
**The Marginalisation of Women in a Male-Dominated Society:
;A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session***

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Abstract:

The present paper examines the issues of gender discrimination, social oppression, and exploitation in Vijay Tendulkar's acclaimed play *Silence! The Court is in Session*. It focuses particularly on the ways in which patriarchal attitudes and male chauvinism continue to control, suppress, and marginalize women within a predominantly male-dominated social structure. The play presents a powerful and disturbing picture of female oppression, discrimination, humiliation, and social injustice through the experiences of Benare, the protagonist. Although she is an independent, confident, and educated woman, Benare becomes the target of social prejudice and moral judgment. Her personal life is subjected to public scrutiny, and the so-called mock trial exposes the deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes of the people around her. Tendulkar effectively reveals how society imposes rigid moral expectations on women while often excusing similar behaviour among men. The major concerns of the play include gender inequality, sexuality, violence, social hypocrisy, human relationships, and the abuse of power. Through satire, irony, and tragic elements, Tendulkar presents a critical examination of patriarchal society and highlights the continuing struggle of women for dignity, freedom, and social acceptance.

Key words: Gender discrimination, sex, violence, and exploitation

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the most significant and influential playwrights of modern Indian drama. His *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe*, translated into English as *Silence! The Court is in Session* by Priya Adarkar, is one of his most important and widely discussed plays. First performed in 1967, the play occupies a significant position in the development of modern Indian drama. It centres on Miss Leela Benare, an educated and independent schoolteacher who becomes the victim of a mock trial conducted by members of an amateur theatre group. What begins as a theatrical game gradually turns into a serious and cruel examination of Benare's private life, sexuality, relationships, and pregnancy. The mock court therefore becomes a symbolic representation of the larger social court in which women are constantly judged according to patriarchal standards.

The significance of Tendulkar's treatment of women has been noted by N. S. Dharan. Discussing the playwright's representation of female characters, Dharan observes that although Tendulkar was "not a self-acknowledged feminist," he "treats his women characters with understanding and compassion while pitting them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious" (28). This observation is particularly relevant to *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, where Benare's individuality and desire for freedom come into direct conflict with the male-dominated social order. The men who conduct the trial claim to uphold morality and social values, but their own behaviour exposes hypocrisy, prejudice, and moral double standards.

The courtroom in the play is therefore much more than a theatrical setting. It functions as a metaphor for patriarchal society. Benare is repeatedly denied the freedom to speak, defend herself, and determine the meaning of her own life. The command *Silence! The Court is in Session* acquires a symbolic significance because the woman is expected to remain silent while men speak about her, judge her, and determine her fate. A recent critical study similarly interprets the court as a metaphor for patriarchal authority in which hegemonic norms are reinforced through commands and the female voice is suppressed.

Dharan's discussion of Tendulkar's dramatic method is also significant in understanding the relationship between violence and social oppression. He argues that Tendulkar's plays are "spectacles of harshness, overt or covert" (107). The observation is particularly appropriate to *Silence! The Court is in Session*, where violence is not confined to physical action. The psychological humiliation of Benare, the exposure of her private life, the denial of her right to speak, and the collective pressure exerted upon her constitute

forms of social and emotional violence.

Kumud Mehta also emphasizes the playwright's engagement with middle-class experience. In her introduction to *Silence! The Court is in Session*, she observes that Tendulkar had "dwelt on the woes of the middle class" with considerable sympathy. She further associates the significance of the play with a deeply personal engagement with social reality. This perspective helps to locate Benare's tragedy within the larger problems of middle-class Indian society, where social respectability, marriage, sexual morality, and conventional notions of womanhood often determine an individual's social identity.

The play also exposes the unequal moral standards applied to men and women. Benare is condemned for her relationship with Professor Damle and for becoming pregnant outside marriage, whereas Damle, the married man who is equally responsible for the situation, remains largely outside the moral condemnation directed towards her. This unequal treatment demonstrates the gendered nature of social morality. The play consequently raises important questions about female sexuality, individual freedom, motherhood, marriage, and the social construction of morality.

Smita Paul's critical study *Theatre of Power* is also relevant to this discussion. Paul observes that women in Tendulkar's theatre experience suffering under hegemonic structures and are repeatedly "other-ed." Her observation provides a useful framework for examining Benare's position in the play, particularly because she is denied recognition as an autonomous individual and is instead reduced to the social categories of woman, unmarried mother, and morally suspect individual. Tendulkar's own understanding of society further strengthens this interpretation. He repeatedly emphasized that his writing emerged from his close observation of life and suffering. His dramatic world is therefore not an imaginary construction detached from social reality but a reflection of the conflicts, inequalities, frustrations, and contradictions that he observed around him. In *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, this commitment to social realism enables him to expose the hidden violence within apparently respectable middle-class society.

Miss Benare, the protagonist of the play, works as a teacher in a school. She is a very hard working lady. She is loved and admired by pupils. She is also an enlightened activist, being a member of the amateur theatre group called "The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association" (59). The main objective of association is to educate

people of the villages. A group of teachers plan to stage a drama in the village. One of the members of the cast does not show up. A local stagehand is asked to replace him. A mock charge of infanticide is levelled against Miss Benare who is one of the members of the cast. Then the pretend-play or game suddenly turns into a grim charge and it emerges from the witness that Miss Benare has killed an illegitimate child by Prof. Damle who is the missing member of the cast. The charges have become verbalized only in the absence of Damle. Miss Benare is trapped by the male vultures around her. Witness after witness, charge upon charge is heaped upon her. The defence lawyer is so frightened that he only asks for a little mercy on her behalf. He announces: "Prisoner Miss Benare, under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code, you have been accused of the crime of infanticide. ¿Are you guilty of the aforementioned crime?" (25) She argues that she has not killed anybody and says: "I couldn't kill even a common cockroach. I'm scared to do it. How could I kill a newborn child?" (73) Ponshe, who is a scientist, asks Benare: "Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature and brought as a prisoner before the bar of this court" (74). On hearing this sudden charge, she is stunned, shocked and bewildered, the entire atmosphere becomes serious. He also says, "She runs after men too much" (81). 'The play-within-play' slowly grows into a serious affair. Karnik, one of the characters, says that Benare was in love with her maternal uncle but the affair ended in failure. He further "reveals her past life by saying that she first proposed to Ponshe and then tried to deceive Rokde, a young boy. Karnik is persuaded to confess the fact that Rokde has seen Benare in "a compromising situation" (85).

Benare realizes that all the people deliberately plot against her. She cannot bear the atmosphere. She wants to leave the court but becomes upset when all doors all automatically bolted from outside. Thus, she finds herself trapped with none coming forward to help her. She can't expect what types of questions are posed to her. Mrs. Kashikar executes physical violence to drag Benare to the dock. She has another damaging view against Benare. She does not hesitate to say that these young unmarried girls get everything without marrying. She shows her doubt how can Benare remain unmarried till the age of thirty-four? Finding Benare's conduct indefensible, Kashikar asks her if she wants to say anything. He gives her ten seconds. She says "Yes, I have lot to say" (116). Commenting on her co-actors, she observes "These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their believes are full of unsatisfied desires" (117). Finally, Benare ends up confessing that she is afraid of them all. She admits the fact that

she committed a sin once in her life that she loved with her maternal uncle as a teen-aged girl. She later came to know that he had kept his eyes on her young beauty. At the end, confronted with, her demand to marry her he “turned tail and man” (117). She tried to commit suicide but she would not die. She confessed that as a grown up women, she fell in love with Professor Damle and thought that it was an intelligent love and she offered her body to him on the altar of her worship, “My intellectual god took the offering and went his way” (118).

Benare’s monologue towards the end of the play is directed against men in general, and Professor Damle in particular. Here, she is almost the playwright’s mouthpiece. In her monologue, some of her statements are satirical “Emotion is something people talk about with sentiment. It was obvious to me. I was living through it. It was burning through me” (117). She says in pain and anxiety that hers is a selfless mother’s quest, founded on her would be son’s most essential needs. The boy must have a mother, a father, a house and a good reputation in society. The people should think about it very seriously and the problem is not only Benare’s but also many young unmarried girls. We can envisage how an orphan faces the problems in the society that is why Benare killed her child and she does not want her son to be humiliated. Though our society receives her as a culprit, it is a controversial thing for many scholars and intellectuals. The absurd and irrelevant verdict comes from the judge. Mr. Kashikar who is a social worker, the leader of the drama troupe and judge in the play, says that the crimes Benare had committed are almost terrible and there is no forgiveness for them. Moreover, she has set a very bad example as a teacher. Benare loses her job at the school and punished by the court but Prof. Damle who was the father to her child does not lose his job. Mr. Kashikar, like his wife, thinks that a grown-up married girl is ‘a sinful canker on the body of society.’ He thinks that the old custom of child marriage must be revived and the girls should be married before puberty. Then only we can stop promiscuities. Through this play, Tendulkar also makes a review of the present day court procedures and points out the problem of dilapidations and the loss of the dignity of the court.

Vijay Tendulkar’s *Silence! The Court is in Session* is more than social problem plays dealing with the oppression of women. It is a sophisticated drama of performance, judgement and manufactured guilt in which the boundaries between theatre and reality gradually collapse. The play begins as an apparently harmless theatrical exercise in which a group of amateur actors decides to conduct a mock trial. What initially appears to be a

game, however, becomes an instrument of psychological violence. The fictional court slowly appropriates the authority of a real court, and Leela Benare, who enters the game as a participant, eventually finds herself transformed from an actress into an accused woman. The theatrical device therefore becomes the very mechanism through which social power is exercised.

The title is consequently deeply ironic. “Silence” does not merely signify courtroom discipline. It becomes a command that determines who is permitted to speak and who must remain unheard. Recent scholarship has similarly interpreted the court as a metaphorical structure through which patriarchal authority controls female speech and autonomy. (Ishal Paithrkama, 20) The repeated command, “*Silence! The Court is in Session,*” therefore acquires a meaning far beyond its literal courtroom function. It signifies the suppression of an inconvenient voice. The court claims to establish truth, but the truth it produces is already determined by the prejudices of those who conduct the trial.

The most striking irony is that the supposed trial does not investigate an actual crime. Instead, it investigates Benare’s private life. Her sexuality, emotional history, pregnancy and relationships become public property. In this sense, Tendulkar anticipates an important modern question: who has the authority to convert a private experience into a public offence? Benare herself articulates the principle of individual autonomy when she declares, “My private life is my own business. I’ll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to!” (Tendulkar, 76). This statement is crucial because it shifts the argument from morality to ownership of the self. Benare is not merely defending a particular relationship; she is asserting the right of an individual to possess her own emotional, sexual and bodily identity.

The play is therefore concerned with what may be called the politics of privacy. Benare’s tragedy begins when her private life becomes available for collective interpretation. The members of the group do not know her completely, but they nevertheless construct a version of her identity from fragments of information, rumours and insinuations. The “court” thus manufactures a narrative about Benare and then treats that narrative as truth. Tendulkar exposes here a dangerous social process: a person can be socially condemned not because of what she actually is, but because of what others collectively decide that she is.

The distinction between fact and interpretation becomes particularly significant in the treatment of Benare's relationship with her maternal uncle. She recalls, "Why, I was hardly fourteen! I didn't even know what sin was, I didn't!" (Tendulkar, 74) The statement is important because the play reveals the disturbing manner in which responsibility is transferred from the adult male to the young girl. Instead of questioning the conduct of the older man, the mock court converts Benare's adolescent vulnerability into evidence against her. The language of "sin" is therefore not innocent: it becomes a vocabulary through which the victim is transformed into the offender.

Her subsequent reflection, "Life is a poisonous snake that bites itself. Life is a betrayal. Life is a fraud" (Tendulkar, 75), reveals the psychological consequences of this reversal of guilt. Benare has internalised the violence of the society that judges her. The court does not create her suffering from nothing; rather, it gives institutional form to wounds that have already been produced by abandonment, exploitation and social condemnation. The psychological dimension of the play is therefore as important as its social dimension.

Tendulkar's treatment of Benare's relationship with Professor Damle further exposes the unequal distribution of responsibility between men and women. Benare remembers, "I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering and went his way" (Tendulkar, 74). The metaphor of the "altar" is significant because it converts love into sacrifice. Benare invests emotion, devotion and intellectual admiration in Damle, whereas he remains largely absent from the consequences of their relationship. The play thus creates an asymmetry of accountability: the absent man continues his social existence, while the woman who bears the visible consequences becomes the accused. This absence of Professor Damle from the actual trial is one of Tendulkar's most effective dramatic strategies. His physical absence paradoxically makes his responsibility more visible. He does not need to appear on stage because the consequences of his actions are represented through Benare's body and suffering. His absence becomes a form of dramatic presence. The playwright thereby creates an unusual structure in which the invisible male participant escapes judgement while the visible woman becomes the spectacle of judgement.

The court's treatment of Benare also demonstrates that justice can become a performance rather than a search for truth. Every participant performs a role, but the

performance gradually reveals his or her real prejudices. The distinction between actor and character consequently becomes unstable. Kashikar plays the judge, Sukhatme plays the lawyer, and the others become witnesses; yet their theatrical roles release attitudes that belong to the social world outside the performance. The mock trial therefore becomes a theatrical laboratory in which hidden social attitudes are made visible. This is where Tendulkar's dramatic technique becomes more significant than a straightforward social message. The play does not simply tell the audience that society is hypocritical; it makes the audience watch hypocrisy being produced in real time. The spectators are placed in an uncomfortable position because they are themselves watching an entertainment that turns into cruelty. The audience initially laughs with the actors, but gradually the laughter becomes disturbing. Theatrical pleasure is thus converted into moral uneasiness. The spectator is compelled to ask when entertainment becomes violence and when judgement becomes persecution.

The play can also be read as a critique of the authority of language. The accused is not physically imprisoned by the court, but she is progressively imprisoned by words. Terms such as "sin," "immorality," "motherhood," "character" and "respectability" acquire punitive force. The court does not need physical violence because its vocabulary has already established Benare as guilty. Tendulkar consequently demonstrates that language can become a form of social coercion. A person can be disciplined simply by being named, classified and publicly interpreted. The final judgement intensifies this paradox. The court declares that "no memento of your sin should remain for future generations" and consequently sentences Benare's unborn child to destruction (Tendulkar, 76). The language of the judgement is revealing because the child is transformed from a living possibility into a "memento" of "sin." The unborn child is not judged as an independent life but as evidence of the mother's supposed moral failure. Motherhood, which the conservative society claims to worship, is therefore simultaneously used as a weapon against the mother.

This contradiction is central to Tendulkar's critique. The society that claims to protect morality actually produces cruelty in the name of morality. The institution of marriage is treated as sacred, but the men who violate the moral expectations associated with marriage remain largely protected. Motherhood is celebrated, yet Benare's motherhood is condemned because it exists outside the sanctioned structure of marriage. Thus, the play does not merely expose male domination; it exposes the contradictory logic by which social institutions selectively apply their own moral principles.

Another significant dimension of the play is its treatment of Benare as both subject and object. At the beginning she is energetic, articulate, humorous and professionally committed. She is a teacher who says, "I just put my whole life into working with the children. I loved it! I taught them well!" (Tendulkar, 76). Her professional identity, however, is gradually erased by the court. She ceases to be seen as a teacher, an individual or a creative woman and becomes merely "the accused." This reduction of identity is itself a form of violence. Society does not defeat Benare by proving that she is immoral; it defeats her by reducing the complexity of her identity to one aspect of her private life.

The tragedy of Benare is therefore not simply that she is silenced. More significantly, she is spoken about so extensively that her own identity is almost completely displaced. Everyone speaks about her, interprets her, judges her and constructs her past, while she increasingly loses control over the narrative of her own life. Silence thus has two dimensions: she is ordered to remain silent, and simultaneously other people speak in her place. This double process makes the title particularly powerful.

The play may also be approached through the concept of social performance. Every member of the group performs respectability, morality and authority. Yet the mock court reveals the desires, frustrations and prejudices beneath these public performances. The courtroom becomes a stage within a stage, while society itself appears as another larger stage. Tendulkar thereby suggests that social identity is performed through accepted roles. The judge performs authority; the lawyer performs rationality; the respectable wife performs morality; and Benare is forced to perform the role of the immoral woman. Once she refuses that imposed role, the social order attempts to punish her.

The absence of an easy solution is another important feature of the play. Tendulkar does not provide a reformist conclusion in which the guilty are punished and the victim is restored to dignity. The play ends with discomfort rather than resolution. This refusal to offer a neat solution makes the drama more modern and unsettling. As Kumud Mehta observes, Tendulkar does not attempt to "offer easy legal remedies to social problems." The absence of a solution forces the audience to confront the persistence of the problem beyond the theatre.

In this respect, Tendulkar's own statement about his social involvement becomes relevant: "As an Individual or rather as a social being, I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society." His drama emerges from this tension between individual experience

and collective reality. His purpose is not merely to condemn society from outside but to expose the mechanisms through which ordinary individuals themselves participate in social violence.

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