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A Deeper Insight into the Multi-Faceted Purports of 'Silence' in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is In Session*

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In this article I would try to highlight how silence, a society-bound and culture-bound word, has, beyond its surface significance, multi-dimensional underlying aspects in Tendulkar's socially purposive and propagandist play *Silence! The Court Is in Session* which has, as its central impetus, 'silence' both in the texture of the play and in the silent state of various characters at various moments. Interestingly, Tendulkar has played a type word-game with the word 'silence' whose demystification has been the endeavour of the critics and scholars ever since its creation. The play has achieved a special appeal because silence is very intricately involved in and fused with both conscious and unconscious minds in Indian culture. Whereas mostly 'silence' is a tool of suppression in the hands of social authoritarian institution, it also becomes, at times, an unheard voice of passive but effective revolt. But most importantly, it becomes instrumental for Miss Benare in disguising the rebellious unconscious mind whose eruption of violent protestant language, otherwise, could have led to the complete turning upside down of unperturbed but biased social stability. It is mainly the protagonist Miss Benare's vocal and silent state that draws the central attention of the readers. Sometimes she is silenced, sometimes it is she who silences herself and sometimes silence comes down upon her automatically but with a certain ideological and hidden political twist. The most ambiguous character is that of Samant whose voice, though conspicuous enough to for justice and sympathy towards the pitiable Benare, is so innocence that it can be silenced at just by one caution or any slightest pretext. The surprising case is with Mrs. Kashikar who tried hard to identify herself with the patriarchal voice but, ironically enough, she is given no scope to speak out her commentary and feeling regarding anything; rather, her mouth is shut up by her dominating husband Mr. Kashikar and she accepts that passively without any real grudge whatsoever.

Tendulkar, a conscious artist of the pros and cons of society, has reduced the complex power-struggle prevalent in post-independent Indian society and culture into a miniature form of mock-trial where a woman named Miss Benare, the representative figure of any free-spirit opposing the male-prejudiced traditional rules and regulations, is tried ferociously by a group of her friends-cum-coactors with the fake illusion of and honoring the real court and its andocentric procedures. What is striking is the banging of the gavel by Mr. Kashikar in a real court-like manner, which stands for the repressive silence. Time and again it is banged not in order to maintain silence only but rather to enforce silence. Archetypally silence itself is a symbol of subjugation, political hegemony of exploitation and discrimination; so, whenever silence is enforced or ascribed, it is to be understood that there works very secretly a fine and intricate objective of inhuman institution in society. The title of the play is highly dynamic in that

it not merely asks the characters involved in the trial to remain silent but in the name of the authority of a running court it benumbs the perception and understanding of the viewers and readers into a sleepy inert silence during which state they are bewitched under the charming spell of pompous patriarchy. As in daily life the grown-ups lull the children's voice by frightening them of something terrible, so also, here, the masculinist society tries to curb the uprising sound of Benare by threatening her of the ill-effects of violating law and order. Ironically, the court, an embodiment of justice, lets the voices of the criminals go at a high pitch and strangles that of the innocents.

At the very outset of the drama Benare's sudden silence, on reaching her hand on the womb, while conversing jollily with Samant and giving expression to her internal agony unconsciously is meant for preventing him from realizing her pre-marital pregnancy. Besides, silence is here a tool for her to make even herself forgetful of what is there in her tormented unconscious mind. It is a kind of self-deception on her part, for it in a way checks her free-flowing revolting spirit from vomiting her bitter but serious pent-up feelings of wrath and complaint against the malpractices of society. Actually, by this silence she tries to appropriate herself to system of institutions—that a woman should not assert her pregnancy at least before a formal marriage takes place and that one being subject to society cannot go after its traditions so severely. Her abrupt shifting from a verbal rattler to a silent careful woman, especially when she was crossing the limits set by the community, is indicative of the fact that howsoever a great effort she exerts to raise her voice against the barbaric social practices and conventions, at the end of the day she is born and brought up in the periphery of that so-called civilization, and, therefore, the very culture, system, process and ideology of it she has digested to flesh and blood. That is why in the restrictive male-centered Indian society she assumes, in spite of all, a pose of equilibrium.

After sometime, she expresses her anxiety “I feel scared when I am alone”, which quite conspicuously points out that she never likes loneliness or silence; rather she always laughs, talks, flirts, and seeks for human company just to eschew looking into her agonized self. Her lonely silent mood propels her to introspect the nightmarish scorched life of the past; therefore, she always wears the garb of joviality though, to her sheer misfortune, it would be shed off to expose her naked bleeding heart. Her situation is like that of the Dancer in Eugene O'Neill's expressionistic play *Thirst* where she pitiably cries out “Oh, this silence! I cannot bear this silence Talk to me! I must not think! I must not think!” However maddening or disgusting the stout exploitative voice of patriarchy, when one is “out of humanity's reach”, silence is intolerably fearful. For this reason, Miss Benare is obliged to swallow the drug of inhumane male-companionship to relieve herself of the deplorable past life. Significantly, when silence for her a while ago was a means of duping Samant and herself, this time, ironically enough, that very stillness gnaws upon her to the deepest marrow of her heart and soul. In another place, she discloses “When I was small, I was very very quiet” which in a flash enlightens the matter that when she was uncontaminated and yet to be tarnished by social smear, she was quiet, tranquil, and pacified, in a word, silent but as she grew up she became ‘the exact opposite of what’ she were. Her silent childhood real past is replaced by the voluble non-real adulthood present. So, the life of Miss Benare who is an actor-cum-

member of the Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association, ironically itself turns into a make-believe one where she plays the role of a voluble, happy, educated and independent young woman but the real reality is that nature she is silent and an introvert.

Afterwards, when Rokde reports to Mrs. Kashikar about the possible absence of Prof. Damle, Benare who was talking to her suddenly fell silent and motionless because the very name drags her on the solid bed-rock of reality checking her long-maintained fluency of speech. This sudden silence of romping Benare generates a kind of thrilling suspense if frequent emission of her bleeding heart is prompted by this intellectual university professor. In the later part of the play it comes to the fore that this man not only muted her voice but her hope, joy, and her social life itself also to such a great extent that she feels completely at a loss either to speak or to move. It is noteworthy to mention here that the present silence of Benare grabs her at a time when her heart, on hearing the name of Prof. Damle, is most disturbed and agitated. Though generally silence and excitement are mutually exclusive, in case of Miss Benare everything happens in a disordered way, that is, excited internal heart but passively silent external appearance.

At the end of Act 1, the well-planned-out mock trial starts with Benare being charged with infanticide by Mr. Kashikar sitting at the seat of the judge, when all others even including Benare remain dead silent. This silence of them is not of innocence but of experienced ferocious tigress lurking before it jumps upon its victim. This cleverly woven silence of all the characters is that of one followed by a destructive gale, or rather it prompts us to conceive society as a cannibalistic ruthless animal with all its conventional agents or representatives as its sharp claws ever ready to mark a deadly wound on its innocent victim that is Benare here. As in natural world it is found that the most violent blood-thirsty animal assumes a pose of soothing silence using it as a trick to pounce upon the target and tear it down, so also this silence forebodes the imminent smashing down of Benare by them. The stillness is the harbinger of the hurricane of hunting

Even in the funny episode of spitting pan-juice when situation is becoming excessively light and everyone talks comically, Mr. Kashikar never forgets the real objective of them and therefore, when Mrs. Kashikar and Samant just talk a bit, he bangs the gavel not only to silence them but also to remind others of their secretive motive of hounding Miss Benare, for which they are asked to be loyal and respectful to the court to create right sort of atmosphere. His assertions “Silence! Silence must be observed”, and “Silence must be observed while the court is in session” signify two-fold purposes—stifling of the revolting voice of the readers and spectators against the savagery that the play is heading towards, and awakening the sleeping self of patriarchy in Samant by imbibing him the andocentric values and ideologies to build in him the heavenly obedience to the court as an institutional body. He orders silence in order for society to manipulate power through the court to secure male hegemony and thereby subjugation of women – the so called lesser sex or weaker vessel.

Then comes the turn of Benare. She is asked by the sit-in judge whether she is really a criminal of infanticide, on hearing which the insurgent spirit of her quickens into life and she counter-questions the judge about the same. At this time, the characteristic Kashikar once again come forward to proclaim “Order. Order! The dignity of court must be preserved at all costs”, which expresses his chunk to restore the poise, with ruling male as the active subject and the ruled female as the passive object. But her fortitude, here, is so free-booting that nothing can subdue her voice anymore from disgorging her commotion, “Infanticide ... infanticide! Why don’t you accuse me instead of – um-snatching public property!” The pronunciation of these words is tinged with pain and irritation, for the humiliation and baseless allegation brought against her reach at culmination, when repeatedly the word ‘infanticide’ is uttered to charged her with. Her violent outbreking and counterattacking the court are caused by sleeping mother’s self in her who can never bear with the sin of killing an unborn baby. Therefore, Mr. Kashikar’s utmost effort to silence Benare by banging the gavel comes to naught. The court orders silence to choke her voice, but this time no authoritarian institution with the ideological concept of ‘dignity’ can repeal her motherly entity, because motherly feelings toward a baby, whether born or unborn, is too pure and elemental to be stunted by any politically-driven external obstruction. This outburst of Benare is meaningful from two perspectives—firstly, it is suggestive of her free-standing libertine soul that withstands firmly the merciless ascription of silence, and secondly, it unravels the harrowing psychological trauma of her by hinting at her pre-marital pregnancy which is ascertained afterwards. The deeper significance is that when one’s very heart is crying within, no outer hushing up of that crying, through silence does work.

In trying Benare the concept of game just for the sake of fun and pleasure, with the simple intention of acquainting Samant with the intricacies of how a court works, is one of the well-thought-out plots of wily co-mates of her, because this game-theory becomes very handy in silencing Benare whenever her indomitable spirit peeps out in protest of their detestable impropriety. Whenever she raises her voice—be it against the ill-conceived charge of infanticide, or against that of suspicious relationship between Prof. Damle and her—she is very effectively made speechless and submissive in the name of the whole trial being a mock one. However, the game cannot be considered as an end in itself or a trivial, non-serious activity, since it is bound up with society, societal norms, values and status of feminine self in a male-centered society. Rather, the game is steered by an ugly sex-politics where a woman plays the part of speechless passive subhuman character. This cruel game for Benare is never refreshing or time-passing, but it in a way makes her feel that her life has become, not only to society but to herself as well, an unbearable burden, to get relieved of which she carries a bottle of TIK-20 always with herself. Ironical again it is that when society imposes silence on her injured noisy heart, her heart bleeds more and more, but she also hankers after silence – the eternal silence of peaceful death. The frequently used word ‘silence’ in the play attains a special dimension when it comes to have two symbolic purports in the context of the play. On the one hand ‘silence’ from Mr. Kashikar’s mouth stands for oppression, exploitation and dirty tool of trade-unionism in the market of sex, but on the other, ‘silences’ with its connotative significance symbolizes the ultimate rest, a really dignitary

state where there is no trade of sex, rather a ubiquitous relief from societal misery, the domain of which she plans to get to with help of that TIK-20. The silence, which is hegemonized by the word 'game, is directed towards gender-victimization rather than what is just. The influence of game-theory in effecting a silent and immobile atmosphere both in the psyche of Benare and in the minds of the readers is like that of a narcosis that induces a slumberous silence. Time and again she is possessed by this narcotic game so much so that her power of giving expression to her confined rebellious feelings is consumed to a cold acceptant attitude.

Another strange but effective method of silencing Benare's revolting voice raised against the doubt of her fellow-actors about her moral conduct is one used by Sukhatme while acting as the counsel for the prosecution. After he and Mr. Kashikar fail to control her naughty trick of spoiling the mock-court procedure by ridiculing other characters and the charge brought against her, it is clever Sukhatme who utilizes the speeches of Benare to gun at herself and thereby he succeeds in silencing Miss Benare. Sukhatme asks the court to record even her wrathful expressions, "Tomorrow I may be seen in our Principal's office. Does that mean my behavior is suspicious?", and then "If you like, I'll give you the names and addresses of twenty-five more people with whom I am alone at times", in order to turn these speeches of indirect protest against her. The political Sukhatme knows very well that only issuing reprimand and formal order for silence would not work in case of an educated, economically independent and fearless woman like Benare. The treatment of her demands much more complicated methodology. The underlying message is that patriarchal system sometimes gags the warring female voice by directly declaring it to be illegal or criminal act, to suit their own selfish ends. When society cannot cope up with the oppositional voice of any sort, it gets hold of that voice by labeling it as unlawful, and thereby becomes capable of silencing that voice of protest. Same is the case with Benare.

In reaction to Samant's falsified account of Benare being in Prof. Damle's room and imploring him helplessly, she cries out the language of vehement protest, "That's enough!" and "It's all a lie! A complete lie!". The voice is more an outcome of deep affliction than of protest, because the Samant whom she thought to be the sheet anchor in the sea of sorrow, figures as a vampire. But, to her dismay, the devilish society does not leave an inch of soil to express her grief, rather it breaks out again, "Order, order!" to silence her. Here, these two words are uttered not put down her rebellious voice any gender biasness but to silence her painful weeping which might draw pity and mercy towards her. After this, for a long time she would be heard no more.

The third act of the play presents a silent and still Benare from the very beginning. While in the first two acts silence was a sharp weapon in the hands of her opposition to beat her with, here, that very silence serves as her arms to defeat and disturb her enemy. Tendulkar, here, for the first time, shows how apparent silence can bear a deeper message of protest. Though now the vulgar attack on her becomes more virulent, it is wise Benare who tackles the situations very tactfully by turning the tool of patriarchal society against itself. Being hurt by her counter-attack through silence Mr. Kashikar shouts, "This is intolerable rudeness! No answer to any question!" and Ponkshe

comments, “This is contempt of court!”. The purport of silence is that what she could not do for so long by her speech, is done at last quite successfully with her silence. So, her silence is pregnant with the language of protest which may not be heard by physical ear but psychologically one can feel its intense throbbing. The silence, here, stands not for suppression of voice but for expression of voice.

The stupefying paradox running in the play is that the silence, by imposing which the male-centered society, embodied in the collective voice of all the characters except Miss Benare, attempted to get the upper hand over her, becomes intolerable for them when she deliberately keeps herself silent. The existential situation of Benare is really heart-rending in the sense that when she wants to be vocal she is forcefully silenced, but when she wants to be silent she is forcefully poked to break the silence. Tendulkar has played a word-game with ‘silence’ by presenting it at times in the light of negativity suggesting extortion, passive toleration and ‘repressive state apparatus’—and at times in the light of positivism suggesting active force, secret but influential way of conveying protest, and defiance of what is unruly. Tendulkar’s artistic depth achieves a special splendour in creating a binary between speech and silence. It almost escapes attention that though throughout the play the representatives of the dominant andocentric society go on talking volubly giving little scope to Benare for expressing her thoughts and feelings and complaints, actually they are completely silent about the crime Prof. Damle has committed. The noisy braggadocio of them in charging Benare is propelled by their deceitful intention of dispersing the main focus from the hypocrisy of Prof. Damle in alluring Benare of the bait of colourful future to her, a victim of that allurements. So, for them talking too much is an upper garment to cover the internal silence in them. As for Benare, when she talks too much her consciousness is silent, but when she is apparently silent, her consciousness manifests a great many things.

At last, it is seen, Tendulkar gave favour to ‘speech’ in opposition to ‘silence’ as Benare comes forward courageously to give expression to her bleeding heart, shedding spell of ‘silence’: “For so many years I haven’t said a word, chances came, and chances went. Storms raged one after another about my throat. And there was a wail like death in my heart. But each time I shut my lips tight. I thought, no one will understand. No one can understand! When great waves of words came and beat against my lips, how stupid everyone around me, how childish, how silly they all seemed.” Now she for the first time, wins in the battle of word. She whitewashes the patriarchy and its upholders by smashing down their pomposity and exposing their bestial insensibility towards the pure feelings and thoughts lying hidden in her heart. This speech casts aside all the dimensions of silence—her own silence to hegemonize with the biased society and the external social silence appropriate her to the injustices of it. She now talks not as a woman revolting against men but as a human being, reaching above all the narrow boundaries of societal norms. Though in the context of the drama her speech will bring no cataclysmic change, it is far better than remaining passively silent and acceptant. Silence is sent to background and speech is put into foreground, not to facilitate one against another, but simply to imply the message that one should, whether wins or loses, always raise pitch the voice to high to stand against any sort of malpractices and exploitations, instead of letting silence

bind one tightly. Therefore, it is Miss Benare who turns out ultimately to be the victorious and a genuine human spirit.

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