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Women as Victims of Power-Bound Society in *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Exploitation and oppression are the characteristic features of Indian society for centuries. Tendulkar's plays illustrate, more or less, how women are exploited in various ways. The inhuman treatment that they receive from the male-dominated society indicates that they lose their freedom first and their lives later for the sake of men. The playwright deals with gender deformity in his plays. Tendulkar in the play, *Silence! The Court is in Session* exposes the condition of women of the middle class family in Indian context. My paper tries to explore Tendulkar's interest in violence in society, the human response to violence, and individual freedom has manifested him in many ways. It also aims to depict how the middle class ideas of morality are responsible for the violence in the play.

Introduction

Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (7 January 1928 – 19 May 2008) was not only one of the leading Indian playwrights of the late sixties, but also one of the strongest radical political voices in Maharashtra. Apart from writing about social issues, he delved deeply into the politics of the contemporary society and exposed the hypocrisies of both individuals as well as institutions. For instance, the rise of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra in 1970s is presented in the play *Ghashiram Kotwal*, the true incident of a journalist who bought a woman from rural sex trade is shown in the play *Kamala* and the real life incident of the ruining of an actress's career after her same sex affair came to light inspired Tendulkar to write *Mitrachi Goshta*. Due to his plays, he acquired the appellation of 'the angry young man' of Marathi theatre.

Vijay Tendulkar has powerfully articulated the socio-political situations in his plays. He has expressed it by saying:

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 are) 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 dharma 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. (1995:92)

Silence! The Court is in Session

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar has depicted the difficulty of a young woman, who is a victim of the male dominated society. Tendulkar has criticized the follies prevailing in the society. The original name of the drama in Marathi is *Shantata! Court Chale Ahe* (1967). It was translated in English by Priya Adarkar.

The play carries all the vitalities of contemporary life. It focuses on the human mind and detects the ugliness in it. All the plays of Tendulkar are the result of his surveillance of the life, society and different incidents of his own life. He has noted in an interview (2001) that:

I personally don't bother about people who haven't seen life. They close their eyes at the sight of suffering as if it doesn't exist. The fact is that life is dark and cruel, its just that you don't care for the truth. You don't want to see it because it might make you uncomfortable. If escapism is your way of living then you will fail to see the truth. I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle class family and I have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My work has come from within ... an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live. If they want to entertain and make merry, fine go ahead, but I can't do it, I have to speak the truth.

Tendulkar raises several questions about love, sex, marriage and moral values prevalent in the society. It is a society which asks everyone to conform to its own yardsticks of decorum and propriety. The writer makes ample use of irony, satire, pathos and even mock element to highlight the hollowness of middle class moralities.

Hegemony of power in the society

Tendulkar exposes the condition of women of the middle class family in Indian context. Both Benare and Mrs. Kashikar are presented as women who have fallen victims to male supremacy in Indian society. They both are not free to act independently. Benare's attempt to lead an independent life of her own has been frustrated by the group of men surrounding her during the course of the mock-trial. Her freedom has been mercilessly crushed. She Argues:

Don't' you think that maturity comes to a person only with experience? And experience comes with age, with an unusual way of life. (62)

She gradually becomes serious and depressed because all the male characters try to unravel her past life with a view of humiliating her. Even Mrs. Kashikar joins her hands with them to expose her. When she visited Kashikar on birthday she listens the communication

It is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be still more immoral to let such a woman teach, in such a condition..There is no alternative. This woman must be dismissed.(58)

It is further revealed that Benare is carrying the child of Prof. Damle in her womb, Karnik discloses the fact that Benare in her youth, was in love with her maternal uncle and when that affair ended in fiasco, she attempted suicide. Further it is disclosed in the court that after her pregnancy through Prof. Damle, Benare attempted to get married to anyone to save herself from defamation. Sukhatme points out to the court that man is liable to error and youth leads a person astray. He appeals to the court to keep this in view and take a lenient view of his client's alleged crime and show mercy to her for humanity's sake.

Man is the last analysis, prone to error. Youth leads a person astray. Let the terrible crime that the accused has committed and is committing be regarded with mercy. However, Benare admits all her crimes. She refers to her love affair with her maternal uncle and Prof. Damle. But both the men had deceived her. She confesses

It isn't love at all...its worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered my body on the altar of my worship. And intellectual god took the offering.... and went his way. (75)

She pathetically states

He wasn't god. He was a man for whom everything was of the body, for the body; that's all. (75)

Unable to bear the bitter experience of her frustrated love Benare feels weak and mental agony and finally cries out. Yet no one comes forward to help her and soothe her. No one feels pity for her. They simply observe the whole scene with indifference. She then tells the Judge that she wants to live for the sake of 'my god - my whole existence'. She is very firm that she wants her body now for her son and 'he must have a mother.....a father to call his own—a house – to be looked after – he must have a good name!'

The play throws light on another aspect of man-woman relationship that is husband-wife relationship. Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar is a middle class couple with the usual male hegemony. Mr. Kashikar is an educated gentleman engaged in social work with a prime objective. But his main objective is to hide his failure in career and to retain the social status. He loves his wife but pays little time to her. There is no natural impulsive love towards her but his love is duty oriented. Mrs. Kashikar is not his match. She is practically illiterate. Though the couple is childless, they seem lead a normal life with an adopted boy Balu Rokade. They have reconciled the situation. Khatri says about the couple that

they represent a conformist couple voicing against the modern onslaught on the traditionally accepted model of the Indian Women. Despite different educational background they are one in their approach to the social problems. (2005:60)

Another kind of man-woman relationship is between employer and employee. Nanasaheb, the chairman of the education society is employer and Benare who is working as a schoolteacher is an employee. Generally female employees are exploited physically, mentally, psychologically and sexually by the employer and the same thing happens here. Benare is victimized by the

employer. When Nanasaheb overhears about the licentious and profligate behavior of Benare and her pregnancy, he asks to do an inquiry and the issue is responsible for her dismissal. Here Tendulkar comments on the two different approaches of the life. In one we see that the normal and sexual behavior of the employee is controlled by the employer where as Leela Benare doesn't accept this view and says,

For what sin are they rubbing 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?" (73)

What begins as a mere game has now become a regular hunt, with Benare as a trapped victim. The hunters launch a concerted attack upon her revealing and enlightening in the sadistic pleasure of persecution. Benare finally breaks down and confesses how she has been seduced by her uncle and she had tried to commit suicide. She also declares her love for an intellectual person whose child she is carrying and at the same time she declares that she is not going to abort the child but when the court gives the verdict that she should be forced to abort, she collapses down. The game is over and everyone becomes normal except Benare who is wounded to the core. She lies prostrate and the play ends there.

Arundhati Banerjee appreciates the emotional out pour of Benare in the following terms.

Leela Benare's defense of herself against the onslaughts of the upholden of social norms in a long soliloquy, has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi Theatre. It is important to note here that Tendulkar leaves in doubt as to whether or not Benare, at all, delivers the soliloquy, thus suggesting that, in all probability, what she has to say for herself is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the authorities. In fact, during the court proceedings, on several occasions, her objections and protestations are drowned by the judge's cry of Silence! and banging of the gravel. (1992:VII)

Tendulkar has achieved a mile-stone in exploring the relationship between men and women at different levels. He has focused on men's superiority complex and shown subtle, inverted and preservative relationship between men and women. He has studied the psychology of all the characters and put them together in the play in natural shapes. The play is an intricate mosaic of several seminal themes. First is juxtaposing the two worlds – games and reality. It shows their areas of similarity and difference, thus raising the significant question of the relationship between art and society. The play also reveals that there are several important facets of human psychology.

The play contains a latent critique of modern Indian society, mostly middle class and lower middle class from different angles. The play combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by the society. The individual is placed against the backdrop of society and the tensions between the two are explored. Tendulkar portrays life as it is from different angles without trying to philosophize or moralize in any way. His sympathy for Leela Benare is underlying throughout the play. He has made Benare to struggle against the orthodox society. Benare possesses a zest for life and she does not care about social customs and norms. The

exploitative society isolates Benare. In the mock trial, there is shift from make believe to the real world and Benare's private life is exposed and dissected publicly.

Transactional Analysis states that the biological basis of human behavior is stimulus hunger and structure hunger. These hungers urge a human being as well as any living organism to receive stimuli and respond to them. The stimulus hunger has become recognition hunger under the pressure of civilization. Strokes, the units of recognition, can gratify this hunger. They can be positive or negative and verbal or non-verbal. People feel depressed when they do not receive enough strokes. People cannot live without strokes since they have survival value. They therefore prefer negative strokes to no strokes.

The society uses strokes to control the behavior of the people as they are more powerful than any weapon. And when people are not given strokes in a normal and natural way owing to cultural restraints and taboos, they resort to morbid and perverted means of getting strokes. The exchange of strokes invariably involves some kind of violence or the other.

Tendulkar, therefore, discovers the inevitability of violence through his experience of the psycho-social reality and says

Unlike communists, I don't think that violence can be eliminated in a classless society, or, for that matter, in any society. The spirit of aggression is something that the human being is born with. Not that it's bad. Without violence, man would have turned into a vegetable. (1980:157)

At the age of fifteen Benare is molested by her own maternal uncle. At the age of fifteen she was innocent and her impulses were natural. Her maternal uncle was a matured person and she was drawn by her uncle in this affair purposely. However, her disillusionment in love, in winning a man through her body leads her to realization of its inevitable futility. The physical, sexual and psychological trauma is there under which she goes stinking. Because when she expresses her love towards her maternal uncle she is blamed by her mother also. She is continuously subjected to the torture and humiliation by the members of theatre group acting against her.

Another reason behind the violence is the frustration of these characters in their real life. Except Benare no one has any individuality and no one is self-reliant. The frustration leads these characters to violence. And surprisingly enough, all these things are done in the name of game. Most serious charge is that Benare has love-affair with Prof. Damle and she has surrendered her body to him and she is pregnant. She has great expectations from him but there is disappointment on the part of Leela Benare.

The characters go on attacking her. They declare her 'a sinful cancer on the body of society' and blame her for being pregnant. She is a slur on motherhood and she is sentenced to kill her child but in fact Benare loves it as any legitimate mother does. She decides to give birth to the baby. The court orders her to kill the baby before its birth. Benare is prosecuted for the crime which she has not committed and the court is to do the same. The prosecution's logic is based on morality and social values and not on the legal ground. Benare is victim of the societal atrocities. There is an abortive attempt to commit suicide or the suicidal attempt on the part of Benare.

Violence in the play operates at two levels – verbal and physical. In the patriarchal society men are given the right to do injustice to women. Benare is sinned more than her sinning. Mr. Kashikar is of the opinion that in order to avoid the immorality in the society the old fashioned child marriage system should be introduced and recommends that the girls should be married off before puberty.

Leela Benare is easily isolated and made the victim of a cruel game, cunningly planned by her co-actors and she has been given mental torture right from the beginning. She is forced to play the role of the accused and other characters plot against her and give her psychological torture. She is made to face inhuman cruelty to her persecution of this helpless woman; a fierce psychological violence becomes evident. Arundhati Banerji opines that

Relationship between individual and society in play paved the social problems contorting the power of middle class and middle society. “Tendulkar was much ahead of his age, aggressively candid in presenting sham and hypocrisy of the middle class”. (1992:IX)

The violence that the men in the play show towards Benare is a result of their own failure and helplessness in life. They try to derive a devilish pleasure in their sadistic behavior towards Benare. Sukhatme has failed to rise in his profession and he is also ridiculed by his co-actors all through the course of the mock trial. Rokde is unable to free himself from the shackles of the loveless care of Mr and Mrs Kashikar and assert independence. Infact when Benare asks him to marry her , he has no individuality to think and to react to her problem as he is always in the fear of Mr and Mrs Kashikar. Just like Sukhatme, Ponkshe is unsuccessful in his aspiration to become a scientist and Karnik likewise is unable to get the recognition of an actor which is his heart's desire. It is well to remember here the analysis of these characters made by Arundhati Banerjee. She says

The violence that Tendulkar's later plays would be associated with, ready makes itself felt in this play. In the prosecution of this helpless woman, a fierce psychological violence becomes evident. The latent sadism of the characters, of Sukhatme, of Mr and Mrs kashikar. Of Ponkshe, Karnik or even Rokde, surfaces during the process of the trial. In delineating these characters, Tendulkar has explored their psyches to the extent of revealing the hidden sense of failure pervading their lives- the inefficiency of Sukhatme as a lawyer, the childlessness of Mr and Mrs Kashikar, the non-fulfilment of Ponkshe's dreams to become a scientist, the vain attempts of Karnik to be a successful actor and the inability of Rokde to attain an independent life, adult existence. The figure of the simple hearted villager, Samant, is deeply adeptly handled by the dramatist to offset the complexities of the urbane characters. (1992: X)

The play is a satire on the middle class male dominated society which is concerned about middleclass morality. As Sudhir Sonalkar says,

This play is not just violence. It is, of course, about the suppressed sexual violence of our middle class. But it is more than that. It is about the innate savagery in all of us and above all it's a kind of exercise in coming closes to poetic truth, however ugly. (1983:20)

When Benare collapses, sobbing, the other characters exclaim that it is just a 'fake' and she has taken it really to heart. This is Tendulkar's "Cold blooded" "moral impartiality" projected throughout his plays. When asked in an interview he said

This play is a caustic satire on the social as well as legal justice...the mental agony suffered by the girl throughout the play is in no way less than the legal punishment...this is what I exactly had in mind. If I say anything else now, that will be an afterthought...an undaunted girl of Benare's makeup could have, besides defending herself, made a counter-attack, tearing to pieces the do's don'ts of the selfish society.

Tendulkar continued,

Had I shown her aggressive, that would have been my attitude, not hers. Otherwise also the playwright should only suggest leaving the rest to the viewers. (1995:28)

Benare's final collapse leaves one with a feeling of pity and horror. The violence of the play is superbly sugar-coated with the technique of play within the play. Without this technique Tendulkar could not have made his characters directly attack Benare on the charge of infanticide. The play is acclaimed widely for this technique.

Tendulkar's plays, in general, are regarded serious in atmosphere, acidic in tongue and intensely tense in situation. He leaves little scope for critics to think of humour in the dialogues of his plays. Irony is commonly accepted tool in the hands of the writer to expose the shams and hypocrisies in our society. In fact the structure of the play is based on contrast. The play within a play itself gives the effect of illusion. In fact all the characters, except Benare, live in a world of illusion to escape the bitter realities of their life. But illusions turn out to be their own realities. The aching sensibility becomes more acute for Benare, who, despite being a woman, is the only one the group to earn her own living. Samant's reading from a sensational fiction comes dangerously close to Benare's real situation. There is a great difference between Benare's illusion and that of others. Benare's illusion is the product of her miscalculation, and it is circumscribed. She thinks at the beginning that her maternal uncle will accept her but she is ignorant. She miscalculates even Prof. Damle. He makes his own identity and does impose illusions deliberately upon himself to escape from the reality.

Tendulkar's interest in violence in society, the human response to violence, and individual freedom has manifested himself in many ways. The integration of the play within a play creates an additional dimension where the demarcating line between reality and illusion is often blurred. Kumud Mehta writes about the presentation of play and says

It is conceived as a game and the idea that all is happening on the stage is part- mock, partearnest gives it theatrical edge. The mock element is all pervasive. What we are witnessing is a mere enactment of what is a rehearsal of shots and nothing more than a mock – trial to be staged later in the day. (1990: VI)

Thus the characters assuming themselves as the unacknowledged legislator of the society attack and torture Leela Benare and they themselves think that it is their duty. The play depicts how the middle class ideas of morality are responsible for the violence in the play. Prof. Damle exploits Leela Benare's academic interest to enjoy sex with her. Benare innocently becomes victim to

him who betrays her. She becomes pregnant and requests Rokade and Ponkshe to marry and save her from ignominy. Benare ridicules their diffidence and hypocrisy. She exposes the hypocrisy of so called prestigious people and laughs at their flaws. In the mock trial her personal life is exposed by other characters and she is hurt deeply. The real culprit is Prof. Damle but other characters do not find fault with him. Benare loves life and she is utterly desperate with the situation. The play thus exposes the inhuman violence in its verbal form of the patriarchal society against women.

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