

Cultural and Gender Related Perspectives in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar a notable Marathi playwright is known for his bold depiction of condition of women in contemporary Indian middle class society. He had been very vocal in raising his voice against the injustice meted out towards women in the male dominated patriarchal structure of Indian society. He ruthlessly portrays the victimization, exploitation and subjugation of women in our society. He in the play *Silence!The Court Is In Session* Exposes the horrifying hypocritical double standards of the chauvinistic male dominated Indian society. In this play he focused on the humiliation, oppression and victimization of women in post independence India. The play focuses on the fact that in Indian society Women are traditionally equated to Gods but in practical life they become an easy prey for the males who look at them as a medium to satisfy their lustful desires.

Keywords: Pseudo-cultural, Patriarchal, Mockery, Male dominant, Identity, Social system.

Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar one of the most notable and controversial playwrights of India is known for the portrayal of social truths that had been a part of Indian social structure for centuries. He is one of the selected eminent Indian writers who openly wrote about the issues related to a woman's identity in the male dominated patriarchal structure of Indian society. His true and honest picturisation of feminine psyche had gained him the epithet of "the angry young man" of Marathi theatre but his play *Shantata!Court Chalu Aahe (Silence!The Court Is In Session)* was a landmark in the portrayal of women's condition in the conventional Indian society. When the play was published in 1967 Tendulkar had to bear the ire of various social groups who severely criticized him for promoting the issues related to female sexuality, independence and equality. As Mr N.S.Dharan writes:

"Vijay Tendulkar play can be said to fall into two distinct groups namely Pre silence plays and Post silence plays. In the plays that Tendulkar wrote prior to *Silence!The Court Is In Session* however marks a change in Tendulkar's attitude towards his favourite subject, that is the middle class man. For the first time in his dramatic career he began to look into to the psyche of a subject and focus his attention on the ugliness he detected there in."(1)

The play *Silence!The Court Is In Session* is based on the true experience of Vijay Tendulkar when he met an amateur theatre group which was on its way to stage a mock trial in Virle Parle a suburb of Bombay. He overheard the groups conversation and the seeds of the play was immediately planted in his mind through which he portrayed the plight of an unwed mother in the strictly conventional post independence Indian society. Indian social construct in 1970's was very rigid and orthodox and women had to face a lot of subjugation in the traditional male dominated social system of India. The condition of women was pathetic and they had to fight vigorously for the proclamation of their rights. The women were oppressed in every field of life and what Simon de Beauvoir had wrote in a book the second sex (1949) that "one is not born a woman, rather becomes a woman"(2) seemed perfectly true in Indian social system. A Woman since her birth was told to behave in a specific way and various restrictions were imposed on her because of her gender.

The paper aims to focus on the fact that Tendulkar through this play is mocking at the pseudo cultural traditions of Indian society where women are traditionally equated to Gods and worshiped as Goddesses but in reality they

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are the victims of cruel social traditions. If we look at ancient Indian culture and spiritual text we find that women are kept at par with the gods. In ancient Indian tradition there is a concept of Ardhnarishwar both the masculine and feminine characteristics blend together to form a complete new identity. We Indians are the proud worshipper of Shakti the divine femininity and mother of all creations. In spite of having such rich cultural values where women considered at par with the man we are shocked to see the present conditions of women in our society.

In the Play *Silence* the court is in session Tendulkar raises his voice against the pseudo cultural values and brutally exposes the petrifying realities of Indian social system. Protagonist of the play Leela Benare is an exceptional human being who lives life to the fullest and despite of all the odds in a life looks at the positive side of human existence. She is a popular teacher loved by her students and hated by her colleagues for all the professional qualities that make her a good and successful teacher. She is in love with her profession and believes that her professional identity cannot be mingled with her personal life. In the play she is a symbol of modern Indian women who is educated, strong, independent and proud of her unique professional identity. Through the character of Leela Benare Tendulkar depicts a joyful liberated human soul who tries to find happy new meaning in the saddest songs of human existence. Leela is beautiful, bold, sportive, mischievous, self supporting and strong but her single status makes her vulnerable to strict social laws of Indian society.

What makes her condition more pathetic is that she is not abused by strangers but by the people with whom she is familiar. Leela Benare, a strong willed woman, refuses to bend against the patriarchal values of Indian social system and strongly declares, "My wishes are my own. No one can kill those - no one! I will do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide...(7). This clearly shows that Tendulkar through Leela Benare is openly advocating for the equality among genders in Indian society. He refuses to see any difference between two human beings of different genders and it is trying to establish this truth that every human being of both the gender has an equal right to live his/her life according to his /her wishes. Leela Benare becomes a spokesperson of new modern Indian woman who is well aware of her identity and refuses to be marginalized only because of her gender.

The play when staged for the first time in March 1971 in Madras, created a furore among general public and literary critics. People were shocked to see that through the character of Leela Benare Tendulkar is justifying the rights of a single and unwed mother.

The story revolves around Leela Benare who is cross-examined in a mock trial with full derision. Although the trial is supposed to be mock but the subject of trial is real. Members of her theatrical group are aware of her secret love affair with Professor Damle who is also a member of the group and is a married man with a supposedly happy family. In order to ridicule and humiliate her, they cunningly decide to stage a mock trial so that Samant, the innocent villager who had come to show the hall where the performance was to be held in the evening can act in a place of professor Damle who had not turned up for the show in order to avoid his direct confrontation with Leela Benare. To acquaint Samant with the intricacies of court room it is decided in the absence of Leela Benare that a mock trial will be held against her. All the members readily agree and as Mrs Kashikar says, "in any case we will be able to see what the trial of a woman is like." (31) Her statement make it clear that Leela Benare is despised not only by the male members but also by her female counterparts. Through her Tendulkar portrays the conditioning of female psyche in the Indian society where every woman is made to believe that she has to act according to the set norms of the society. This social conditioning of a woman's mind make her believe that any women who refuses to accept the conventional social rules is characterless and should be ridiculed and treated as an outcast by the society.

Leela Benare is caught unaware and the poor woman is left stunned when she is charged against the crime of infanticide under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code. From here begins the shocking trial of a woman who thinks that through her education she is capable of taking her personal decisions according to her wishes. As the trial progresses, the true motives and intentions of her so called friends are revealed. All type of questions are raised against her character and her personal life is examined brutally in the broad daylight in a so called judicial trial. This cruel treatment leaves her shocked, shattered and devastated yet she refuses to stop to the hollow pretentious norms of the so-called civilized Indian society. Tendulkar in an interview with Satya Saran and Vimla Patil admits, "When I saw the struggle of a woman it is not one woman's fight. The individual must have name and identity and caste and background to be credible but she is not just a woman on stage in a particular way. I am in writing of a situation showing that the possibility of a struggle against it exists.... By not giving a solution, I leave possibilities open for whatever cause the change may take place. When the members of my audience go home and chew on the situation they might be able to see their daughter or sister in the women's position and come up with the way of changing the situation for her advantage .(37)

Through the plight of Leela Benare Tendulkar exposed the sordid realities of Indian social system. It is sad to see that Professor Damle who is an equal partner in the presumed crime of infanticide is left scot-free and no questions are raised against him. If we look at the situation impartially Professor Damle's role in committing the ostensible crime is more significant. He is a married man with children and yet he chooses to have an extra marital affair with a woman who is single, beautiful and intelligent and is deeply in love with him. His relationship with Leela Benare is based on physical lust and when she becomes pregnant he leaves her. As Leela Benare admits, "this love is intelligent. It is love for an unusual intellect. It isn't 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 was a man for whom everything was of the body, for the body! (106)

Leela Benare loved Prof Damle for his cognitive attributes but he deceived her by faking to be in love with her. Once his lust was fulfilled he left her all alone with the responsibility of an unborn child in her womb. A child cannot be conceived through the involvement of a single sex individual, it requires the participation of two individuals of different genders. Tendulkar raises the question that then why only the woman is questioned and held responsible for corrupting the society, if the copulation takes place between the two unmarried individuals? In the Play Tendulkar by raising this question depicts a true picture of female oppression and inferior status granted to them in Indian society. Through Leela Benare he showcases the abhorrent sexual realities that had been prevailed in our society for centuries.

At the tender age of fourteen Leela Benare was cheated by her own maternal uncle who took advantage of her innocence and had an incestuous relationship with his own niece. When she confronted him to marry her, he ran away forcing Benare to commit suicide by throwing herself off the parapet of her house to embrace death. But fortunately she didn't die and chose to live.... embracing life with all it's beauty and ugliness. What Benare experienced at the young age of fourteen is experienced by many young nubile girls who are sexually exploited with in the security of their homes by the respected uncles, cousins and other male relatives. Unfortunately none of these cases of child rape, sexual abuse and molestation are ever reported. The festival of Navratri which ends with the worship of kanyas or young girls is celebrated with great gusto throughout India and through the worship of nine Devis we bow down to the life giving force of divine femininity. It is really heart rendering to see that in the same country numerous crimes against young girls are left unreported and small girls become an easy target for the hungry wolves that exist around them in the disguise of dear uncles and relatives. These cases of child abuse raise grieve concern about the dual concept of respecting and degrading female

sex in our society. What Leela experienced as a young girl left a permanent emotional scar on her timid heart and instead of attaining sympathy of her family she became the target of their scorn and hatred. Even her mother supported her brother who was responsible for ruining her daughter's life. Later on as an adult she was exploited by a man who was respected in society for his academic profession. Professor Damle was equally responsible for fathering a child out of sacred bonds of matrimony but no body dares to question him. It is a socially accepted fact that a man can exploit any woman for his sexual gratification and bears no moral responsibility for the alleged illicit affair.

Thus a woman becomes an easy target for a man who uses her body for his sexual needs and is not bothered about her existence as a living human being. It is really heartbreaking to witness the savage and barbaric treatment meted towards Leela Benare when Sukhatme, the counsel for prosecution pleads in the court, "no allowance must be made because the accused is a woman. A woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society. *Na stri swantantrayamarhati* 'Woman is not fit for independence. That is the rule laid down for us by tradition. Abiding by this rule, I make a powerful plea. *Na Miss Benare swantantrayamarhati*. Miss Benare is not fit for independence. With the urgent plea that the court should show no mercy to the accused, but gave her the greatest and severest punishment for her terrible crime, I close the argument for the prosecution." (103)

This horrendous argument is not against only one woman who happens to be Leela Benare in the play, but is against every woman who exist in our society. The horrible charges that are laid against her shows the twofold opinion that our society is having towards a woman. On one side we believe that every woman should be worshiped because she is the reincarnation of divinity and her motherhood makes her the most respectable individual and on the other side it is argued that she is not fit for independence. How can two totally different notions about individual coexist in the society? It is through the condition of Leela Benare that Tendulkar exposes the horrifying hypocritical double standards of the chauvinistic male-dominated Indian middle class society. The hostility felt for a woman because of her superior professional qualities can be seen in the behaviour of the fellow troop members. As Gail Omvedt writes, "Feminism is not a form of social science nor is it a social ideology. It can be best understood as the developing self consciousness of a woman as an oppressed section struggling for liberation. (Omvedt:177-178). The play deals with radical subject of unwed motherhood aggressively and the accused woman, Leela Benare, becomes the epitome of modern Indian woman who refuses to accept the age-old established social values of orthodox Indian society. Her long speech towards the end of the play when Kashikar gave her ten seconds to say anything about the charge that has been made against her speaks volumes about the position of women in Indian society. The true dimensions of the allegedly cultured society is revealed when she says, "These are the mortal remains of some cultured men of the 20th century. See their faces- how ferocious the look! Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases and their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires." (104)

This dialogue take us back to the primitive mythological times of Indian culture when Shakti the divine feminine took the incarnation of Durga and killed the ferocious demons and devils who dare to touch her. A woman in no way is inferior to a man and is capable of fighting against the lustful desires of her male counterparts. Though Benare is tortured, humiliated and her private life is dissected in public yet she emerges as a strong woman who despite of all the social pressure is keen to bring her child to this beautiful world. She is not a coward like professor Damle who being a man is unable to confront the society and refuses to take the responsibility of their unborn child.

Thus it can be said that the play *Silence! The Court Is In Session* ruthlessly portrays the victimization, exploitation and subjugation of women in our society. The gender related issues that are prevalent in Indian society are successfully brought to the light by Vijay Tendulkar who in this play raises the questions related to feminine identity and asserts the fact that individuals of both the genders should be treated equally. In the play he depicts the conflict that exists between the ancient Indian religious texts and the existing social practices. It is evident that Tendulkar is mocking at the hypocritical male attitude in Indian society and raises serious questions about the gender equality and cultural practices in the play.

As N.S. Dharan comments, ".....though not a self acknowledged feminist (Tendulkar) treats his women characters with understanding and compassion, while pitting them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious." (Dharan: 28). In *Silence! The Court Is In Session* Leela Benare's exuberant qualities as a compassionate dutiful and free individual are beautifully portrayed by Tendulkar. Even though she is accused of a heinous crime of infanticide yet he succeeds in arousing his readers' sympathy for her.

Objective of the Study The paper aims at exploring the various pseudo-cultural and general social practices related to female gender that have become an integral part of Indian social system for centuries. Through this paper the various gender issues related to women in middle class Indian society as highlighted by Vijay Tendulkar would be discussed and brought to the light. The unbridled attitude of men towards women and their general tendency to look at her as a need satisfying object is described in detail by the playwright through the portrayal of his numerous male characters. Tendulkar evidently asserts that a woman's marital status plays an important role in deciding the society's attitude towards her.

Conclusion The play aims at exposing the bitter realities of Indian social system where women are traditionally worshiped as Goddesses but in reality are treated worse than animals. Tendulkar satirizes at the male chauvinist who praise motherhood as one of the most sacred emotion related to human life but brutally attack an innocent woman who is betrayed by a man who professes to be in love with her but leaves her to confront the society all alone once she gets pregnant. Thus the play is an honest record of all cultural and social actualities that exist in our society depending on the gender of an individual.

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