



The Study of Sexual Politics in “Silence! The Court is in Session”

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Abstract - Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a searing critique of patriarchal structures and the politics of gender in Indian society. This paper explores the theme of sexual politics within the play, focusing on how societal norms and institutional power suppress female autonomy and reinforce male dominance. Through the character of Leela Benare—a progressive, unmarried woman who becomes the target of moral judgment—the play exposes the double standards and hypocrisy inherent in traditional gender roles. The mock trial becomes a metaphor for real societal oppression, turning personal freedom into public spectacle and reinforcing the silence imposed on women. Tendulkar uses courtroom drama to unveil the cruelty of social norms and the ways in which women are silenced, judged, and marginalized. This study highlights how *Silence! The Court is in Session* remains a powerful and relevant commentary on gendered injustice and the politics of sexuality..

Index Terms- subaltern, sexual political, dominance, suppression

I. Introduction

The Parrot to the sparrow said, ‘Why, oh why, are your eyes so red?’ ‘Oh, my dear friend, what shall I say? Someone has stolen my nest away.’ Sparrow, sparrow, poor little sparrow... ‘Oh, my brother crow, oh, brother crow, Were you there? Did you see it go?’ ‘No, I don’t know. I didn’t see. What are your troubles to do with me?’ ‘O sparrow, sparrow, Poor little sparrow....’ (Tendulkar 110)

Silence! The Court Is In Session, analyzes the mental anguish of the protagonist, Miss Leela Benare who has been subjugated and suppressed by the male dominated society. The mental trauma of the lady is aggravated by the society and she is pushed to the fringes from all dimensions. Miss Leela Benare is forced to give up on her existence and is reduced to a non-entity, the way subaltern is. The silencing of the victim is a perpetuation of further violence against them as it leads to their further suffering. The Mock trial showcases the suppression when she is not allowed to speak but is being perpetually made to shut her mouth and not voice her pain.

Benare [banging her head on the chair] order!
Order! The dignity of the court must be preserved at all costs. Can’t shut up at home, can’t shut up here! [imitating a lawyer]. Milord, let the court’s Family Be given a suitable reprimand. She has never committed the crime of infanticide or stolen any public property except for milord himself!

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The victimization of Leela Benare is quite conspicuous in the above statement. She is made a butt of ridicule in the mock-trial and everything plausible is done by other characters like Miss Kashikar, Mr Kashikar, Rokde to tear her down.

Mrs Kashikar: What better proof? Just look at the way she behaves. I don't like to say anything since she's one of us. Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman! No matter how well she knows him! Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out!

The Indian society has projected a particular image of woman. She has to observe by the norms and any violation in the prototype of "ideal woman" is not taken well by the society. She has to be an ideal wife, daughter, sister and so on. Any deviation from the set norm is meted out with severe treatment. Leela Benare propounds a feminist ideology where in she believes, she has every right to lead a dignified life at par with men. She believes in the basic tenets of Feminism; gender equality, human choice, transforming systems of oppression and so on.

Benare: Why in the classroom, I'm the soul of seriousness! But I don't see why one should go around all the time with a long face. Or a square face! Like that Punkshe! We should laugh, we should play, we should sing! If we can and if they'll let us, we should dance too. Shouldn't have any false modesty or dignity. Or care for anyone! I mean it. When your life's over, do you think anyone will give you a bit of theirs? What do you say, Samant? Do you think they will?

But unfortunately, she falls a prey in the trap of patriarchy when exploited sexually by Damle and her own uncle. Benare: It's true. I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother. But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom everyday. He gave me love... . How was I to know that if you felt like breaking yourself into bits and melting into one with someone—if you felt that just being with him gave a whole meaning to life— and if he was your uncle, it was a sin! Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was— I swear by my mother—I didn't! [Tendulkar 105]

II. SHE CONTINUES

I insisted on marriage. So, I could live my beautiful lovely dream openly. Like everyone else! But all of them—my mother too— were against it. And my brave man turned tail and ran. Such a rage- I felt such a rage against him then— I felt like smashing his face in public and spitting on it! But I was ignorant. Instead, I threw myself off a parapet of our house to embrace death. But I didn't die....Again I fell in love. As a grown woman. I threw all my heart into it; I thought this will be different. This love is intelligent. It is love for an unusual intellect. It isn't love at all— it is worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering and went his way... [Tendulkar 105]



Both incidents in Benare's life reveal that she has been exploited badly by men. She has mistaken lust as love and been a puppet in the hands of her own uncle and Prof Damle too. And quite interestingly, the oppressors are not called to the dock but it is the oppressed, Benare, who is. One of the critics, Veena Das, says, 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." (Das 10). Their absence is symbolic as in almost all situations the woman is held responsible and accountable for everything even if the perpetrator is man. The patriarchal set up of the society is a boon obviously for man and guilt traps woman. 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). The trace of this egoistical strain can be found in all male characters of "Silence! The Court Is In Session": Kashikar [picking his ear] It's all become quite unexpectedly enjoyable—the whole fabric of society is being soiled these days, Sukhatme. Nothing is undefiled any more. Sukhatme: That's why thoughtful people like us, Mr Kashikar, should consider these matters seriously and responsibly. This should not be taken lightly.

Further, power politics can be analyzed to understand the hierarchical structure of the society which has placed woman at the abject base for the unfathomable reasons and man at the top. 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 of 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 gavel negate Benare's cry for justice and humility. Tendulkar criticizes the hypocrisy of the males in the Indian society where women become 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.



A thorough study of the disposition of Leela Benare's trauma reveals that she has been a victim at the hands of society. Sexual violence has been perpetrated on her in the guise of her uncle and intellectual lover. Kate Millett opens "Sexual Politics" by providing a deep dive into the distribution of power within sexual relationships. Millett argues that the imbalanced distribution of power between the sexes stems from the patriarchal structures which afford men greater freedom, authority and power over their female partners. She states in "Naming and Defining Patriarchy":

It offered a framework for showing how widespread the oppression of women was – and the many ways it was reinforced. It was not only a system of government, but an ideology that conditioned both men and women to accept a particular form of sexual hierarchy and to develop an appropriate understanding of their role, status and temperament within it.

Now considering, the above quote from Kate Millet, a look at the male characters of the play makes it quite conspicuous that males act as a pack of wolves who are out there to haunt females and drag them to the level of insanity. Females like Mrs Kashikar who is loathed and humiliated by Mr Kashikar considers it normal as society has normalized the heinous role of men. Similarly, Leela Benare has experienced sexual violence in the masquerade of false love.

Benare: 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. Even the man I call my own. I thought, I should just laugh and laugh till I burst.....My life was a burden to me....[Heaving a great Sigh.] But when you can't lose it, you realize the value of it....There's a great joy in a suicide that has failed. It's greater even than the pain of living.[heaves a great sigh.] 102)

It makes clear, the panorama of the emotions that Leela Benare experience at the hands of a ruthless society which operates on patriarchal structure and where the apt place of the females is "attic"— [Madwoman in attic]. She is reduced to non-entity by the males and has not any say and is choked to such an extent that she is found struggling with words.

Life seems to sing for you! There is great joy in a suicide that's failed. It's greater even than the pain of living.[heaves a deep sigh.] Throw your life away—and you realize the luck of having it. Guard it dearer than life—and it only seems to throw away—and you are blissfully happy and its saved! Nothing satisfies. The same thing, again and again. (Tendulkar 102-103)

Concluding, "Silence! The Court Is In Session" documents the everyday strife of women who are pathetically dragged into the intense depths of sorrow, sufferings, anguish and physical exploitation. Vijay Tendulkar has showcased that



in this power hierarchy it is women who is at the receiving end. The playwright acquaints the readers or the audience with the Indian socio-cultural milieu through the journey of characters in *Silence! The Court is in Session* and uncovers the perceptions of the people towards women in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. He questions that whether social sanctity, morality, ethics, values are applied to both genders i.e. men and women with the same lenses or does it favour any of them. If there are dual standards for measuring the character of an individual based on gender, how can one hope for justice? This play gives an expression to the silenced, the hushed up, the repressed, the suppressed and the oppressed voices, liberating the women while interrogating the male-chauvinistic world.

III. CONCLUSION

Silence! The Court is in Session is not just a critique of individual injustice but a broader indictment of a system that uses sexual politics to maintain control over women. Through Benare's trial, Tendulkar interrogates the cruelty of societal morality, the performative nature of justice, and the enduring power of patriarchal norms.

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