

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

August 2013 Vol. 4 Issue IV

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Breaking the Silence: Women's Protest Voiced in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* and Jana Natya Manch's *Aurat*

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Theatre has always been an active and lively medium for expression of contemporary socio-cultural crisis issues. It has proved to be a committed art form with an intention for positive socio-cultural change. In this regard, my paper here makes a comparative study of the strategies used by two seminal plays belonging to different performance variants, proscenium theatre for Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, and street theatre for Jana Natya Manch's *Aurat*, to see how they cope with the socially imposed silences and suppressions and whether they succeed in voicing the crucial protest necessary for women's liberation. The articulation of protest needs to be the first step towards a search and scope for remedies.

Through this paper I shall try to make a comparative study of how the demand for women's rights and protest against women's oppression has been voiced in two modern post-independence plays in India. One is Vijay Tendulkar's celebrated and widely translated/performed play *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (*Silence! The Court is in Session*) (1968) and the other is Jana Natya Manch's (known as Janam in short) street play *Aurat* (Woman) (1979).

The concern for women's rights finds a confident voice in Sarojini Naidu, ironically when India was voicing demands for its right to freedom. In 1906, Naidu asks: Does one man dare to deprive another of his birthright to God's pure air which nourishes his body? How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? And yet, my friends, man has so dared in the case of Indian women. That is why you men of India are today what you are: because your fathers, in depriving your mothers of that immemorial birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights . . . (Iyengar 215).

Naidu speaks of the 'human soul', thus erasing the divide between man and woman. Another point here is that true freedom won't come until these two become equal.

In the context of voicing the demands for attainment of rights of all types of marginalized sections of a society, including women, theatre has proved to be a powerful medium. It has given voice to the silenced and oppressed women, one of the "subalterns", to borrow Spivak's concept. Firstly, proscenium theatre has often become political/didactic/ activist in nature and has expressed and made known oppression of various kinds including women's plight, thus aiming at raising an awareness and awakening of the conscience of the viewer/ reader hoping to affect a change in the mindset of the society. Secondly, the form of street theatre through its activism has attempted to directly

reach out to the marginalized sections of the society, including women to affect grassroots awareness. Both forms use theatre as a weapon of voicing protest against exploitation in various forms. In the first category fall plays of stalwarts of the modern Indian theatre movement like Vijay Tendulkar, J.P.Deshpande, Badal Sircar or Girish Karnad. In the second category falls the street theatre of Jana Natya Manch, Samudaya, Jana Sanskriti, Andhra Praja Natya Mandali, etc. for instance, Vanangana in Bundelkhand, a women street theatre group has voiced women's issues in plays like *Om Swaha*, *Sati*, *Balatkar Kanoon* (Rape Law) . In a similar line are Janam's *Aurat*, *Police Charitram* (Police Nature), *Who Bol Uthi* (She Spoke Up), and *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* (This Too is Violence), giving voice to the 'subaltern' as female. *Police Charitram* deals with the issue of rape in police custody, *Who Bol Uthi* with the breaking of silence against oppression and voicing the protest, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai* with the issue of the male gaze, the marriage market, and rape where lack of evidence could prove nothing.

Gayatri Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' helps us understand the double marginalization of the "subaltern as female". Spivak says: "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadow." (Spivak 82-83).

We know that this observation is applicable even in the post-colonial and post-independence context.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's deep scrutiny into the woman/ women question is worth remembering at this juncture. Her objections regarding the generalized term "Third World women", which she thinks is a western construct making it a monolithic misnomer and a subjugating category that again needs to be "redeemed". In fact the difference between the word "woman" as a social/ ideological abstract label and "women", inclusive of all national/ regional/ local differences is a crucial one and should not be lost sight of. (Mohanty 334).

The traditional/ obvious categorization and attitude towards women in modern post independence India has been studied by Dia Da Costa in comparing two very different fields in her essay 'Mirrors of Value?' One is the field of advertisements where she studies Fair and Lovely ads and their hidden psychology and the other is the focus and representation of women in Jana Natya Manch's plays. She shows how the representation of women and the target audience of Fair and Lovely ads and Janam plays are essentially opposite, showing the contrasting approaches and intentions of Capitalism (in case of Fair and Lovely) and Marxism (in case of Janam's plays). Dia explains:

The advertisers educate people into making appropriate associations so that a wide range of people have concrete images for picturing how exactly fairness creams can help make their particular dreams come true.... Advertisers cannot do this without attention to already entrenched associations between a woman's complexion and her value such as the racial formations produced through colonial encounters between *varna* hierarchies and British evaluations of whiteness (Da Costa 136).

So, Fair and Lovely (especially through their welfare initiatives under the FAL Foundation, i.e. the Fair And Lovely Foundation) propagates a message of women's liberation (in the context of beauty) which has an underlying racial history. Dia points out:

...the FAL Foundation, which provides scholarships, vocational training, and employment opportunities *while* advertising FAL products, is an explicit tool for

encouraging privatized consumption as development. Significantly, this is happening in the context of a developmental state that is perceived to have failed to deliver legitimate needs to its citizenry (137).

Dia's essay shows:

... how three of Janam's plays namely *Aurat*, *Yeh Bhi Hinsa Hai*, and *Who Bol Uthi* represent a different class of women rarely seen in FAL campaigns (138).

It is interesting to note here that Benare in Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* belongs to the class of women represented in FAL ads. On the contrary Dia observes about the women represented in Janam's plays:

I found that women as commodified (sic) and violated are frequently seen on Janam's stage as marginalized, as strength and resource, as icon, and as one absent in public vocabularies and images (147).

The "public vocabularies and images" mean the images of woman as a social construct.

In *Aurat* (1979), a 30 min. street play, Janam presents four stories of women's exploitation in family and society. A girl child, a college girl, a wife/ mother, an old lady—all situated in the working class. Scenes of suppression, exploitation, neglect, physical violence are juxtaposed with songs of revolution which makes the protesting voice surface and stand out against the patriarchal rhetoric of society. Significantly, as Richa Nagar informs us:

The opening sequence is adapted from a poem by an Iranian teacher and revolutionary, Marzieh Ahmadi Oskooii, who was shot dead in May 1973 by Iran's imperial forces (Nagar 37-38).

In the play, the girl child faces economic constraints affecting her going to school, thus hampering her right to education. The first story shows the girl being married off and all the patriarchal "mantras" are recited by the pundit. The second story shows married life, the ultimate crescendo being the wife getting slapped by her husband. The next story shows a college girl, devoting more time on giving tuitions to back up the economic difficulty in affording books and fees, than on her study. The issue of eve teasing is also addressed through her story.

Then, with poor results and no job she takes part in a procession of unemployed youths. Police retaliation results in her going behind bars. The last story shows an aging woman factory worker being dismissed from service by the capitalist factory owner for voicing her protest. The Leftist trade union supports her cause. Though she at first is reluctant, and tries to work out a compromise with the owner. On failing, she joins the trade union activists in protest, taking up the red flag of revolution. Thus trying to find a solution in mass agitation following a socialist/ Marxist line of thought, as opposed to the bourgeois line where perhaps this ending would have shown the old lying helpless and motionless on stage, a tragic figure lime lighted in her loneliness (an image which may seem closer to Benare's posture in the closing scene of *Silence! The Court is in Session*). This is how street theatre differs from bourgeois proscenium plays. In this context if we try to define street theatre, Safdar Hashmi's definition helps. He says: "It is basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to mobilize them behind fighting organizations" (Hashmi 9). But if it seems to define street theatre as exclusively propagandist poster plays (like the election based poster plays of Panu Pal, Utpal Dutt and IPTA in general) Safdar adds that it has outgrown from the formal and thematic limitations of poster plays.

In the case of Janam, the high and consistent level of performance; the relevance of theme; the artistic and formal applications of Nukkad Natak (street corner play) with the popular stylized performance of the *madari-jamura* or use of folk forms like *nautanki* and *tamasha*; the fine quality of poetry/ song element in Hindustani language; the element of popularization and indigenization through the use of Khari Boli (a dialect of Hindi) the level of professionalism; commitment and determination shown even after the irreparable loss and setback suffered when Safdar Hashmi got killed during the attack on his group Janam on 1 January, 1989, were factors that helped them continue performing and remain popular as the foremost street theatre group in India. (Vachani, *Natak Jari Hai*). Performance statistics of 2007 gives the number of performance to 8000, of its 80 odd street and proscenium plays in over 140 towns, cities and villages in India. (Deshpande, *Theatre of the Streets*)

Moving on to Vijay Tendulkar, we come to a stalwart of the modern post independence Indian theatre movement. He laid bare on the proscenium stage, that complacent arena for the middle class theatre going public, the hypocrisies and unabashed atrocities of so called socially accepted civilized people. Women's issues have been dealt with deep sensitivity and focused scrutiny, unmasking the hypocrite conventional patriarchal middle class but without the scope for an easy way out or solution. This makes his depictions realistic and often claustrophobic, relentless and dark/pessimistic. This can be seen in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *Sakharam Binder*, *Kamala*, *Kanyadanor* *Ghasiram Kotwal*. Making a retrospective assessment of Tendulkar's plays, G.P. Deshpande observes:

With *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (*Silence! The Court is in Session*) in 1968 begins the new phase in Tendulkar's theatre. The early Tendulkar was quite critical of con- temporary society and its mores. He observed and attacked them ruthlessly. Yet that attack was dramatic but not quite rebellious. With *Shantata* a new phase begins. In that play (along with *Sakharam Binder*, *Gidhade* (*Vultures*), *Ghashiram Kotwal*, and *Kanyadaan*), Tendulkar appeared in a destructive mood. One finds these plays powerful but rather black, some might even say nihilistic. Their power was undeniable. But so was their nihilism. In this phase we see Tendulkar moving towards a position that treated violence and cruelty as primordial. A potential rebel has now turned into a nihilistic metaphysician (Deshpande 19-20).

In fact, based on his assessment of Tendulkar's nihilism and metaphysical way of dealing with crises in his plays, a little later in the same article Deshpande considers him an essentially modernist and belonging to the genre of the theatre of cruelty. At this point and based on Deshpande's analysis we can compare the different strategies adopted for resolution of crisis by Tendulkar in *Silence! The Court is in Session* and Janam in *Aurat*. While Tendulkar shows a modernist and bourgeois treatment of the issue, Janam in *Aurat* takes up the line of agit- prop and the delineation and resolution are quite straightforward, less complex and comes through a clear advocacy of building up a communist/leftist line of mass resistance and revolution. Thus, though its solution to problems of women depicted in the play *Aurat* is political because it inspires the oppressed to voice her protest and promises the support of leftist trade union, and may appear to be too easy according to bourgeois or modernist critical viewpoint, this is what political agit prop street theatre stands for and tries to deliver, mass movement of the proletariat and this is what Safdar Hashmi points out in his definition of street theatre referred to above. On the

other hand, though Tendulkar also deals with issues of women's oppression in *Silence! The Court is in Session* and other plays, his treatment is more complex and less close to any solution, which is typical of modernist attitudes. Thus, in the closing soliloquy of Benare, the almost poetic and fluent articulation which heightens the performance on stage to tragic levels, and thus adds to the aesthetic beauty of the play, is in fact an interior monologue, which should have been but in reality is never voiced.

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Miss Leela Benare and Mrs. Kashikar are victims in a patriarchal society which won't allow the voice of protest to the woman. Mrs. Kashikar is always subjugated to the dominant voice of her husband Mr. Kashikar. There are two points of irony here. One is that Kashikar, the male, is the judge of the quintessential defaulter woman in the eyes of conventional patriarchal society, Miss Benare, who is unmarried and pregnant. Not surprising that the patriarchal society pronounces the following sentence on the accused. It says:

...no memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed (*Silence!* 76).

One cannot miss the irony embedded in the fact that in such a farcical judgment the patriarchal society is exposing its own criminal tendency of committing infanticide which is a real and burning issue in India, and something which it was accusing Benare with when assessing her attempts to commit suicide.

Benare, who is assertive, revolutionary, and exceptional in voicing her individuality and rights to life, becomes the target of the sinister and merciless 'game' of the court session. Benare is relentlessly attacked from all sides, hunted down like a vulnerable prey to cheap, hypocritical middle-class societal norms. The hunting down is like that by a pack of hyenas or jackals, a degrading scene, in which Benare stands out, though defeated, under a kind of elegiac, tragic, lonesome singular light. She had been both physically and psychologically devastated by the trial that slowly but steadily develops sinister and menacing qualities. She is being attacked by middle class masked hypocrites who have been failures in their respective fields. Mr. Kashikar is a bad judge, Sukhatme a bad lawyer, Karnik an unsuccessful theatre person and so on. But ironically, Benare the school teacher had been successful with her students. Yet the patriarchal society is ready to punish her on moral grounds or based on her private life.

The play covers the issues of love, betrayal, motherhood, right to economic independence, right to self esteem and right to a dignified life (if we keep in mind the issue of infanticide and suicide that problematizes the life of Benare and endangers it. To complete the irony, Mrs. Kashikar, the only other woman in the play, herself an oppressed, and one who is, significantly, childless, becomes one with the torturers of Benare and with what relish!

The woman is accused of infanticide and labeled as promiscuous. But the real culprits, the maternal uncle and Prof. Damle, being a part of the hypocritical, coercive society are beyond the clutches of any real or mock law-court. Benare was desperate to marry anyone, just to keep the baby and give it a father's name. But neither Prof. Damle, nor any other man has spine enough to take responsibility, thus pushing Benare towards suicide as last option. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Benare remains in the receiving end without any deliverance or solution. In fact her desperate attempts to find a father for her unborn child are typical of conforming to the patriarchal norms. On the contrary,

Aurat advocates an avenue of voicing the protest and to change the suffered situation through trade unionism and active agitation. Here we may keep in mind another form of alternative/ street theatre, the Theatre of the Oppressed, developed by Augusto Boal and practiced in India by Sanjay Ganguly and his group Jana Sankriti and its nationwide branches. Theatre of the Oppressed takes the agitation a step further in inspiring the marginalized and oppressed peoples, including women to participate and work out their own solutions. An exact example would be Jana Sanskriti's production of *Shonar Meye* (Golden Girl). Since this kind of theatre activism works through direct participation of the spectators (whom Boal prefers calling 'spect-actors') to effect change, and more importantly because it reaches out to the target spectators who are the oppressed.¹ Thus practitioners of this theatre believe in effective voicing of protest and active agitation through performance. Sanjay Ganguly says: "...human culture is about statement, it is not about silence. While working with the rural women I never felt that they preferred silence to self-statement" (Ganguly 26). Since the political street theatre of Janam is, like Theatre of the Oppressed, an activist theatre of protest, the agitation and solution of trade unionism seems to be an obvious way forward, but according to bourgeois critical standards this is bound to be seen as naïve. This is the basic difference of approach towards denouement between *Silence! The Court is in Session*, which depicts the middle-class and is presented in proscenium theatres, where the middle class has greater access. It presents a bleak picture, but no change in status quo. On the other hand, *Aurat*, or for that matter, *Shonar Meye*, which focus on the women of the marginalized working class and which being leftist street theatre remain optimistic and try to find active solutions.

In conclusion, it may be said that both *Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Aurat* use their respective medium of proscenium and street theatre with the aim of voicing the protest against patriarchal aggression with the aim of effecting indirect or direct change in society. However, it depends more on the spectator/ reader to decide which is more convincing, given that regarding the question of commitment, both forms continue to prove their sincerity.

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