

## **Gendering Social Protest: Analysing the Plays of Vijay Tendulkar**

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Women studies and feministic ideologies have been studied in relation to literature for some time from the inception of feminism and womanism in the field of literature. Much have been studied and debated since its inception; however, the studies of woman remain an elusive one as it evades any definite conclusion. It is due to the discrimination and subordination that has been seen in studying gender discrimination and disparity. However, the need for emancipation of women from all spheres of life and empowerment of women in all walks of life have been much felt by the creative writers and professional academicians. The very 'she' in women studies is recusant not because of Elaine Showalter or Kate Millet but because of the status attached to her and the way in which she is treated by the male society. The social system established by the menfolk considers women as soubrette.

Present society is governed by industrialization, capitalism, science and technology and changes in socio – cultural aspects. Life of modern man has lost all sense of unity/coherence. It has been fragmented, thwarted and made to remain as islands. Hence, the theme of man – woman relationship becomes and universal one in which the literary texts relate man and woman to social, cultural and economic, moral and political domains. Man's life becomes a complex one in relation to psychological, sociological and patriarchal set – up. In a male – dominated patriarchal society, woman has no voice of her own and has no means to articulate her feelings, emotions, and sentiments.

Simon de Beauvoir in **The Second Sex** writes, "For the man is not of the woman but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman but the woman for the man (...) for the husband is the head of wife even as Christ is the head of the church. Therefore, as the church is subject up to Christ, so let the wives be to their husband in everything" (110).

So, it can be argued that in the psychological make up of marriage can be taken as a form of slavery to a woman. It is not social or sacred institution supported by tradition, custom or social morality. Marriage also involves pre-marital, marital, post-marital, extra-marital relationships.

Several writers have explored the theme of marriage, love, and sex as a social problem in their writings. This theme of marriage, love and sex is a basic one for human relations between man and woman. Yet, this relationship is often depicted in crisis as there is rarely a smooth and conflictless relationship between man and woman. In marriage, love and sex compatibility is a major problem. Hence, sustaining such a relationship becomes a difficult one. Compatibility demands not only the physical union on the same ground but also the emotional and intellectual union on the same level.

In the plays of Tendulkar, woman's issues have been dealt with deep sensitivity and focused scrutiny. His plays unmask the hypocrite conventional patriarchal middle class. This can be seen in **Silence!**, **Binder**, **Kamala** and **Kanyadan**. G.P. Deshpande in "Remembering Tendulkar" points out that "one finds these plays powerful but rather bleak, some might even say nihilistic. Their power was undeniable. But so was their nihilism. In this phase we see Tendulkar moving towards a position that treated violence and cruelty as primordial. A potential rebel has now turned into a nihilistic metaphysician" (20).

Tendulkar not only exhibits nihilism and metaphysical attitude but also deals with the modernist tendency and belongs to the genre of theatre of cruelty. It can also be taken as a satire on the degradation of Judiciary system, pretentious institutional social service, organizations, and forceful male supremacy.

In all his plays, Tendulkar depicts woman as loyal, docile, hardworking and tenderhearted. While he deals with woman and woman issues, he relates these issues/problems to the very existence of human mind, human being, human psychology and human relationship in various/varied forms. Women are related to the issues of violence, sex, Illicit sexual relations, power, stability in the family and society, and all related social issues.

**Silence!** Covers the issues of love, betrayal, motherhood, right to economic independence, right to self-esteem and right to a dignified life. Benare is accused of infanticide and labeled as promiscuous. Benare remains in the receiving end without any deliverance. In fact, her desperate attempts to find a father for her unborn child are typical efforts conforming to the patriarchal norms.

In **Silence!**, Tendulkar presents the mock – trial concept to represent the subjugation of women. In it, Benare is attacked for no fault of her own and the play hints to her personal tragedy. In the end, she collapses and faints and becomes a victim of a male chauvinistic society. All the characters in the play like Ponkshe, the science student, Sukhatme – the lawyer, Karnik – the theatre actor, Balu Rokde and Mr and Mrs. Kashikar represent the patriarchal forces at work. They attack Benare more severely because she attains a greater level of self – confidence and mental clarity that they wish to have but cannot attain it. In fact, Benare remains a living self-assertive woman, who has been silenced by the patriarchal and societal norms. Her private life is nakedly exposed and she is made to undergo a thorough postmortem throughout the play. Benare is made to voice her self-assertion and individuality.

In the opening scene of **Silence!**, Benare, the self – conscious, vehemently assertive and a n independent woman, is pitted against the utterly selfish, hypocritical and malicious amateur artists, who are going to try her and reverse the natural justice by their false and intended and preconceived verdict. Through Benare, Tendulkar seems to assert that human life is always an unending source of material for literature and literature is after all a mirror that reflects the outer world as well as the inner universe. Tendulkar skillfully moulds the socio – political milieu in **Silence!**. His play comprises a critique on the vices, drawbacks, and limitations of contemporary Indian Society. Likewise, he expresses his dislike for hypocrisy, vulgarity, barbarism, superficiality, narrow – mindedness, corruption, duplicity, and treachery. While depicting the drawbacks and vices of both an individual and society, his humanitarian approach and his commitment to human values are clearly perceptible. They create an uproar in Indian society, posing new challenges and demanding new morality.

The play, **Silence!** is a satire on social as well as legal justice. Miss Benare is held guilty on the basis of witnesses only. So, the play obliquely suggests that the present day justice is just a mockery. Throughout the rehearsal of a mock – trial, Benare’s co – actors try to console her by telling that they are only joking with her. The mental agony she suffers is in no way less severe than the legal punishment. She is punished harshly, even disproportionately, and Prof. Damle, the real culprit, goes scot-free. Contemporary Indian society is still male-dominated, where women are born to suffer. The injustice projected in the play will go on repeating itself in actual life until this “man – centered” world becomes “a human – centred world”. Bandyopadhyoy in Vijay Tendulkar’s Collected Plays in translation says “**Silence! The Court is in Session** is the first Tendulkar play to become part of the New Indian Drama phenomenon of the sixties and the first significant modern Indian play in any language to centre on woman as protagonist and victim” (XIIIV). The play marks a sharp break with the tradition of Marathi plays in respect of subject – matter and mode of presentation. According to Chandrashekhar Barve in “Vijay Tendulkar: The Man who Explores the Depths of Life” says,

This is not a play about the cornering of Benare, nor about the cornered Benare. In fact, the dramatic element in it is derived from the situation in which the being of Benare is engulfed [...]. She tries to express her ego openly and freely; and finally, it is throttled, ‘Life is something like nothingness’ – these crazy words of Benare are good comment on the nothingness of our being. (24)

The character of Benare symbolizes, a modern, educated, but helpless woman in contemporary Indian society. She raises several questions about love, sex, marriage, and established moral values. Her long soliloquy in self-defense reveals that the voice of protest of a simple, innocent woman is always submerged in the male-dominated society.

It is with the presentation of this play that Tendulkar is recognized as a rebel against society. Outwardly, the play moves around the theme of violence in love, marriage, and sex. But the ideas expressed here are anti-romantic and anti-establishment. The play points out particularly, Benare’s long speech, that neither there is any sin nor any goodness in the society around Man should disown

the established norms and values and move towards a new humanitarian order. What is important in life is one's feeling, one's sincerity or integrity if the life lived is authentic. Benare is humiliated by her co-actors for her unmarried motherhood. Still audience's sympathy goes with her for she is by nature, loving and loved. Benare's innocence is punished, very severely punished by her fellow – companions' cruelty and vulgarity.

**Silence!** is a satire on male-dominated society. It deals with the problem of unmarried motherhood. A rehearsal of a mock-trial play is arranged which is actually a “game” cunningly arranged by Benare's co-actors. In the so called game, Benare's private life is exposed, revealing her illicit relationship with Prof. Damle that results into her pregnancy. Benare is punished without the least compassion, and Prof. Damle goes unnoticed and “unenquired” even though he is the father of a child outside wedlock. The play treats of the problem of unmarried motherhood is conceived as a “game” in more than one sense. Mock-seriousness pervades the whole play. It is a day-time rehearsal of a mock – trial play to be performed at night. Miss Benare, an unmarried grown up woman, is the victim of the game in the midst of the great laughter, banter, and cordiality. What begins, at the outset, as partly a conjecture and partly a hearsay, comes out, in the final analysis, as the gravest and the most unpredictable truth about the woman's private life. Finally, comes the unkindest cut of all, the punishment that the baby in her womb, be killed, i.e., foeticide (which is, ironically enough, a crime in itself), meted out to Miss Benare. Describing Benare's character, Arundhati Banerjee in *Five Plays* remarks:

Leela Benare, the central character of the play is the only exception. Possessing a natural lust for life and a spontaneous *joie de vivre*, she ignores social norms and dictates. Being different from the others, she is easily isolated and made the victim of a cruel game, cunningly planned by her co-actors. (ix)

Benare is cross-examined in the court with full mockery. She is charged with infanticide and having illicit relations with a married man, Professor Damle and in this way her private life is exposed, and she is humiliated and dishonoured. All other characters, who serve as witnesses, like Mr. Sukhatme and judge Mr. Kanishkar and his wife Mrs. Kanishkar behave in a way of mockery. Ram Sharma in “The Trial between the Humanists and the Anti-Humanists in Vijay Tendulkar's **Silence! The Court is in Session**” points out that in this play.

In the court, Benare's crimes of infanticide and illegitimate motherhood are established by the prosecution as crime against society. To Sukhatme, Kashikar says, “This case has great social significance, Sukhatme, No joking! I must put aside the practice of court and give evidence” (FP.92). The public prosecutor Sukhatme clarifies that motherhood is sacred and a mother bears the responsibility of bearing her child unmindful of her own difficulties and Benare has brought shame to the holy motherhood by her conduct. He says:

The character of the morality. Not only that. Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. If such socially destructive tendencies are encouraged to flourish, this country and its culture will be totally destroyed” (FP.115)

Sukhatme further clarifies his point.

Infanticide is a dreadful act, but bringing an illegitimate child is horrifying. If it is encouraged, there will no such thing as the institutions of marriage. Immorality will flourish. Before our eyes, our beautiful dream of a society, governed by tradition will crumble into dust. (115)

Although Benare says that society has no right to interfere with her private life she cannot totally shy away from her responsibility. Tendulkar has developed Benare through the contents of a beautiful poem by Mrs. Shirish Pai. Benare is very frank in giving a fitting reply to the charges leveled against her in the court. She tells the judge that life is very dreadful thing and life must be hanged.

Benare is a challenging woman to those of men called executors of power politics subjecting sexual politics to subjugate a woman, who also aggressively, mostly in absentia, transgress the sexual norms. Similarly, Tendulkar's **Vultures** also presents the theme of sex, violence, and sensationalism with an exhibition of the avarice of Ramakant and Umakant and the good sensuality of their sister, Manik, and their sister-in-law, Rama. **Kamala** treats the theme of subaltern subjectivity and resistance to male – dominated patriarchal society and its futile values and false pretensions and prejudices. The play delineates women as commodities or objects of sexual pleasures, who can be purchased, used, thrown away, bartered, and wasted. **Kanyadan** deals with the theme of social upliftment underlining the chaotic consequences which disturb the existing social distinctions. Commenting on the play, **Silence!** Satish Barbuddhe in "Imposed Silence in **Silence! The Court is in Session**" admits,

**Silence! The Court is in Session** is a play about a middle class urban group who goes out on a picnic and starts a mock court-martial to while away time. [...] Mr. Kashikar is the chairman of this experimental theatre. Each one of this group is gregarious. Each character has a strange or unusual habit or way of behaving. (120)

Benare is a strictly rebellious and assertive woman, who has a natural thirst for life and spontaneous Vitality. She is conscientious in her work. As an activist, she has become a member of the amateur theatre group, which is a miniscule cross-section of a middle class society. The members of the amateur group are really jealous, angry and frustrated in their attitudes towards their fellow beings. They gather in a place to stage a play entitled, "The Trial of President Lyndon B. Johnson". As they had an ample time, they plan to stage a mock trial and under the guise of staging a mock trial, they exhibit their vague suspicion of Benare's relationship with Professor Damle and its consequences. The play becomes a replica of Webster's **The Duchess of Malfi**. Hence, to check her pregnancy, she is isolated and made a victim of the cruel game cunningly planned by them. They forcibly make her play the part of accused and damage her psyche beyond repair. She is charged with infanticide and unwed motherhood. According to the court, she has tarnished motherhood and tries to destroy the social systems and conventions. Like Hester Prynne of **The Scarlet Letter**, she is tried by them in the court of law. In the end, based on assumptions, scandals and false, imaginative stories,

the court deceases that she shall live by the child in her womb is to be destroyed. When she tries to establish the fact that she has been victimized by the society, the court chooses to punish her as it has to leave Professor Damle from the sin. He has not been punished for his adultery. She understands that what has been started as a harmless game is unleashing venom with a view to belittle her in all walks of life. She tries to express her ego openly but the door is locked and she is forced to remain with those who have ganged up on her and the claustrophobic atmosphere created a psychological crisis in her. The man made society considers Benare as an erotic figure, a symbol of desire, an object of sexual gratification. But within herself, she has immense power and the recognition of power gives her maturity by raising several questions related to love, sex and marriage. In fact, she becomes a challenge to the endocentric world.

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