from the situation start enjoying it.

Leela Benare, young, intelligent, educated and economically independent, is an important member of Sonarmati Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association. Her sense of humour and her sensitivity evoke the envy and jealousy of her social inferiors. The members of the group have failed in life either personally or professionally. Miss Benare disdains them and makes fun out of them. She is proud that she can shape her life according to her own wish. She shows herself as an introvert who is not circumscribed by the norms of Indian womanhood.

A mock people's court is indeed set up to judge her all actions. It is known that Benare had previously pestered all the bachelors of the group with marriage proposals. She has demeaned herself and bagged them to marry her. All the members of the group knew about her illegal affair with a married man, Prof. Damle. They wanted a confession from Benare herself that whether she had terminated her illegitimate pregnancy or not. Mr. Kashikar has also found out from Nanasahab that an inquiry committee looking inside her stained past and equally present has pronounced her as guilty of moral turpitude.

Benare wanted a free life –free from patriarchal dominance and the conservative norms of the society. She displays self-determination, self-assertiveness and cynicism. The character of Miss Benare reminds us of Ammu, the protagonist in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai also portray the same kind of characters in their works. They have also exposed the naked realities of women suffering at the hands of male dominating society.

Spivak borrows the term “subaltern” from Gramsci, to refer to the unrepresented group of people in the society (Gramsci 55). Spivak’s study of the unhappy condition of the subaltern people in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* has affinity with Tendulkar’s female subaltern: “ If... the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadows.” (Spivak 28). Here Benare is also that subaltern who is denied of speech and justice.

Manusmriti propounds the idea, “Na Stri Swatantriyamarhati” ( Tendulkar 71) - that women are not fit for independence. The other member except Benare seems to take this as their motto in life. They, in this process, reveal the rigid and unchanging nature of world’s first and longest colonization. Men expect women to follow and respect those behavioral norms set by patriarchy. Female sexuality is a taboo and sexual independence of women is regarded as dangerous and destabilizing. For this reason the icon of womanhood is built upon the virtues of sexual fidelity and sacrifice. The critical structure of the coercion of women by patriarch can be drawn from Kate Millet’s revolutionary book *Sexual Politics* (1969). Here in this book she argues that institutionalized patriarchy covering all aspects of life is responsible for the oppression on women. In this play, Benare characterizes their revolt against the falsification of a woman’s traditional place in the society.

Throughout the whole two acts and most of the third act they try to hunt down Benare to deprive Benare of her independent pleasure and wishes. They inflict strong mental violence upon her which she tolerates silently. It is only at the end of the play she revolts back in her own defence but that too seems very weak. Mr. Kashikar looks down upon this new woman as “A sinful canker on the body of the society” (Tendulkar 67)

Tendulkar exposes the hopeless condition of women in the Indian context. Both Mrs. Kashikar and Miss Benare are victimized. They are not free to act independently, not free to speak out their mind independently. Their voices are throttled and silenced. Benare’s

desperate situation exposes the bestial violence lurking beneath the respectable exterior of the Indian society, especially the middle class. The audience here witness how the masks of gentility and civilization drop off from the faces of Sukhatme, Karnik, Ponkshe, Rokde and the Kashikar couple who are conclusively portrayed as predatory vultures – as ‘gidhare’ waiting to pounce upon their victim, as individual who has the intellectual ability and moral courage to attain success and to fulfill her private desires. The play also reveals the ugliness of social jealousy.

It is true that Tendulkar’s play does not reveal any overtly feminist agenda. Unlike Ibsen’s Nora in *A Doll’s House*, Benare is no emancipated woman. Pleading for freedom from the norms of a male dominated society, nor is Tendulkar a self-acknowledged feminist. It is interesting to note that Benare is not a ‘convict’ to begin with but only an ‘accused’, despite the fact that everyone knows what she has done and all are awaiting a foreknown verdict. Beneath the horseplay of Act III, there has sinister implication of the group, consisting of violent packs of male aggressors, biding their time for an opportunity to pounce on Benare.

The irony of Benare’s mock trial is that Benare is accused in the court without the presence of Prof. Damle. This depicts the condemnation of the Indian society and the prejudices of women. According to Veena Das, in her *Women Characters in the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar*: “It is important here to note that these characters became verbalized only in the absence of Prof. Damle.” (Dass 10). According to C. Coelho: “In his portrayal of human relations and tensions, Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egoistical man and equally self-centered society.” (Coelho 34)

In his seminal work *History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault analyses what he means by ‘power’. In this context he observes” “Power is exercised rather than possessed.” (Foucault 10). In this play also, we get to see, that though the other members are social failures and are frustrated but they do not leave any opportunity unturned to exercise their power over a ‘woman’ – one who is inferior to men. The play can be described as a play which combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society.

The very title of the play suggests a violent suppression and free-violation of the suppressed to ventilate self-expression. Being silenced is one form that power takes, but there is also the defiant gesture of the silent refusal which can be a resistance to power and while

power may act to silence subjects, it is often at its most insidious when it itself acts in silence by naturalizing itself. As Foucault writes, "...there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses." (Foucault 27). One technique of resistance of these discursive ways of violence can be in Foucauldian term a 'reverse discourse' – taking up the terms of the discourse in question and using those terms to 'make noise' about the silences it enforces. In case of Leela Benare, the deviation constitutes if being pregnant without being married. If power regulatory bodies want to throttle her into silence, then she tries to speak for her own behalf and justify her silencing. In this play Tendulkar shows how law operates as an instrument in silencing the voice of women. Here, the judiciary system becomes the farce where the accusation becomes the verdict and moreover the judge's cry of silence and banging of gravel negate Benare's cry for justice and humility. Tendulkar criticizes the hypocrisy of the males in the Indian society where women becomes the puppets in the hands of them. Though he is not a self-acknowledged feminist, but he shows his concern in these issues regarding the concern of women, their sensibility and subjugation.

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