



Disempowering and Silencing the Women: A Critique of Patriarchal Gaze and Power-Game in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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ABSTRACT

The play Silence! The Court is in Session by Vijay Tendulkar, poses a critique against the power game of patriarchy towards the marginalised (specifically woman race) to terminate the power structure authenticated by patriarchal values, institutions and judicial system. The play explores the terrible condition of women of middle class family in Indian context by presenting Benare as a central figure with her bitter experience gathered through her trial episode in court which is directed by the patriarchy norms and disciplines. Tendulkar shows how women in our society are tortured, suffered, marginalised and exploited. This paper aims to map out the exploitation, subjugation of women by patriarchal gaze and unequal power game in Tendulkar's Silence! The Court is in Session.

Keywords: Power game, Patriarchy, Judicial System, Exploitation, Subjugation.

The term "violence" becomes a burning issue in the present era. Men and women are the victims to this structure. The history of violence in literature can be traced back since Seneca's age. The tragedies based on revenge invented by him, and the later practitioners of this genre are the proper instances of violent actions and emotions. They are involved with huge blood-shedding, murder, supernaturalism and the terrific atmosphere that always provide a spine-chilling flavour to the readers and the audiences. Some great Shakespearean tragedies such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* are modelled on this genre.

With the gradual passing of time, women have been treated as a trivial puppet in the hand of male-gaze society: sometimes it is the father, sometimes the husband or lover and sometimes her own son. They are always considered as the objects of playing and pleasure to the male-oriented society. There are so many unofficial and unwritten societal rules and doctrines bestowed on them, that clog their lives with restriction and limitation. Vijay Tendulkar, the great Marathi playwright has introduced several remarkable women characters in his plays. Some of the important female figures are Leela Benare in *Silence ! The Court is in Session*, Princes Vijaya in *Encounter in Umlugland*, Rama in *The Vultuers*, Lakshmi and Champa in *Sakhrum Binder* and Sarita and Kamala in *Kamala*. All these women characters represent the Indian woman who has long been under suppression and cruel domination of man, but emerges out as a new woman in modern era.

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar has delineated the deplorable and miserable plight of the protagonist, Leela Benare and the facade of sympathy behind which there lies the scratches of mental and spiritual violence that cannot be seen outwardly but be felt from within. The attitude of the Indian society towards women is not indirect rather paradoxical. In the typical framework of Indian male-dominated society, women are not considered with equal rights. But on the other hand, we worship the goddess as mother in our religion. This ambiguous attitude has set up men's response to the problem of women.

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is all about a middle class educated group of men and women who are the actors of amateur theatre and came to village to perform a progressive play. To spend the excess time, they decide to perform a mock trial. In course of time, things start taking ugly turn when an unmarried female teacher is put the dock and various questions are posed to her about her personal life. Eventually who balked from the situation start enjoying it.

In this play, Tendulkar has depicted the plight of a young woman, Leela Benare, who is betrayed by the male dominated society. A traditional male dominated society cannot relinquish its paralysed values and customs. The society does not like to perceive or receive any social change. Though Tendulkar is not a self-acknowledged feminist, we can see that he treats his female characters with understanding and compassion, while juxtaposing them against men who are selfish, hypocritical and brutally ambitious. With anti-essential mindset and new found consciousness he has explored the man-woman relationship and how torture on women has been rationalised through judiciary in this play. Here, he has critiqued the Hindu patriarchal meta-discourse. Besides, he has also constructed an oppositional feminist discourse to protest against the patriarchy that scrutinizes nationalist ideology towards its refusal to give an unmarried expectant woman the status of motherhood.

Though the play is gyno-centric because of its main focus on the unmarried expectant woman, it deals with many stories which have been woven in a crisscross way by the threads of lives of middle-class people. It is a play of moderate length having double structures which resemble the divide between public and private sphere.

The play by the sarcastic treatment of Tendulkar portrays the tragic vision of life integrated to the individual suppressed and dominated by male-gaze society. Benare, the centre of the play becomes the victim by the patriarchy and is put at the mock-trial in the court and is cross-examined with different kind of embarrassing questions that ultimately leads into entire frustration. The characters such as Rokde, Samant, Council for defense, Mr. Sukhatme, Mr. Kashikar and Mrs. Kashikar, all behave in a sarcastic way and the protagonist Benare is summoned at court as a accused one due to her illicit relationship with Prof. Damle and having a illegitimate child. Tendulkar through this play has criticised the very nature of patriarchy who out of their frustration, try to show up their power and superiority over women. Through the very process of mock-trial, the dramatist brings in the nature of misogynism and sadism of male-gaze society.

Tendulkar is not a typical feminist but he raises his voice in voicing women's concern, sensibility and their suppression and their protest. Benare here represents all women in India who are subjugated and marginalised. She becomes broken-hearted because the character what she is performing at the mock-trial is very identical to her own self. The endin of speech of Benare is skilfully advocated to reflect irony, sorrow, pain in Indian society as Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* says-

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 feeling were dead – they hadn't died either then. 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 is not love at all – it's worship! But it was the same mistake. (74)

The play is about the pathetic position of women in the male dominated Indian world. Here, the protagonist's desires, cravings, needs and femininity are all ignored and smashed. The final verdict on Benare, as she is given ten seconds to defend her case, makes her stagnant, motionless and realised the view of the world. She stands up and says "Yes, I have a lot to say". This comment follows a crucial monologue of Benare who excavates her relish for life and how she is deprived of all cravings in the following manner –

My life was a burden to me. [Having a great sigh] But when you can't lose it, you realise the value of it. You realise the value of living. You see what happiness means. How, new, how wonderful every moment is! Even you seem new to yourself. The sky, birds, clouds, the branch of a dried up tree that gently bends in, the curtain moving at the window, the silence all around – all sorts of distant, little noises, even the strong smell of medicines in a hospital, even that seems full to bursting with life. Life seems to sing for you! There is a great joy in a suicide that's failed. It's greater even than the pain of living ... Life is so and so. Life is such and such. Life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. 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 something that's nothing – or a nothing that's something ... I knew that life is no straightforward thing. People can be so cruel! Even your own flesh and blood don't want to understand you. Only one thing in life is all-important – the body. You may deny it but it is true ... 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 that poison, but didn't even let a drop of it touch them! I taught them beauty. I taught them purity. I cried inside, and I made them laugh. I was cracking up with despair and I taught them hope. (72-73)

Benare throws her severe attack against patriarchy in the following monologue –

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 bellies are full of unsatisfied desires. (74)

In the play the male dominated society or patriarchal society used the strategy of game as a potential tool to trap Leela Benare in the web created by the different male players as a group to defeat the lonely and single player Leela Benare who is as depicted in the play lives on her own term in a world designed and crafted by her.

The game theory started with the publication *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*(1944) by John Von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern at the time of World War II. It was published to interpret war-ridden world mathematically. It is applied in social science, Mathematics, Economics and Biology to study the competition between different species.

Another critic Eric Berne in his book *Games People Play* has categorised human psyche into three different phases- stimulus hunger, recognition hunger and structure hunger. In the last phase, people structure their time and the operational aspect of time structuring is called programming. It deals with three aspects such as material, social and individual. He remarks in this book in the following way-

As people become better acquainted more and more individual programming creeps in, so that 'incidents' begin to occur. This incident specifically appears adventitious, and may be so described by the parties concerned, but careful scrutiny reveals that they tend to follow definite pattern which are amenable to sorting and classification and the sequence is circumscribed by unspoken rules and regulation: these regulation remain latent as long as the amities or hostilities proceed, but they become manifest if an illegal move is made, giving rise to symbolic, verbal and legal cry of foul such sequences, which in contrast to pastimes are based more individual than on social programming may be called Games. (5)

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* assumes the game theory where different members of the group played a deliberate game with rule and regulation constructed by the patriarchal society in which the protagonist Leela Benare is well-trapped and overruled. Tendulkar has mentioned the word 'game' so many times to expose the beastliness and inhumanity of male-gaze society that always plays a new game to entrap someone to fulfil their emotional appetite. Therefore, the question remains why Tendulkar wants the readers to emphasis on this aspect of game theory. Johan Huizinga in his article *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* remarks that –

Playfulness in literature as the game that has the quality of tension, the power of madding, absorption, a quality of clear element of eagerness. The game creates a second level of real life. The second level is supra-logic level; it is different from first level of reality, the everyday reality: 'play is not ordinary or real life'. Rather it represents a stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. What does not happen in the first level happens in the second level. The second level of reality breaks with the logic in the first level. In other words, it breaks the logic, the structure or the boundaries to create a new logic, a new structure or boundaries. It is supra-logic because it transgresses everyday reality. (5)

The game is quite apparent and the game ends by transforming us to the actual and severe reality that poses a critique against the judicial system of the contemporary time of the writer, which is failed to install a proper justice. Though the patriarchy plays the game against the marginalised, but quite ironically the game takes opposite turn by showing the whole judiciary system and policy invalid and unethical.

To conclude, the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* gives the space to the reader/spectator to think and re-think on the internal gap that Tendulkar has made consciously to attack the supposedly valid and stable patriarchy system in the social discourse. Tendulkar's deconstructionist approach helps the reader to analyse the marginalised character like Leela Benare boldly being away from the centre and traditional perspective. The reader has the scope to make a free-play in the text and rejoice the multiplicity of literary game, meaning and connotations to subvert the overt and implicit meaning and reality and go deep into the sub-conscious strata of the text.

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