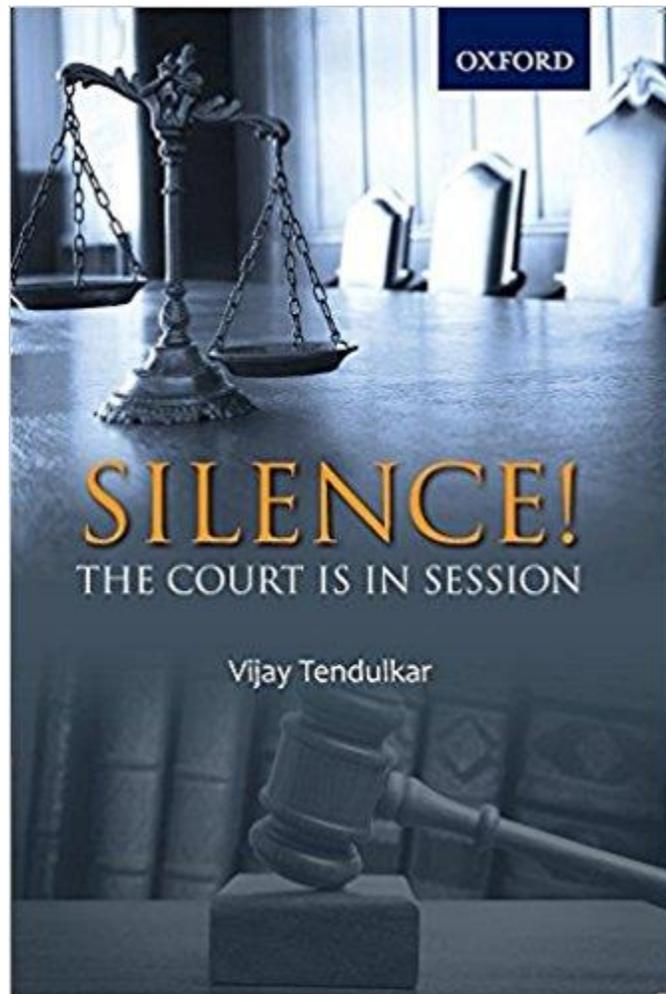


**Understanding the Feminine Mind:
A Study of Select Plays of Vijay Tendulkar**

**Ms. Monica Mahajan, Dr. Neeti Mahajan, Dr. Deepa Diddi and
Ms. Sangeeta Shahane**



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Silence-Court-Session-Vijay-Tendulkar/dp/0199476063>

Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the changes in the female psyche in the post-colonial period. Women were discontent and frustrated but these feelings were in their subconscious and they did not have the power to take steps for their liberation. Tendulkar

understood the simmering chaos and gave expression to it. Whether these women protagonist lose their battles or they win but they both express their desire for freedom. Their fight is not only against the patriarchal order but also against the institutional body of power. The paper is an attempt to understand this with respect to two plays: *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

Index Terms: Vijay Tendulkar, marginalization, feminism, gender, women's perspective, power

Vijay Tendulkar

Vijay Tendulkar, a playwright writing in Marathi, has been on the vanguard of Indian theatre for almost four decades. His works include twenty eight full length plays, twenty four one act plays and eleven children's dramas. Winner of Padma Bhushan, Vijay Tendulkar was not only a playwright but also a movie and television writer, literary essayist and a social commentator. Several of his plays have become Marathi theatre classics and have been translated and performed in many Indian languages. His first major work, *Manas Navoche Bet* (an island called Man) set him apart from other Indian playwrights. There are many others who write in other Indian languages, like Girish Karnad in Kannada, BadalSircar in Bengali, Mohan Rakesh in Hindi but Tendulkar who writes in Marathi has a style distinct from all. His characters speak naturally and do not appear artificial. There is a harmony between his form and content. His themes vary from alienation, contemporary political, historical, man-woman relationship to social issues. Tendulkar with his distinct understanding of patriarchy has explored the myriad of power relations present in society in the post-colonial period.

Women in India's Independence Movement

In India many women participated in India's fight for independence. This participation helped cause a general awakening in Indian women. After independence, the women expected freedom from gender discrimination and patriarchal domination. But these aspirations were not fulfilled and the women found themselves balancing between the west and the traditional. They questioned the norms laid down by society and resented against the system but their voices were suppressed. Tendulkar understood the simmering chaos in the minds of the women and in his plays portrayed this resentment against the social codes which were made by men at the power centres.

Objective of the Paper

The objective of the paper is to review the position of women in India in the post - independence era. The plays which have been analyzed are *Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Kamala*. Both Leela Benare and Sarita, the protagonist of these plays respectively are fighting against the patriarchal mindset which exists in society. Their fight is not only against the patriarchal order but also against the institutional body of power. The paper is an attempt to understand this with respect to two plays: *Kamala* and *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

Silence! The Court is in Session

Silence! The Court is in Session throws light on the oppressive nature of society where women are the sufferers. The word 'Silence' has been used for women who have to suffer in silence. In the play, whenever Leela Benare wants to speak she is always silenced by the sound

of the gavel. The protagonist, Benare, an independent, non-conformist woman is pitted against an orthodox, patriarchal society. The setting is a play within a play where the members of the Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) arrive in a village and have to theatrically depict the trial of American President Lyndon Johnson for producing atomic weapons. There is some time before the stage show so they decide to have a mock trial against one of the troupe members. There are members of the troupe who are willing to be tried but it is agreed to choose Leela Benare for the trial. Sukhatme, a professional lawyer and a troupe member declares that: “there is not much difference between one trial and another. But when there’s a woman in the dock, the case does have a different complexion.” Soon, the mock trial assumes serious proportions and Leela Benare’s personal life is intruded upon in the most indecent manner. The trial is malicious fun for all its members except Benare herself. The troupe has planned this mock trial to discipline the liberated Leela Benare but Vijay Tendulkar uses the mock trial to reveal the hypocrisy and moral depravity of the orthodox middle class society.

Leela Benare as a Spirited Young Woman

The first Act of the play presents Leela Benare as a spirited young woman with a zest for life. Similar to Shakespeare’s heroines, Tendulkar uses Miss Benare to portray the dilemma of many women of that period who are modern and emancipated yet vulnerable. Like many of these women, Miss Benare too is on the cross roads of emancipation and also carries the baggage of patriarchal orthodox views. Though she is lively, bold and assertive but yearns for social approval. Miss Benare, inadvertently pitches herself in both the worlds and this leads to her agony by the end of the play.

Main Story

The main story of the play moves around an unmarried expectant woman though there are many more stories crisscrossing by way of lives of a cross section of urban middle class people. Through these characters, Tendulkar discusses diverse power relations existing at the micro level in society. Tendulkar explores the power relations which according to Foucault are: ‘the most deeply invested experience in the history of human culture.’ He explores the man woman power relation in terms of Miss Benare and the men with whom she has relations; through the other men in the drama he explores the patriarchal discourse – *nastriwatanriyamarhati* (women not fit for independence) and through the other women in the play he constructs the oppositional feminist discourse which resists patriarchal power.

During the first act she has a mind of her own and is bold. She mocks at Mr. Kashikar, Mrs. Kashikar, Sukhatme, Ponkshe and even Prof Damle. But in the subsequent act, we see that her personality is ravished by the mock trial. In the second act she tries to raise her voice against society but her voice is frequently suppressed by the word, “Silence” and the sound of the gavel. As the play proceeds the mock trial grows into a serious trial and all members torture Miss Benare. This torture reveals the sadist tendencies of society which takes pleasure in inflicting misery on others. It is not only Sukhatme and Ponkshe but also Mrs. Kashikar who torture her. Mr. Kashikar who is playing the role of a Judge, frames the charge of ‘infanticide’ against Miss Leela Benare. When Mr. Kashikar frames the charge of infanticide it has a close bearing on the dignity of Miss Benare because she is not married. The charge of infanticide by all the male members of the troupe is a unified conspiracy to ruin the respect of Miss Benare. The patriarchal

system has different set of rules for men and women. Patriarchs define morality and chastity to be synonymous for women. They do not allow sexual pleasures to an unmarried woman and even if she does indulge in sexual pleasures away from the leering glances of society, society does not accept the child born out of this wedlock and calls such a child illegitimate. All the men folk in the play agree that the girls should not be given independence and should be tied in the matrimonial knot at the onset of puberty. All the male members of the troupe who point fingers on Ms. Benare sermonize on motherhood. By way of their opinions on motherhood, Tendulkar mocks at the existing hypocrisy in society. Sukhatme says:

Motherhood is a sacred thing...Motherhood is pure. Moreover, there is a greater nobility in our concept of motherhood. We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind...there is a great responsibility upon a mother. (CP114)

Ms. Benare

Not only the men, but even Mrs. Kashikar takes pleasure when the others are intruding on Ms. Benare. Mrs. Kashikar portrays the traditional women, extremely docile and unassertive. Benare, on the other hand is Tendulkar's new age woman who is bold enough to raise her voice. Mrs. Kashikar often made her venomous comments against Benare. She does not justify of the independence which independent working women enjoy. She tells Sukhatme: "That is what happens these days when you get everything without marrying" (CP 99). Here Tendulkar reveals the power play between women.

Ms. Benare tries to defend herself many times but every time she is ordered to be silent. Rather, By the end of Act II, the troupe members have sufficient evidence to prove Ms. Benare guilty. In her stead, when Ms. Benare goes towards the door to leave, she finds that the door has got bolted from outside. She wants to leave but is not able to do so. The locking of the bolt signifies the trap in which the women find themselves. They wish to get out of it but find themselves trapped in the norms laid by the orthodox patriarchal system. In the epic Ramayana, Sita undergoes *agnipariksha* to prove her chastity. The trial of Ms. Benare is also suggestive of an old practice in Indian tradition to prove chastity. Indian society likes to put its women to trial. Just as Hobbes chooses to keep the ruler outside the preview of the rule of law in his influential work *Leviathan*, the mock court also maintains a stony silence about the sexual practices of intellectuals like Prof Damle, does not question them and lets them move freely in society. The court remains silent about the practices of the male members of society and also silences the marginal female voice.

Till the second act Benare maintains silence but in act three there is a monologue where she protests against the society that has trapped her. The playwright chooses to be vocal in the end, thereby sending a strong message to all the women to break their silence against the system which lays down different rules for its men and women. Miss Benare reveals that she falls in love with her maternal uncle at the tender age of fourteen. She wants to marry him but no one supports her. He uses her body and deserts her. When she grows up she falls in love with a professor. She loves him intensely but he too uses her body and deserts her. She is pregnant with his child but society does not allow woman to be a mother without marriage. She suffers because of the two men. The men had no commitment but society leers at her instead of questioning the

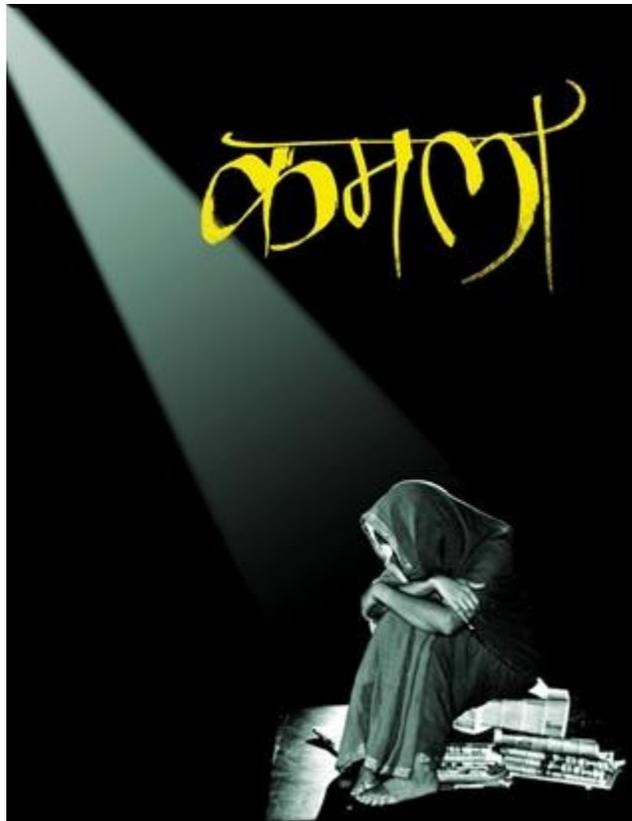
men. Leela Benare is innocent but no one seems to understand her innocence. In her simplicity she believed the two men but no one seems to appreciate her simplicity. It is a mockery of her simplicity, self-respect and dignity. In Act III, she shares her feelings: “I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the offering and went his way.”

Commodity of Oppression

The men in the play enjoyed sex but later refused to bear the consequences of their action. The play is a reflection of the oppressive nature of society. Both the plays: *Silence! The Court is in Session* and *Kamala* depicts women as a commodity of oppression. Whether these women lose their battles or they win but they both express their desire for freedom. A keen observer, Tendulkar understands the degeneration of contemporary society in terms of power politics, gender discrimination, caste and personal relationships.

Kamala

Kamala, written in 1981, is a play in two Acts. The play depicts the deplorable state of women who are treated as slaves. Tendulkar juxtaposes two women- one educated and the other a tribal and shows how they are slaves of their individual circumstances. *Kamala* is a reflection of both hegemonic and institutional violence against women.



Courtesy: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15826350-kamala>

The play opens in the residence of Jaisingh Yadav who is an adventurous journalist associated with well-circulated English daily. He risks his life and exposes different scandals and

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his efforts widen the circulation of the daily. Jaisingh attains for himself name, fame and money. He writes about the flesh trade in certain areas of Bihar but it is dismissed as false news for lack of definite facts. Determined to expose the flesh trade, Jaisingh goes beyond Ranchi to Luhardaga, a place where they sell human beings. In Luhardaga, women of all age groups are openly auctioned and people from long distances visit the place to make their bids.

Patriarchal Domination

As an evidence to the flourishing flesh trade Jaisingh buys an adivasi woman for rupees two hundred and fifty. Jaisingh is a product of the patriarchal system and is unaware of his own actions. Ironically Jaisingh himself commits the crime he wants to expose. He is not sensitive to Kamala as a human being and looks at her only as evidence. He is also inconsiderate to the maid servant, Kamalabai. He bosses over her and gives orders and rebukes her. Neither does he consider Sarita's opinion in any matter. An advocate of freedom, he has not given any freedom to his own wife. The playwright gives the reader several hints of Jaisingh's patriarchal mindset when he disappears for several days without sharing his whereabouts with his wife. What Simon de Beauvoir says about modern men applies to Jaisingh. Beauvoir opines that the men of today show a duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women; they are willing on the whole to accept women as a fellow being, an equal but they require her to remain the inessential.

Sarita

As the macrocosm so the individual. In her domestic space, Jai Singh's wife Sarita is a slave to the patriarchal norms. Kamala's arrival helps Sarita evolve from a non-entity to an empowered individual. In the play, the viewers see her changing from being a subservient, unassertive wife in the beginning of the play to becoming an assertive individual by the end of the play. From the beginning of the play Sarita is mindful of her reality. When Kakasaheb said that they did not give her to Jaisingh to take her back as a widow. Sarita replies, "But you did give me away, didn't you? Then that's that". Tendulkar draws our attention to the age old hindu tradition where the girl's parents believe it to be their duty to give the daughter away in marriage. Sarita may be feeling the brunt of patriarchal psyche but she does not vent her emotions and carries out her duties as a wife. She makes meticulous arrangements when her husband returns home after four days. Like a wife Sarita is also expected to write the details of all his phone calls, be a graceful social companion and a sexual companion.

Kamala's presence and her disempowerment help Sarita understand patriarchal power. The prime point of the play is when Kamala asks Sarita: "How much did he buy you for?" It is a moment of revelation for Sarita. She realizes that if Kamala is a tribal slave she too is a slave of the orthodox patriarchal system. In fact, Kamala suggests that the two of them can divide the work between them to keep the 'master' happy. In her essay, *Can The Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Spivak speaks of a silenced subaltern but Tendulkar's Kamala is a subaltern but not inarticulate. Tendulkar's Kamala is the reason for Sarita's self-awakening and self-realization. Sarita is also disturbed by Jaisingh's casual appropriation of Kamala for his own vested interests. Immediately after the drinking when Jaisingh hungers for physical intimacy, Sarita refuses. Through this she contests over a patriarchal view that dictates women's body as its dominion. Her refusal to make herself available reiterates the right of a woman over her body. Soon she declines the role of a social companion thereby resisting the commoditization of a woman as a pretty object on the

husband's side. Kamala wakes up Sarita from her disempowering state of existence. Sarita shares with Kakasaheb:

I was asleep. I was unconscious even when I was awake. Kamala woke me up. With a shock Kamala showed me everything. Because of her I suddenly saw clearly. I saw that the man I thought my partner was the master of a slave. I have no rights at all in this house. (CP 46)

Awakening of Sarita

By the end of the play, Sarita is awakened. Like any modern day woman she becomes aware of the husband wife relationship based on mutual respect, responsibility and equality in decision making. In the end, Sarita extends her hand to Jaisingh for support but it is not a lame hand rather a supportive hand. Her action is not born out of any compulsion or intimidation. She resolves, "But a day will come, Kakasaheb, when I will stop being a slave."

Sarita is no longer the oppressed. She becomes the woman fighting for equality in a dominant male culture. Her voice is not unheard. The play is a big way forward in the assertion of rights and justice for women. There is always an opportunity for progress.

Simon de Beauvoir states that, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described feminine." Both Leela Benare and Kamala are not prepared to accept the moral and social codes of a male dominated society and gather courage and raise their voice against it. Their subversive and assertive statements reveal their search for identity. In both these plays, Tendulkar gives an insight into the feminine mind and clearly shows its development to mitigate the effects of the patriarchal set of mind.

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