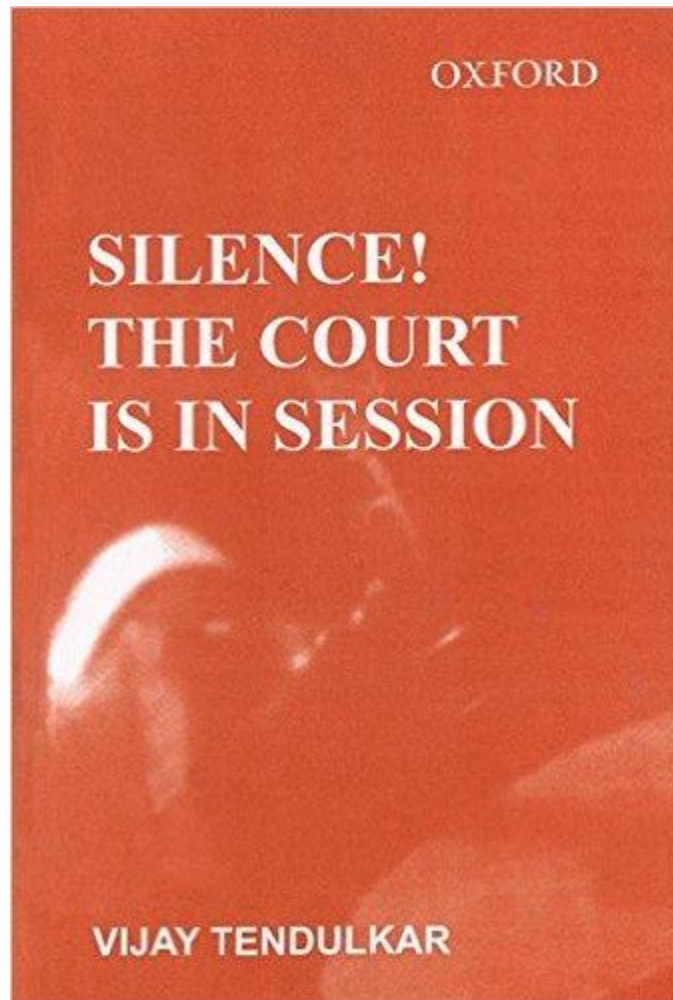


**Suppression of Women in a Male Dominated Society:
A Study of Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court Is In Session* and
*The Vultures***

S. Meenakumari, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.



Abstract

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the most renowned as well as controversial playwrights of India. His plays focus on the conflicts between the individual and the society. In his plays, women play a central role. *Silence! The Court is in Session* is a satirical play. Benare is the

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protagonist of this play. The play exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of all male characters against the protagonist Benare. Judicial court is supposed to be a seat of justice, seriousness and decorum. The play mocks at the judicial system. The play depicts the tragedy of an individual who is victimized by the society. Finally, in a state of desperation, she consumes poison and dies. In the other play *The Vultures* tells about the unmitigated violence arising from greed and immorality. It portrays the domestic violence caused by greed. The selfishness and greed of human beings are the main issues of the play. Rama and Manik are the two women characters of the play. These women characters suffer in the hands of men. Violence is the main theme of the play. Thus, the playwright Vijay Tendulkar clearly depicts the suppression of women in male dominated society in his plays *Silence! The court is in session* and *The Vultures*.

Key Words: Suppression, Judicial system, Domestic Violence, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *The Vultures*.

Introduction

Literature is broadly defined as anything that is written. There are a few characteristic features that differentiate literature from other writing. In a literary piece of writing, language is handled with extreme care to drive at the desired effect. It is written in any one literary genre like poetry, prose, fiction or drama. It expresses ideas of permanent or universal interest.

Drama is meant for a live performance. It communicates in the present. Even, an illiterate can watch a drama, get educated and entertained from it. The action in drama plays a crucial role. But, in other genres, words are more important. In drama, even if an audience misses a word, he could make out the meaning from the gestures and the acting of the artists.

Patriarchy is a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways. The subordination that women experience at a daily level, regardless of the class they might belong to takes various forms of discrimination, disregard, insult, control, exploitation, oppression, violence within the family, at the place works, in society.

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Vijay Dhondopant Tendulkar (1928-2008) is one of the best known playwrights in modern Indian theatre. He was born on 6th January 1928. He has been the leading playwright of Marathi for more than fifty years. He started his career as a dramatist with his play *Shreemant* in 1955. Tendulkar's eight plays are translated into English. They are *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1968), *Encounter in Umbugland* (1969), *The Vultures* (1972), *Sakharam Binder* (1972), *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972), *Kamala* (1982), *A Friend's Story* (1982), *Kanyadaan* (1983).

Male Dominance in *Silence! The Court is in Session*

Indian Civilization has an unquestioned practice of treating women as the secondary self who has to dance to the tune of man's lyric as regards their choice, belief and life style. Tendulkar treats his female protagonists with a great comprehension and sympathy. His female characters reveal his intensive treatment of themes like social conscience and complex human relationships.

In patriarchal culture, power is equated with aggression and masculinity, weakness with compassion and femininity. Women are supposed to bear male oppression silently and meekly. The purpose of this oppression is to obtain psychological ego satisfaction and strength and self-esteem. Since this question of subjugation of woman in patriarchal power structure is crucial in modern culture, Indian as well as Western dramatists have used the stage to expose gender discrimination in patriarchy and how women fight against this injustice. The purpose of this research paper is the study of male dominance in Vijay Tendulkar's play *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

The Central Theme

The central theme of Vijay Tendulkar's drama, *Silence! The Court is in Session* is the plight and predicament of women whose bodily wealth is plundered by gang of selfish men. In this play Vijay Tendulkar chooses a term of judicial register as the title of his play to make a powerful satire on society with a heavy patriarchal bias that makes justice impossible. A judicial court is supposed to be a seat of Justice, seriousness and decorum.

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Throughout this play, Tendulkar makes a review of the present-day court procedures, and points out the problem of degradation of the court. The play depicted the tragedy of an individual victimized by society. The female protagonist becomes the victim of sadism of his male counterparts. The audience is made to witness the enactment of what is rehearsal of sort of a mock-trial to be staged later in the day.

Silence! The Court is in Session (1967), one of Tendulkar's finest dramatic works, is a play originally written in Marathi and later translated into English by Priya Adarkar. Known for its artistic creativity and resourcefulness, the play "combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society" (Banerjee 18). The Play originated from a real life incident in which Tendulkar met an amateur group which was on its way to stage a mock-trial in Vile Parle, a suburb of Bombay.

Futile Struggle of a Woman

In the play, Tendulkar presents the futile struggle of a woman in the male-dominated society of post-Independence India. By using the techniques of dramatic irony and satire effectively the playwright portrays how a young woman suffers a lot and undergoes deep mental agony when she is betrayed by the other members of the group. Leela Benare is the central character of this group. She is a young school teacher. In this play, the hypocrisy of the male-dominated middle-class society and its brutal hostility against women is exposed. Benare is a young, energetic, vivacious, rebellious and individualistic and she defies the established social conventions and dictates.

The play has many characters but Benare overshadows everyone because of her intelligence, sense of humour, argumentative skills and her awareness of personal freedom, space and existence. She, a fair born creature without any narrow dichotomy of male and female is ready to work with other human beings. She demonstrates herself as a qualified individual who understands her responsibilities. Because of her devotion to her job and her sincerity, she has won the admiration of her students.

In school, when the first bell rings, my foot's already on the threshold. I have not heard a single reproach for not being on time these past eight years. Nor about my

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teaching. I'm never behindhand with my lessons! Exercises corrected on time, too! Not a bit of room for disapproval – I don't give an inch of it to any one! (STCS 3-4).

Open-minded Assertive Benare

Benare is open-minded and expects everyone to be candid and not repulsive. She considers adults to be full of hollow faiths and sick of self-knowledge. These people show no respect to others and often remain in their so-called orthodox beliefs. Every inch a living, loving and caring creature, she possesses all the colours that would qualify her to be the most deserving maiden whom the prospective grooms could run after. She has a very good sense of humour and tenderness full of longings and fondness for life. Though a teacher by profession, she does not consider her profession to eat out all life that is in store. Her awareness about the expectations of the various stages of life and time appear quite genuine when she says:

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 life's over do you think anyone will give you a bit of theirs? (STCS 8)

These words reveal the assertive, independent, bold, indomitable and individualistic nature of Miss Benare. The woman, Benare, faces the mock charge of infanticide in the mock rehearsal of a play and her affair with professor Damale is exposed by her fellow actors. It is on Sukhatme's suggestion that they decide to make Benare the accused. It is notable that Benare is allotted the role of the accused in *silence! The court is in session*. Benare is cross-examined in the court with full mockery. All the other characters like witnesses Mr. Gopal Ponshe, Mr. Karnik, Rokde, 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. Benare is summoned merely as a witness while she remains the prime accused as the mother of an illegitimate child and having illicit relations with so many persons.

Premarital Relationship and Motherhood

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In the beginning of the play, Benare is bubbling with over-confidence. She represents the working class women who want to lead a liberated life. Though she is a victim of male chauvinism, it is not in the main focus as it is referred to by way of reflection by Benare herself. She is robbed of her family when she is hardly fourteen years old. The important point of the play is the violent response of the male dominated society to premarital relationship and motherhood. The mock-trial holds a mirror to the social response to such things. It is pre-eminently male biased. What is wrong, immoral for a woman is not so far a man. Benare is the accused and not Prof. Damle.

The character of Ms. Benare reminds of various female characters depicted by Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai in their books. These writers also exposed the suffering of the women at the hands of the male dominated society. The mock - trial holds a mirror to the social response towards moral values. Sex is a private affair in one's life. But there are certain social and moral values attached to it. Pre-marital or post-marital sexual relations are condemned in Indian society. The social rules in practice are stricter for women than for men. Tendulkar throws light on the hypocrisy of the society that excuses men for the same offence women have been condemned.

Mock Law Court

Leela Benare and Samant are the first to arrive at the village hall where the actors are to stage a "Mock Law Court". Then she tells him about the perfect, candid and outspoken nature of children in the school. While Benare talking about the relationship between her and her students in the class she tells Samant that because of her efficiency in her teaching work and the enviable attachment of her students to her, other teachers and the management are unjustifiably jealous of her. Benare is sometimes a naughty, childish, mischievous and fun-loving woman. When she tries to entertain other actors, she is scolded by Sukhatme.

Except Professor Damle and Rawte, all the other actors have arrived. Professor Damle is unable to join them as he is busy with a symposium in the university. Rawte is absent because he is sick with flu. Sukhatme tells Kashikar that he will play the roles of both the counsel for the prosecution and that for the accused. Then Samant is asked to play the role of Rawte and thus he

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becomes the fourth witness in the “Mock Law Court”. Since they have already staged the atomic weapons trial seven times in the past three months, they feel that they need not have the rehearsal before the show. Ironically it is Benare who suggests the idea that a different play other than the atomic weapons trial should be performed. They finally decide to stage a mock-trial in order to make Samant understand the intricacies of court procedure.

Arrangements are being made to perform the mock-trial or the “play-within-the play”. When Benare goes into the inner room to wash her face, Ponkshe and Karnik who have some knowledge of Benare’s personal life conspire against her. Finally, at Sukhatme’s suggestion they all decide to make Benare the accused in the mock-trial. Mrs. Kashikar too supports the idea by saying: “We’ll be able to see what the trial of a woman is like” (STCS 22). When Benare comes out of the inner room fresh, singing a song Ponkshe tells her:

Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature and brought as a prisoner before the bar of this court (STCS 23).

Shocked and Stunned

Benare is terribly shocked. Unable to understand what is happening, “she looks around her numbly” (23). Kashikar assuming the role of the judge addresses Benare: “Prisoner Miss Benare, under section 302 of the Indian Penal Code you are accused of the crime of infanticide” (STCS 23-24).

Benare is greatly stunned on hearing this unexpected charge and the whole atmosphere becomes incredibly serious and grim. In order to throw more light on the case, Kashikar reprimands her for obstructing the procedure of the court in session. She tries to reason with him and pleads not guilty. As she couldn’t even think of killing a common cockroach, how could she ever kill a newborn child? The distinction between the fictitious accused and the real-life one ceases to exist and the mock-trial begins to assume sinister dimensions. Benare is terribly crushed and humiliated by others under the pretension that the trial is nothing but a game. As the

counsel for prosecution Sukhatme begins his argument which reflects spontaneously the views of the male-dominated society.

The Judge and Court Proceedings

By setting aside the court tradition Mr. Kashikar, the judge of the mock-trial, expresses his desire to be openly examined as a witness. Standing in the witness box he tells Sukhatme, that Nanasaheb Shinde, the Chairman of the Education Society in Bombay has already decided to dismiss Benare from her service. He tells the lawyer that he heard Nanasaheb talking to someone on the phone angrily: “It is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be still more immoral to let such a woman teach, in such a condition! There is no alternative--this woman must be dismissed” (STCS 69). Dazed by the revelations made by Kashikar, Benare tries to drink the deadly poison TIK – 20 but she is at once prevented from doing so by Karnik.

Thus, she reveals her agonized self, her intense feeling of love and gusto for life which resulted unfortunately in pregnancy. Because of her natural thirst for love and sexual desires she happened to defy the patriarchal values, cultural and moral restrictions and the institution of marriage. Without any pretension, she openly admits her moral weakness and tragic dilemma courageously.

Though the members of the mock-court have, in fact, derived a lot of vicious and sadistic pleasure by forcing Benare to disclose her private sexual life they are, no doubt, stupefied by her true and honest confession of the intimate secrets of her life. Finally, Kashikar, the judge, gives the verdict. He tells Benare that the crimes committed by her are the most terrible. He states: “Marriage is the very foundation of our society’s stability. Motherhood must be sacred and pure.” (STCS 76). He continues: “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” (STCS 76). The judge passes his judgement without giving a chance for cross-examination by the defence-lawyer and this violates the basic norms of the court. Moreover, the judgement is based on half-truths and fictitious stories presented by the character-assassins and scandal-mongers.

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On hearing the inhuman, heartless, merciless and cold-blooded verdict of the judge, Benare writhes in unbearable pain and screams: “No! No! No! – I won’t let you do it – I won’t let it happen – I won’t let it happen!” (STCS 76). Terribly upset with the paroxysm of torment, Benare collapses on the nearby table. She is found motionless and only “stifled sobs” are heard when others are “as still as statues” (STCS 76). At this time someone from outside opens the door and asks whether the play has already started. Samant answers him by saying that the play is yet to begin. Meanwhile others try to convince her that it was after all a mock-trial and only a game. Unable to wake her up from her inert position Samant places the green cloth parrot in front of her and goes away. At the end of the play Benare’s voice is heard singing a song softly.

Superb Social Criticism

Silence! The Court is in Session is a superb social criticism of male domination in society by which “women have often been called upon to make sacrifices, adjust and accommodate claims of religion and moralities and suppress their personal claims . . . Women have often been left waiting on the margin” (Jain 9). Through the play, Tendulkar makes a call for introspection on gender inequality and inhuman social norms and conventions forced upon the weaker sex.

The Vultures

The Vultures by Tendulkar is the most powerful argument on the unbridled upsurge of violence. It has become more relevant and intense because in *The Vultures* it is manifested amid the framework of family and familial relationship. *The Vultures* is an indictment of the male oriented society in which women are mere slaves for the achievement of men. In the play, the human relationship between man-woman is depicted as husband-wife, brother-sister, father-daughter, lover-beloved and exploited-exploiter relationship. He exposes the inhuman violence in its verbal form of the patriarchal society against women. The themes of the play are based on the present socio-economic situation, family and marital relations, violence and male domination.

Domestic Violence in *The Vultures*

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The very title of the play *The Vultures* suggests violence and ruthlessness. Vultures are flesh-eating birds. In literature, it stood for greedy people who stop at nothing to gain their ends, even if it means living of the misfortunes of others. Even before the play actually begins, the elaborate stage setting mentions “a shrill screeching of vultures” (TV 201). This ominous sound sets the backdrop for the violent scenes that follow and it is repeated from time to time in the course of the play especially after a heinous act has been committed. The play reveals violence both physical and emotional within the family set up. This violence at varied levels ruthlessly dissects human nature, excavating from its depths the inherent selfishness, avarice and cruelty which very often lay in the unconscious zone of the mind.

Hari Pitale and Family

The play displays the unmitigated violence arising from drunkenness, greed, and immorality. It is a play built on contrasting situations. The play displays the five vultures on the swinging branch - Hari Pitale, the embittered patriarch of the family, his brother Sakharam who feels cheated, Pitale’s greedy sons Ramakant and Umakant and his insecure daughter Manik, who despite her masculine name, is a victim of exploitation both within and outside the house. Rama, the sensitive daughter-in-law to whom Rama turns for physical gratification and emotional support, find themselves trapped in the midst of these vultures’ human beings. Everyone in the family suffers from a sense of insecurity and consequently there is disharmony within the characters.

The play tells the story of the Pitale family: Mr. Hari Pitale (Pappa), his two sons, Ramakant and Umakant, daughter Manik, and Rama, Ramakant’s wife. Another member of the family is Rajaninath, Pappa’s illegitimate son. All the characters portrayed cruelty, greed and cunningness of the vulture except Rama and Rajaninath. The fact that the lives of Rama and Rajaninath are bound with these human vultures gives rise to a conflict of great dramatic significance. Pappa, Ramakant, Umakant and Manik display the savagery of vulture through their words as well as actions. The interrelationships among the family members are hopelessly degenerate. All their strength is spent in searching inhuman tricks to cheat others.

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Rama pleads her husband, Ramakant to leave the house because nobody can be happy in such a haunted house. Umakant wants his share and possession of the mortgaged house, but Ramakant refuses to help him to pay his debt. Thus, Umakant takes revenge on his brother by telling him that Rajaninath is the real father of Rama's child. On hearing it, Ramakant becomes restless. He broods over it and decides to abort the child of Rama.

Rajaninath and Rama

The relationship between Rajaninath and Rama is called as a lover-beloved relationship. Rajaninath is the illegitimate son of Pappa. Rama is the wife of Ramaknt. Rajaninath is the brother-in-law of Rama. He watches the violent disintegration of the family. His coldness allows him to record the cruelty of the people involved in the process and the suffering of Rama. There is a split between Rajaninath and Rama. Both are strikingly cold and his poetry is charged with passion, sympathy and concern for Rama.

Though Rajaninath and Rama have great sympathy for each other, they are outsiders. Rama is a sensitive, naturally kind and good- hearted individual but she is like a helpless, submissive among the vultures. Rajaninath is out casted from the family. He lives in the garage. Rama's illicit relationship to her half-brother-in-law evokes the question of morality. So the patriarchic society doesn't give permission for such type of relationship but it is the genuine and humane relationship in the whole play. The relationship between them is immoral. The sexual aspect of their association is only their true love.

Rama wants to fulfill her desire to become a mother through him. So, she keeps illicit relationship with Rajaninath. It is different relationship from the other members of the family. He closely watches the painful condition of Rama in the house of vultures. He pours out his feelings through his monologues. She secretly feeds him because he is lonely, helpless, unmarried man lived in the old garage. He also accepts whatever she brings for him. Rajaninath says: ". . . If you took mud in your hand, it'd turn to sweetmeats." (TV 239) It shows his faith on Rama and she also shows sympathy and kindness towards him.

Agony and Frustration

Rama expresses her agony and frustration in the whole play. She is bored to her husband's drunken love. As a husband, Ramakant doesn't pay attention to her. He treats her badly, and then she declares her intention to have a relationship with Rajaninath. For that purpose, she is ready to keep immoral relationship with him. She is hungry for motherhood. According to her, every woman has her own rights, wills. No one can stop it. In this context, Rama says:

. . . It's not the fault of doctors, of learned men, of saints and sages! It's not even my fault! This womb's healthy and sound, I swear it! I was born to become a mother. This soil's rich, it's hungry. But the seed won't take root. If the seed's soaked in poison, if it's weak, feeble, and lifeless devoid of virtue-then why blame the soil? (TV 241).

In this relationship, no one is dominant. Both are equal and kind. When Rama goes to give Rajaninath food and tea, Ramakant stops her and says if he is so proud, then why he is begging for food and tea. But she has been always on Rajaninath's side. She shows mercy to him. Though she has no courage to bring food and tea openly for him, she gives food to him. It shows her love for him.

Cruel Relationship Between the Brothers and Their Sister

The play presents a cruel relationship between the brothers and their sister. Manik leads a stressful life. She can't even drink water because of her fear that it might contain poison. She cannot have sound sleep because there is a constant threat to her life from her brothers. It seems 'Raksha Bandan' is meaningless from their point of view. Ramakant and Umakant always humiliate her. They call their sister "a whore". Once they plotted to poison her. They have an eye on her share in the property. The brothers even plot to blackmail and demand twenty-five thousand rupees blackmailing the Raja of Hondur who is in love with Manik and has made her pregnant: "Otherwise, bloody publicity! Uproar in the bloody newspaper!" (TV 232). They don't respect the sanctity of the tender relationship between brother and sister. Vrinda Nabar in this connection rightly observes:

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Vulture-like, they prey on one another: Conventional sentimentalities have no place in their world where fathers deceive children, in a destructive vortex of greed and treachery (qtd.in Kharat.T.S 6).

Unfortunately, Raja's death by a heart attack makes them frustrated. They think to make a public show of Manik becoming sati sitting on the brat and thereby earn money by selling out tickets. Both of them beat and kick her on the belly so that the brat is aborted. She screams, cries before the stony-hearted devil brothers. Her leg is broken. The inhuman beating of Manik is one of the awful scenes in the play. Then, Manik takes her revenge by trying to abort her sister-in-law's child.

Violent Play

Tendulkar's *The Vultures* is indeed the most violent play. Hari Pitale and Manik thirst for revenge. Both succeed in their mission. While Pappa succeeds in driving Ramakant to the streets, Manik succeeds in causing Rama's abortion. The dialogue is composed of words which seem appropriate in the mouths of the characters who utter them. On the whole, the play is no doubt, naturalistic in its portrayal of domestic violence caused by greed.

Tendulkar witnessed the different facets of violence prevalent all around him. The rampant violence, exploitation, and oppression made him restless. To expose all this, he started presenting raw violence in his plays. In his plays, he never fails to produce sympathy for the victims of violence and abhorrence for the tradition of victimhood. Tendulkar's primary compulsion to create violent scenes in his plays had essentially a humanistic purpose. Although he accepted violence as one of the basic human instincts, he never supported the meek option of bearing it dumbly. He believes in revolt and change to lay the foundations of a society.

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S. Meenakumari, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English
P.S.R Engineering College
Sevalpatti 626140
Sivakasi
Virudhunagar District
Tamil Nadu
India
meenasaranya92@gmail.com

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S. Meenakumari, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

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