

Silence! The Court is in Session: The Quintessence of Gender Discrimination

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Vijay Tendulkar is one of the outstanding Indian Playwrights. He has mastered different genres of literature like Essays, Short Stories, Criticism, Screenplay Writing and Drama. He is known for his plays, Shantatal! Court Chaule Ahe (1967), Ghāshirām Kotwāl (1972), and Sakhārām Binder (1972). He has received awards including the Padma Bhushan, Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, Filmfare Award, Saraswati Samman, Kalidas Samman and Maharashtra Gaurav Puraskar. He is ranked with great playwrights like Badal Sarcar, Girish Karnad and Mohan Rakesh. In the preface to his collection of ‘Six One Act Plays Raatra (night)’, he has mentioned:

Recently, my name has been repeatedly counted amongst the followers of the new drama sect. I have felt no great urge thus, far to determine which sect I belong to, nor do I expect to feel the need to do so in the future. I have written on any theme that has occupied my mind over time, stubbornly insisting that I write on in which ever form I thought best...It is wrong to support that everything different from the establishment is bad, childish and irrelevant. It is equally wrong to think that only which is different is good, true or valuable. Personally, despite being counted amongst the new dramatist, I love to lose myself in the best of Deval, Gadkari, Khadikar and Warerkar... (Tendulkar 197)

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. (Tendulkar 92)

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 Shatata! Court Chaule 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 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.

Miss Leela Benare is presented as an extraordinary and crucial character in the play. She is a young middle class woman of 34 years who is working as a teacher to earn her livelihood. She was loved and appreciated by her students in the school. She was punctual in coming to the school every morning, carrying out her assignments and her courses. Ms. Benare said to Samant:

I never had been behind with my lesson! Exercises corrected on time too, not a bit of room for disapproval, I don't give an inch of it to anyone! (Silence... 4)

She admits to Samant, a local villager who escorts the amateur dramatic troupe members to the village hall, that little children are much better than the adults. She said:

They don't have the blind pride of thinking they know everything. There is no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They don't scratch you till you bleed, then run away like cowards. (Silence...4)

She was a member of an Amateur Theater group. They arrived in a village to perform an awareness raising play on the social and current issues. Ms. Benare was preparing to present a play titled 'Mock Trial of Lyndon B. Johnson' at Suburban Village. She was accompanied by Samant and was enjoying his company. She admits it to him that: "I felt even more wonderful coming here with you. I am so glad the others fell behind". (Silence... 1) She introduces all her co-stars to Samant in their absence. She sarcastically calls Mr. Kashikar as 'Mr. Prime Objective' Mrs. Kashikar as 'Mrs. Hands that Rocks the cradle' She further says that the 'Hands that Rocks the cradle has no cradle to rock.'(Silence...2) Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar were childless and had adopted Balu. According to Benare, they have made him slave:

Mr. Kashikar and the hands that Rocks the cradle, in order that nothing should happen to either of them in their bare house and that they shouldn't die of boredom, gave shelter to a young boy. They educated him- made a slave out of him (Silence... 6)

She sarcastically introduced Sukhatme, one of her co-stars as:

'An expert on the law. He's such an authority on the subject; 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! (Silence ...6)

According to Ms. Benare, Ponkshe is 'Hmmm.... Scientist, Inter failed'. (Silence... 6) She called Prof. Damle as:

And we have an intellectual too. That means someone who prides himself on his books learning. But when there is a real life problem, away he runs, hides his head. He's not here today. Won't be coming either. He won't dare. (Silence...6-7)

Benare wanted to live a free life, free from the patriarchal dominance and the conservative norms of the society. She displays self-determination, self-assertiveness and cynicism but is also receptive to the conventional norms of integrity. Tendulkar has tried to initiate the new form by commenting on the mendacity of the social and ethical standards existing in the society. The below conversation between Benare and Samant throws light on the character of Benare.

Benare: I am the soul of seriousness: But I don't see why one should go around all the time with the long face... we should laugh, we should play, we should sing! If we can and if they will let us, we should dance too! Should not have any false modesty or dignity or care for anyone! I mean it. When your life is over, do you think anyone will give a bit of theirs? What do you say, Samant? Do you think they will?

Samant: You are quite right. The great sage Tukaram said... at least I think it was him...

Benare: Forget about the sage Tukaram. I say it-I, Leela Benare, a living woman, I say it from my own experience. Life is not meant for anyone else. It's your own life. It must be. It is a very very important thing. Every moment, every bit of it is precious... (Silence...8)

The actual play was scheduled to be staged in the night. Character wanted to rehears the drama, a mock trial and also found it as an opportunity to dig up Leela's past life. Balu Rokde, Ponkshe, Karik and Samant appeared as witness for the trial against Benare. Samant was forced to accept and act as the fourth witness in the play on behalf of Prof. Damle. Sukhatme suggested the theater artists to make Ms. Benare as the accused in the mock trial. She has to perform the role of woman who is indicted of infanticide. Mr. Kashikar played the role of the judge. Leela was accused by the Judge of the 'Mock Law Court' as:

Prisoner Miss Benare under section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code, you are accused of the crime of Infanticide (foeticide). Are you guilty or not guilty of a fore mentioned crime...? (Silence...25)

Benare replied:

I don't like your word at all! Infanticide...Infanticide! Why don't you accuse me instead of snatching public property...? I plead not guilty. I could not kill even a cockroach. I am scared to do it. How could I kill a new born child...? (Silence...29-30)

Mr. Kashikar quoted a Sanskrit proverb: "Mother and the Motherland both are even higher than heaven."(Silence...30) Sukhatme was playing the role of the Counsel of Defense and the Counsel for the Crown. He added:

Considering this what would we respectable citizen say if any woman were to take the life of the delicate bundle of joy she has borne, we would say, there could be no baser or more devilish thing on the earth. I intend to establish by means of evidence that the prisoner has done this same vile deed. (Silence...31)

Benare was smart, educated and good looking but was unmarried. To this, Mrs. Kashikar stated:

Anyone who really wants to can get married in a flash... when you get everything without marrying....they just want comfort. They could not care about responsibilities. In my time even if a girl was snub nosed, sallow hunchbacked or anything whatever, she could still get married. It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread through our society... look how loudly she laughs, how she sings, dances, cracks jokes...and wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out. (Silence... 54)

Mrs. Kashikar further added with firm assurance that all the unmarried girls are,

"a Sinful canker on the body of society, that's my honest opinion of these grown up married girls." (Silence...54) The play is a satire on the hypocrisy of the middle class society. The playwright exposes:

...their characters, dialogues, gestures and even mannerisms reflect their petty circumscribed existence fraught with frustration and repressed desire that find expression in their malicious and spiteful attitude towards their fellow being. (Preface VIII)

Kashikar, Sukhatme and others formed a group to torture Leela in the mock trial. She was charged as a licentious woman who is always ready to sell her body. She was even charged to share an illicit relationship with her maternal uncle and later with Prof. Damle.

Ms. Benare was in love with her maternal uncle at the age of fourteen but if a failure due to the cultural bounding and limitations. Benare explained the way in which she was abused by her own maternal uncle at the age of just fourteen. Benare said:

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. (Silence 74)

She failed in the love affair with her maternal uncle. He exploited her at such a tender age to satisfy his hunger for bodily pleasure. She uttered while remembering him that: "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 dreadful thing..." (Silence...75-75)

The character of Ms. Benare reminds us of Ammu, the protagonist in 'The God of Small Things' by Arundhati Roy. She is also identical to various female characters presented by Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai in their books. They have also exposed the naked realities of women suffering at the hands of the male dominating society.

Ms. Benare studied and established herself as a teacher. She fell in love with Prof. Damle as a young woman inspite of her previous failure in a love with her maternal uncle. Prof. Damle was a married man who also wanted to satisfy his bodily thirst. She was pregnant without marriage and this was a reason that she was discharged from her school. The chairman of the education society, Mr. Nana Saheb Shinde also failed to drop an inquiry against her. According to Ms. Benare:

Again I fell in love. As a grown woman. I throw all my heart into it. I thought, this will be different. This love is intelligent. It is love for an unusual intellect. It is not love at all-its worship! But it was the same mistake. 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! He was not a god. He was a man for him everything was the body, for the body? That is all (Silence 73-74)

She pleaded in front of Rokde and Ponkshe for marring her but her proposal was shorn of by them. Vijay Tendulkar has created a satire on the unjust male dominating society and on the working of Court. Mr. Kashikar, the judge should be free from the prejudice but he was just the opposite. He quoted the proverb: "Janani Janama bhumischcha Svargadapi Gariyasi."(Silence...30) This is a mockery on the judge who is talking about motherhood and innocence who himself does not follow what he says. The court allows Prof. Damle to enjoy his married life and does not accuse him to exploit and abuse the life of a woman. The irony of the mock trial is that Benare is accused in the court without the presence of Prof. Damle. This depicts the condemnation on the Indian society and the prejudices it carries against women. According to Veena Dass, in her 'Women Characters in the Plays of Tendulkar':

It is important here to note that these charges became verbalized only in the absence of Prof. Damle. If he were present, the typical backbiting attitude of the self righteous Indian male would not have helped reveal the truth. Miss Benare was thrown into the dock and there she remained trying to joke herself out of it, but trapped too murderously by the male vultures around her. Witness after witness, charges upon charges were heaped upon her. The defense lawyer was so frightened that he only asked for a little mercy on her behalf. Miss Benare who is on the

offensive at the beginning found herself trapped at the close of the play.
(Dass 10)

All the characters drawn by Tendulkar except Ms. Benare represents the male dominated Indian society. 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)

Ms. Benare has been loyal to her profession. She declares in the final act that she has always kept her professional life away from her personal life. She has justified her role of being a teacher. Ms. Benare stated:

I just put my whole life into working with the children... I loved it, I taught them well... Emotion is something people talk about with sentiment. It was obvious to me. I was living through it. It was burning through me. But do you know? I did not teach any of this to those tender; young souls. I swallowed the poison, but did not let the drop of it touch them. I taught them beauty. I taught them purity. I cried inside and made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair and I taught them hope. (Silence... 75-76)

The Judge, Mr. Kashikar orders Ms. Benare to abort her child. According to him, to have the child without marriage is against the tradition of Indian culture. The judgment passed to Ms. Benare seems to be absurd. Mr. Kashikar said:

The crimes you have committed are the most terrible. The mortality which you have shown forgiveness for them...through your conduct was the mortality you were planning to impart to the youth of tomorrow. It must be said that the school officials have done a work of merit in deciding to remove you from the job...There is no forgiveness... No memento of your sin should remain for the future generation. Therefore the court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed... (Silence... 67-68)

She screamed to this:" No! No! No! I won't let you do it. I won't let it happen, I won't let it happen" (Silence... 76). The character of Ms. Benare also reminds us the Ibsen's heroine Nora in The Doll House. Nora abandons her children and her husband due to the annoyance and dominance created by her husband. She questions the male dominating society and finds her escape. According to Arundhati Banerjee,: "Benares' monologue is reminiscent of Nora's declaration of Independence." (Banerjee 40) Mrs. Kashikar does not help the helpless Ms. Benare in the court inspite of being a woman. She is against Ms. Benare because she is a conventional Indian housewife who has accepted

all the norms framed by the society. She accepted the role of a woman as a beautiful flower to be decorated in a flower pot with no existence of her own. Benare, on the other hand was a progressive contemporary woman. She was psychologically tortured but was still starving to search for her existence. According to P. Obula Reddy and P. Pramila Devi:

Benare, the principal character in the play is as sprightly, rebellious and assertive as the heroine of Shakespeare romantic comedies... Of course, Benare is a lovely spark from the thunder bolt of Tendulkar. She is a new woman pleading for freedom from the social norms... (Reddy and Devi 36)

Ms. Benare is a prey of male chauvinism, used simply to gratify the quench for bodily thirst and deserted at the end to her own destiny. Man has all the rights to be sinful in the society. He can be harsh, notorious and innocent too. All the rights are reserved specially for him. On the other hand, a woman must be deserted, abandoned, ignored, thrown away and should be tainted for her sins. There is no escape for her in our society. She must be brutally destroyed for her actions both physically and mentally. The character of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Ponkshe, Rokde, Sukhatme represents hypocrisy and inferior complex. One can clearly notice a conflict raised by Tendulkar between the real self and the performed self in the play. Tendulkar digs the inner self of all the characters in the plays, how they present themselves and what they actually are. He has identified the role of society in shaping and determining their identities. In an interview, Tendulkar divulged: "This play is a caustic satire on the social as well as legal justice." (Tendulkar 40)

Benare represents all the women in India who are suppressed, oppressed and are marginalized. She breaks down during the mock trial because the story of the character in the play she is performing at the mock trial is identical to her own. The last speech of Ms. Benare is skillfully constructed by Tendulkar. It echoes the irony, sorrow and lampoon present in Indian society. Ms. Benare said:

But I was ignorant Instead; I threw myself off a parapet of our house-to embrace death. But I didn't die. My body didn't die. I felt as if feelings were dead-but they had not died either then.... (Silence... 74)

Tendulkar has left the play open without suggesting any solution to the problem of Ms. Benare. He has highlighted critical problems like the squalor of Indian Judiciary system, male dominance in the society and the ostentatious institutional social organizations. The play is derision on the middle class probity, where people have all the rights to pass the judgments and Silence is the only alternative left for the victim. The words of Candy Elizabeth quoted in

'The Introduction of Feminism in our Times' can be the best to conclude. According to Candy:

Thus far women have been mere echoes of men. Our laws and constitution, our creeds and codes and customs of social life are all of masculine origin. The true woman is yet a dream for future... (Candy XIV-V)

Nari tame Narayani

WORKS CONSULTED

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