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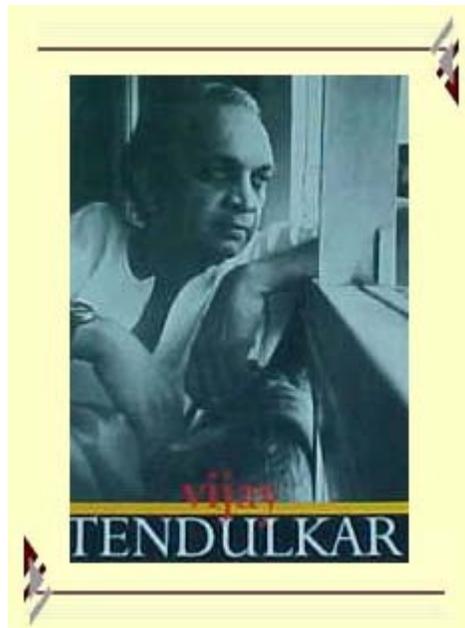
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Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session:* Social Criticism and Individual Tragedy

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From <http://www.iaac.us/Tendulkarfestival/home.htm>

Vijay Tendulkar, a great Indian playwright

Vijay Tendulkar, one of the outstanding Indian playwrights, was born in Mumbai on 6th January 1928. He started writing at an early age, and as a writer he has excelled in many departments of literature: essays, short stories, criticism, screenplay writing and drama. In the beginning he appeared as a controversial writer, but his works showed him as an honest artist. His honesty and skill won him reputation and recognition. Today, he is celebrated as a great Indian playwright.

Satire, Sarcasm and Reality in *Silence! The Court is in Session*

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, 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 paralyzed values and customs. The society does not like to perceive or receive any social change. Tendulkar presents a treatment of those ugly ways of society in this play. It is a bitter satire against the social ills and an interesting attempt to criticize the follies that prevail in our society.

The Background and Story

I'd consider *Silence! The Court is in Session* to be Tendulkar's best play. In it we find a group of teachers who were planning to stage a play in a village. It so turned out that one of the members of the cast did not show up. A local stagehand was asked to replace him. A rehearsal was arranged and a mock trial was staged to make him understand the court procedure. A mock charge of infanticide was leveled against Miss Benare, one of the members of the cast. Then the pretend-play or game suddenly turned into a grim charge and it emerged from the witness that Miss Benare did kill an illegitimate child by Prof. Damle, the missing member of the cast.

Charges

It is important here to note that these charges became verbalized only in the absence of 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, charge upon charge was 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.¹

The Plight of Miss Benare

Benare is an educated woman about thirty-four years old. She worked as a schoolteacher. She was also associated with an amateur dramatic alliance, whose prime purpose was to educate the public with social and current issues. The association chose to educate people with procedures of a court of law. They arrived on the spot quite early, thus they decided to have a rehearsal of mock court. Benare was reluctant to perform the role of an accused but this reluctance was ignored. The playwright endeavors to create a game-like non-serious atmosphere. But soon the imaginary charges led to personal dilemmas.

Benare is seen in a cheerful mood of flamboyance, but she gets her first blow, when Ponshe, a scientist, says, "She runs after men too much." Karnik, one of the characters, says that Benare was in love with her maternal uncle but the affair ended in fiasco. He further "reveals" her past life by saying that she first proposed to Ponshe and then tried to deceive Rokde, a young boy.

The Judgment

Mr. Kashikar, the presiding Judge, reads out the charge and pronounces:

"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 crime?"²

Benare says: “I couldn’t kill even a common cockroach. I’m scared to do it. How could I kill a newborn child?”³

This falls deaf on the ears of men in the court. Benare’s views are rejected by all of them, and it seems like a pre-planned conspiracy. Benare herself observes their odious nature by saying, “ You’ve all deliberately ganged up against me! You have plotted against me.”

Literally Trapped

Benare tries to leave the court but becomes upset when all doors all automatically bolted from outside. In fact, she is trapped and can’t escape. Furthermore, Mrs. Kashikar executes physical violence to drag Benare to the dock. She has another damaging view against Benare. She does not hesitate to say that these young unmarried girls get everything without marrying. She shows her doubt, how can Benare remain unmarried till the age of thirty-four?

Accusations Not on File

Thus, the main charge is wholly forgotten during the trial. All the characters try to impose their personal comments and accuse Benare of wrong-doing and immoral acts, in one form or another. The game of mock trial, which started for entertainment, turns into Benare’s tragedy. Benare is totally devastated. She is also stricken with a sense of fear like a trapped animal, and has been dismembered morally and socially.

Benare utters only these words, after her failure in love with her maternal uncle: “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 very dreadful thing.”³ She wanted to die, but she could not.

Destroy the Child!

The judgment itself seems more absurd. Mr. Kashikar says: “The crimes you have committed are most terrible. There is no forgiveness for them...No memento of your sin should remain for future generations. Therefore this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed.”⁴

Mockery of Trials, Judges and Justice

A judicial court is supposed to be a seat of Justice, seriousness and decorum. Through this play, Tendulkar also makes a review of the present day court procedures, and points out the problem of degradation and the loss of the dignity of the court. It is a matter of fact that a witness has to take an oath keeping his hand on the Gita or some such religious scripture, during the court procedures.

In the play, the witnesses take oath touching the *Oxford English Dictionary*. What is more, Mr. Kasikar, the judge, also jumps into the witness box in violation of all court procedures and decorum, and declares his personal views from the witness stand: “A

sinful canker on the body of society- that's my honest opinion of these grown-up unmarried girls.”⁵

Who Is Under Attack Here?



From <http://passionforcinema.com/a-conversation-with-sir-vijay-tendulkar/>

Tendulkar has criticized the middle-class morality that throttles the tender desires of Benare, a middle class woman, to mother a child in the play. Tendulkar seems to leave the play without suggesting any solution to the problem. None in the play is ready to sympathize with Benare. Only Mr. Kashikar, the judge, feels that they are going too far in their mock-trial but, then, he immediately silences his conscience. After all the Court is in session, and everyone is expected to keep silence! Tendulkar covertly pleads for sympathy for the victims of the society through this flash of humanity for a moment in the heart of Mr. Kashikar.⁶

Silence! The Court is in Session is not a propaganda play. It grapples with several problems of the Indian society—such as the degradation of the judiciary system, pretentious institutional social service organizations, and forceful male supremacy in Indian society, in a masterful way. However, the fact is that we look at the world and our friends, relatives, et al., and value their roles only from their utility towards our ends. Conventional morality is only an imaginary issue.

References

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²Tendulkar, Vijay. *Silence! The court is in Session*, trans. Priya Adakar (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1978). p. 25.

³Ibid, p. 73.

⁴Ibid, p. 75-76.

⁵Ibid, p. 67-68.

⁶Reddy, P.Obula. "The Violence of Middle Class: A Study of Vijay's Tendulkar's Silense! The Court is in Session," *Indian Literature Today*, ed. R. K. Dhawan (Prestige Books: New Delhi.1998, vol. I.), p.42-43.

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