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Benare, a Victim of the Patriarchal “mouse-trap” and the Emergence of the ‘New Woman’: Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Abstract: Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* theorizes the subdued condition of women-folk in the post-independence Indian scenario. Benare, the school-teacher who is trying to come out as an independent woman falls a victim to the patriarchal mouse-trap. She only hopes to get a social recognition of her unborn baby. But the members of the so-called guardians of moral values create obstruction in her attempt. However, Benare herself continues her protest and struggle against the hypocrisy, sham and amorality of the middle class men folk. Thus she attempts to pave a way for the women to regain their due rights.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, mouse-trap, silencing, male chauvinism, sham.

“One is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman”- is a very popular comment made by Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex*. The quoted comment makes it clear that society makes a person a woman after seeing the light of this earth. Now one question may arise about the identity of that society. Obviously this society is our society which is male-centered, to be given a specific term, “Patriarchal”. This patriarchal society always aspires to be superior over the female class by any means. If any obstruction comes in front of them, they try to overcome them applying different patriarchal machinery. These, however, become the mouse-trap for the innocent women.

The dramatist Vijay Tendulkar has himself articulated the socio-political situations in his plays:- “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 others) and in my way brood over it. Once in a way I even do something to relieve myself of the tension and anxiety and agitation produced by this brooding. I participated in a protest meeting or dharna or a fast or morcha or a satyagrah. I align myself with some civil liberty organization....As a writer I find myself persistently inquisitive, non-conformist, ruthless, cold and brutal as compared to the other committed and human... As a social being, I am against all exploitation and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end.... As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploiter and exploited relationship and obsessively delve deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that the relationship is external fact of life however cruel, will never end. Not that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off. (Tendulkar 1992:92)

Miss Leela Benare is the central character in Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Apparently she is a strong personality. She acts as the unity of the play. One will be right to think her to be a successful school-teacher and an economically independent woman. This economical independence of a woman is hardly acceptable to the male-dominated society. They always try to curb the inner excellence of the female class and dominate over them. It is better for the male dominated society that women will always remain subdued, meek, calm,

peaceful and engage themselves in the homely ordinary works. It is the male who is born to achieve excellence, they believe.

This sort of unreasonable and irrational thought always was there in the minds of the male actors of the play. Actually Benare is a member of an Amateur Theatre Group (The Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association). She along with her group-mates was preparing to stage a “Mock-trial of Lyndon B.Johnson” at Suburban village. Being a fun-loving and jolly personality, she jibes at the other members of the group and enrages them to the zenith. Mr. Kashikar is referred to as “Mr. Prime Objective”. Mrs. Kashikar is ironically called “Hands that Rock the Cradle”. Sukhatme is, according to her, “An expert on the law. He’s such an authority on the subject that even a desperate client won’t go anywhere near him. He just sits alone in the barristers’ room at a court “swatting flies with legal precedents”. Punkshe is sarcastically introduced as “Hmmm.... Scientist, Inter-failed” and Prof. Damle as the “Intellectual”. Benare was little conscious that the guardians of the male chauvinism would hardly accept such kind of assessment of them. To her unexpectancy, she became a prey to their female-exploiting hunger.

The Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association is going to stage a mock-trial opposing the destructive invention of the nuclear weapon. In the absence of Rawte, the fourth witness it was decided that the local villager Samant will play the role. In order to make Samant understand how the court works, the rest of the members decided to stage another mock-trial with a different accused. Benare was chosen by the group. The charge of “unmarried motherhood” and “pre-marital relationship” was brought against her. All the members of the group promised Benare not to worry assuring her that they will deal with it light-heartedly and in a game spirit.

The mock-trial commences. Gradually the game becomes a trap for the helpless Miss Benare. All the characters who are supposed to be the so-called guardians of the society needle their attack on Miss Benare. Even Samant, though unwittingly, sharpens the case. Her private life has been dragged in by them. Mr. Kashikar inhumanly declares, “Prisoner Miss Benare, under Section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code you are accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty of the aforementioned crime?”(Tendulkar 1978: 23-24) Benare looks tensed. Sukhatme tries to calm down the accused by saying, “After all, it’s a game. Just a game, that’s all. Why are you so serious?”(Tendulkar 1978: 25) They will employ all their efforts to humiliate Benare. They will leave nothing unattempted as is evident in the Sanskrit proverb uttered by Kashikar “Adhikasya adhikam phalam”(Tendulkar 1978: 26)Whenever Benare tries to oppose against this inhuman proceeding, they silence her on the excuse of maintaining the etiquette of the court which says that without the permission of the judge, the accused is not supposed to speak. One by one the witnesses exert their attack on Benare. Punkshe, the first witness refers to Benare as “a bit too much” and she, according to his statement, once tried to seduce him into marriage. Mr. Balu Rokde produced a marvelous, unbroken bit of evidence of Benare’s private meeting with Prof. Damle at the latter’s house. Raghunath Bhikaji Samant, the fourth witness quite unwittingly reads out a story from a book and unexpectedly it tallies with the present case of Benare. Another case in Benare’s life is her illegal relationship with her maternal uncle. Her maternal uncle exploited her completely without paying heed to her age and the moral code of conduct. Her words express her immature love: “Why I was hardly fourteen! I didn’t even know what sin was, I didn’t ! I insisted on marriage. So I could live my beautiful lovely dreams openly... But all of them –my mother too- were against it and my brave man turned tail and ran.” (Tendulkar

1978:74) Her speech expresses the disillusionment about life: “Life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. Life is a poisonous snake that bites itself. Life is a betrayal. Life is a fraud. Life is a drug. Life is drudgery. Life is a something that’s nothing- or a nothing that’s something.”(Tendulkar 1978:73)

All these proceedings created a claustrophobic atmosphere for Miss Benare. Yes, it is right that Benare had a relationship with Prof. Damle and the fruit of that love is in her womb. She has been considered as the “sinful canker on the body of society”(Tendulkar 1978:67) But not a single word of contempt is uttered against Prof. Damle, who is the actual culprit. The judge Mr. Kashikar who is the guardian of the patriarchy gives a verdict that Miss Benare must be sacked from her job of school-teacher and must destroy the baby in her womb. This inhuman verdict is a great shock to Miss Benare. She tries to go out from the mock-court room. But the door is locked from outside. Symbolically it is the patriarchal trap into which she falls a prey. In her we find the typical Indian women who are marginalized, suppressed and oppressed.

Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* presents Ammu, the protagonist who can be identified with Vijay Tendulkar’s Benare. Arundhati Roy along with Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai have, through their female protagonists, expressed their angst against the patriarchal oppression, torture and maltreatment of women. Their literary works are the exposition of the naked realities of Indian subcontinent.

N.S.Dharan in his “The Plays of Vijay Tendulkar” commented on Tendulkar’s interest in Feminism. He told, “[---] 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 1999:28) Another critic C.Coelho said, “In his portrayal of human relations and tensions Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egotistical man and equally self-centered society. 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 Court is in Session* the focal point of interest lies in the struggle between women like Benare and her antagonists headed by the orthodox Kashikar and his associates. (Paul 2010:34)

Even if Benare is trapped in the mouse-trap of patriarchy, she is not a woman to surrender to the male chauvinism silently. As per her capacity she silently repudiates the injustice and maltreatment meted out to her. At the end of the play she utters her words of protest: “ But- do you know?- I did not teach any of this to those tender, young souls. I swallowed that poison, but didn’t even let a drop of it touch them! I taught them beauty. I taught them purity. I cried inside and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair. And I taught them hope. For what sin are they robbing me of my job, my only comfort? My private life is my own business. I’ll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can’t be anyone else’s business; understand? Everyone has a bent, a manner, an aim in life. What’s anyone else to do with these?”(Tendulkar 1978:73) Again she expresses her anger against the male hypocrisy when she referred to the so-called Intellectual Prof. Damle: “I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering- and went his way. He didn’t want my mind, or my devotion- he didn’t care about them! [Feebly.] He wasn’t a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That’s all! Again, the body!”

(Tendulkar 1978:75) It is as if the door of a new glorious, free and impartial world of freedom for the weaker sex is unlocked by her protest.

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