

Mockery on Judicial System and Social Criticism in ‘Silence! the Court is in Session’

Indu Goyal

Head and Associate Professor Dept. of English, Allahabad Degree College(A constituent college of university of Allahabad) Allahabad.

Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar was a leading Indian play-wright, movie and television writer, literary essayist, novelist, short story writer, political journalist and social commentator. He is best known for his play, Shantata! Court ChaluAahe, GhasiramKotwal and Sakharam Binder. Many of Tendulkar’s plays derived inspiration from real life incidents or social upheavals, which provide clear light on harsh realities. His plays have given Indian theatre a rich and challenging heritage.

Tendulkar’s plays portray different aspects of human characters. All of them underscore the complexity of human relationships. Most of his plays deal with the individual pitted against the society and explore the tensions between the two. In all of them, women play key roles in the plot. All the plays contain a subtle critique of modern middle-class and lower middle-class Indian society. Most of Tendulkar’s dramas follow the naturalistic model of dramaturgy. Although there is similarity; the plays are clearly distinct from each-other Silence! The Court is in the Session combines social criticism with the tragedy of the individual.

This paper brings out satire, sarcasm and reality of the orthodox society. Tendulkar has depicted the plight of a young woman 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 and receive any social change. Tendulkar presents a treatment to those ugly ways of society in this play. It is a bitter satire against the social ills and an interesting attempt to criticise the follies that prevail in our society.

Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session) is a Marathi play written by Vijay Tendulkar. The play was written in 1963, for Ramayana, a theatre group, though it was performed much later in 1967. It could not win any prize but Rangayan continued doing it. However, it won awards for acting and direction the following year when Satyadev Dubey did it in Hindi. It was adjudged the play of the year and Tendulkar won the Kamladevi Chattopadhyay Award in 1970 and Sangeet Academy Award in 1971. The play has since been translated into 16 languages in India and abroad, BBC showed its English version. Tendulkar was at once recognized as one of the leading playwright of India.

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 pointed out in an interview that:

“I personally do not bother about people who have not seen life. They close their eyes at the sight of suffering as if it does not exist. The fact is that life is dark and cruel;

it's just that you don't care for the truth. You do not 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."¹

The play, 'Silence! The court is in Session' emerged as Tendulkar watched a troupe of dabblers of drama and eavesdropped their rehearsals. The play made him the center of a general controversy. He was considered a rebel against the established values of fundamentally orthodox society. This play has a play within itself that presents a mock-trial. In it, we find group of teachers who were planning a stage in a village. A rehearsal was arranged and a mock trial was staged to make him understand the court procedure. Their spiteful attitude to Leela Benare, the central character of the play, reflect their malicious and spiteful attitude towards their fellow beings. A well-targeted conspiracy is hatched out against her, and in the name of a mock-trial, they expose and dissect her personal life blight her psyche. Their attitude towards her reveals the basic hypocrisy and double standards of society. The play exposes the vulnerability of women in Indian society. A mock charge of infanticide was leveled against Miss Benare who is a simple and straightforward school teacher. She is cross-examined in the court with full mockery. She is charged with infanticide and having illicit relations with a married person Prof. Damle and in this way her private life is exposed. All the other characters like witnesses Mr. Ponkshe, Rodke, Mr. Karnik, Samant, counsel for the defense and counsel for the crown Mr. Sukhatme and Judge, Mr. Kashikar and his wife Mrs. Kashikar, all behave in a way of mockery. Interestingly Sukhatme plays the role of a counsel on both sides that shows the height of fun. But then suddenly the game turned into a grim charge and it came out from the witness that Miss Benare did kill an illegitimate child by Prof. Damle, soon the imaginary charges led to personal dilemmas.

Miss Benare is a school teacher and devoted to her profession. She is a lover of nature. She expresses her philosophy of life to Sukhatme:

"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 is over, do you think anyone will give you a bit of theirs?"²

She has a strong desire to enjoy life without being suffocated by the hegemony of culture. She is an embodiment of Nature's innocence and spontaneity. Being asked not to behave childishly, she says:

"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 Ponkshe! 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 will give you a bit of theirs?"(60-61)

Her innocence, beauty and lively nature attract many people and thus land her in danger several times. In her teens, she is seduced and sexually exploited by her own uncle. He does not marry her. Somehow Benare overcomes this shock and completes her education. Her academic interest takes her to Prof. Damle whom she respects for his

scholarship and intelligence. Though married, he exploits her sexually and betrays her. She becomes pregnant and requests Rodke and Pokshe to marry her and save her from ignominy. But they have no sympathy with her. Benare ridicules their hypocrisy. She is frank and open. She laughs at their flaws. Miss Benare 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 barrister's room at a court, swatting flies with legal precedents! (6). The other members of the troupe like Sukhatme, the lawyer without a brief and Ponshe the "aspiring scientist" who has failed in his intermediate science exams, Mrs. and Mr. Kashikar who foreground themselves as social reformers but exactly the opposite by virtually enslaving their adopted son, feel more humiliated by the ridicule of Benare than their failure and decide to take it on her in the name of mock-trial where they expose her personal life and hurt her deeply. They do not find fault with Damle who is the main culprit and who caused the misery in her life. At first they accuse her of infanticide for trying to abort her foetus. Later, they accuse her of becoming pregnant without marriage. Concluding his argument, the public prosecutor, Sukhatme says to the judge, Mr. Kashikar:

"Milord, the nature of the charge against the accused, Miss Benare is truly dreadful. The woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherland-which is purer than heaven. For that, any punishment, however great, that the law may give her, will be too mild, by far. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality."(114).

Leena Benare protests against it and demands not only freedom but also the right over her body and to live in the way she likes. Tendulkar's plays put forth several questions without providing any answers to them. The playwright seeks to present the modern man with his predicament, his challenges, his difficulties and his complexities. In the career of Tendulkar as a dramatist, 'Silence, The Court is in Session' is a milestone. It is new not only by content but also by form. The major character around whom all things revolve is Leela Benare, a school teacher. Her bitterness with the society comes out through the mock-court scene. Benare's soliloquy at the end raises many equations, it rises about society, man-woman relationship etc. that almost leave us speechless. There was lot of controversy about 'indebtedness' and piracy. Although one cannot set aside the questions raised by Leela Benare's predicament is not foreign origin; it is indigenous. The agony faced by Benare is symbolic and representative of Indian experience. The root of Benare's tragedy is that her suffering does not reach the people around her. Besides empathizing with her, the society likes to play or toy with her feelings. Benare's blind belief is that her private life is her own affair and she is free to do what she likes to do with it. But it is not possible for the middle-class people in India. Leena Benare says:

"Who are these people to say what I can or can't do? My life is my own-I haven't sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own."(58).

The character of Miss Benare also reminds us Ibsen's heroine Nora in 'The Doll's House'. Nora abandons her children and her husband due to the annoyance and dominance created by her husband. According to Arundhati Banerjee, "Benare's monologue is reminiscent of Nora's declaration of independence."³

Vijay Tendulkar 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 sum up. According to Candy:

"Thus far women have been mere echoes of men. Our laws and constitutions, our creeds and codes and customs of social life are full of masculine origin. The true woman is yet a dream for future....."⁴

Tendulkar implies the same attitude on society too where men are roaming 'faultless' and are permitted to seek extra marital sexual pleasure, while that of woman is limited within marriage. Miss Benare is not only accused and hurt for having illicit relations with Prof. Damle but she is dismissed from her job also with the blame that what moral she will present before the students though everyone is aware of her dedication to her profession. She knows that people are jealous of her freedom. But the mock trial hurts her so severely that finally she breaks down.

"Milord, life is a very dreadful thing. Life must be hanged. No Jeevan Jeevanamarhati 'Life is not worthy of it: Hold an enquiry against life. Sack it from its job.(116).

The words Silence! The Court is in Session indicate the absolute authority of the judge in the court room to decide upon the manners of others. The judge has also the final authority to pronounce contempt of court in case of breach of discipline. In a civilized society the court system is in vogue for the sake of justice. The judiciary is considered to be one of the four main pillars of democracy.

In the present play Vijay Tendulkar chooses a term of judicial register as the title of his play to make a powerful comment on a society with a heavy patriarchal bias that makes justice impossible and that converts the august judicial system into an instrument of oppression of women and the vulnerable. Ideally justice can be provided only if the judge and the judicial system are objectively detached. But the same objective detachment can become the face of a very repressive and dehumanized system if the persons involved in the process of justice are themselves devoid of human value and compassion. In the present play we find how Benare becomes the victim of sadism of her male counterparts.

The play oscillates between theatricalization of private life and privatization of theatrical performance. Leena Benare oscillates between reality and illusion and the imaginative and mundane. While performing the role of a woman in the group, she transcends the limitations of verbal reasoning and tries to spy into the masculine strategies. It is a bitter satire against the social ills and an interesting attempt to criticize the follies that prevail in our society.

Miss Benare pleaded in front of Rokde and Ponkshe for marrying her but her proposal was shorn 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 Swargadapi Gariyasi." (30). This is a mockery on the judge who is talking about motherland 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 of the Indian society and the prejudices it carries against women. According to Veena Dass: "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 after charges were heaped upon her. The defense lawyer was so frightened that he got up with bow head and asked very politely for a little mercy on her. Miss Benare who is very offensive at the beginning found herself trapped at the close of the play.”⁵ She tries to leave the court but all doors are bolted from outside. Mrs. Kashikar drags Miss Benare to the dock. She does not hesitate to say that these young unmarried girls get everything without marrying – and further she makes comments on her age also.

Thus the main charge is forgotten and all the characters try to impose their personal comments & accuse Miss Benare of wrong doing and immoral acts, in one way or the other. Mr. Kashikar, the judge, also jumps into the witness box and declares his personal views from the witness stand. The game of the mock trial which started for entertainment turns into Benare’s tragedy.

After hearing the arguments of Sukhatme and witnesses of different persons, Mr. Kashikar, the judge reads out the charges:

“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 crimes? (75).

Benare says: “I couldn’t kill even a common cockroach. I’m scared to do it. How could I kill a newborn child?” (79). But nobody gives ear to her words and it seems like a pre-planned conspiracy.

And finally Mr. Kashikar delivers his Judgment which seems more absurd. He says: “The crimes you have committed are most terrible. There is no forgiveness for them.....No memento of your sin should remain for future generation. Therefore, this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed.” (118-119).

It is a flat mockery on the judicial system where the judge commits the same sin in his order (to destroy the fetus) for which Miss Benare is sentenced. Law gives equal rights to men and women but it is only on papers. Even the judges are not free from the mental set-up of men’s dominance and treat women as secondary sex. Men are portrayed and delineated as embodiments of hypocrisy, selfishness and treachery. Men like Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik whose words and deeds expose their inherent malice and hypocrisy. Women, on the other hand, are portrayed as helpless victims of the conspiracies hatched by men. Benare of ‘Silence! The Court is in Session’ is being mercilessly harassed by her own co-actors.

Tendulkar’s ‘Silence! The Court is in Session’ is a powerful satire on modern society. The Kashikars, Balu Rokde, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik of the play emerge as individuals belonging to the middle class who prove to be ineffectual and discontented. Their words and actions prove, beyond any doubt, that they are neurotic, sadistic, conspiratorial and even treacherous. It is not out of genuine love for drama and they have turned theatre activity, but out of a sheer sense of their own personal failures in real life. Dejected, discontented and still daring, they can only behave cruelly towards one another. To expect them to be refined, truthful and generous is perhaps to ask for the impossible. The play ‘Silence! The Court is in Session’ satirizes the respectable façade of middle class men such as Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponshe and Karnik. The play also satirizes the values they profess. They preach the sanctity of motherhood, but show absolutely no

compunctions in asking Benare to destroy the foetus in her womb. This attitude of male power is also exposed in the play. C. Coelho says, "In his portrayal of human relations and tensions, Tendulkar depicts the violent tendency of egoistical men and equally of self-centered society."⁶ A judicial system is supposed to be a seat of justice, equality, fairness, seriousness and decorum. Through this play, Vijay Tendulkar also makes a review of the problem of degradation and the loss of dignity of the court. It is well-known that a witness has to take an oath keeping his hand on the Gita during the court procedure. But in the play, the witnesses take oath touching the Oxford English Dictionary. What is more, Mr. Kashikar also jumps into the witness box in violation of all court procedures and decorum and makes his personal comments and again resumes his seat as Judge.

Tendulkar's plays portray different aspects of human characters. All of them underscore the complexity of human relationships. Most of his plays deal with the individual pitted against the society and explore the tension between the two. In all of them, women play key roles in the plot. All the plays contain a subtle critique of modern middle-class Indian society. Most of Tendulkar's dramas follow the naturalistic model of dramaturgy. Although there is similarity; the plays are clearly distinct from each-other. *Silence! The Court is in Session* combines social criticism with the tragedy of the individual.

With this mock-play, Tendulkar has made a mockery on the present judicial system as well as criticized the middle-class morality that throttles the tender desires of Benare, a middle-class woman, to mother a child in the play. Tendulkar covertly pleads for sympathy for the victims of the society through this flash of humanity for a moment in the heart on Mr. Kashikar;⁷ but immediately silences his conscience. After all, the court is in session, where everyone is expected to keep silence. Tendulkar has expressed it by saying, "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 can not shake it off".⁸

The play is political and social satire on middle-class society's hypocrisy. In all his early plays, Tendulkar is concerned with the middle-class individuals set against the backdrop of a hostile society. Plays of Tendulkar variously deal with the different dimensions of man's cultural deformity and bring out its evil consequences on human body, mind and spirit. His feminist approach is also praise worthy.

Physically, as well as culturally, human beings are divided into two classes; men and women. This division is farther accentuated by the roles they are assigned in the making of family. Man is the head of the family, governing and controlling all its affairs. Woman is entrusted with household responsibilities, particularly those of cooking food and rearing children. This leads to the information of exploitative and oppressive society of men as against the exploited and oppressed society of women. Simon De Beauvoir rightly observes;

"One is not born but rather becomes a woman...It is civilization as whole that produce this culture....which is described as feminine."⁹

Tendulkar seems agree with above statement. Tendulkar's plays bring a turning point in Indian theatre as they shock the sensibility of the conventional audience by projecting the reality of life, human relationship, and existence. His plays are revolutionary in the sense that they bring about a transformation in the audience's mindset. They depict the doomed or lost generation of the post-independence India, where people are victims of willful monstrosity. Also the hegemony and hypocrisy of male cast members comes into the light, who like their counterpart in the society are not blameless themselves, while they still find it easy to point figures of a woman's character.

In an interview, Tendulkar was asked that "Khamosh! Adalat zari hai,' made one realize that to classify people, emotions, relationships into right-wrong, good-evil, fair –unfair is not appropriate. The better classification would be "comfortable-uncomfortable." But it is extremely difficult to convince others through writing. What conscious efforts do you make to ensure that your point goes across? Tendulkar replied that good-bad, right-wrong, once you tag things like that, you loose your ability to see the complete truth. Criminal is not only a criminal. A murder can also be a loving father. Firstly, don't tag things. The words which you and I have just used, they are insufficient to describe the picture in totality. Try not getting trapped in the dictionary meaning of words. As for me, I simply care to see and keep my eyes open, what comes out in my writing is natural without the conscious efforts of convincing or justifying".¹⁰

This excerpt makes it clearer that this play is a mockery on judicial system and Tendulkar does not believe in any artificiality and has revealed the hypocrisy of the present male-dominated society. 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."¹¹

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