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Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Plight and Pain of a Woman in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

Dr. C. Raghavendra and Dr. P. Sreenivasulu Reddy, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

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A New Era in Marathi Theatre

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It is no exaggeration to say that with the production of Tendulkar's *Silence! The court is in Session*, a new era has begun in Marathi theatre. The play raises many unsettling questions about human relationships. Tendulkar here uncovers middle class mentality and violent impulses of middleclass people. Vijay Tendulkar has depicted the basic theme of violence and dealt with most of its significant aspects and varieties in the life of human beings. He has explored and expressed bitter and gruesome truths. The entire play revolves round the idea of a mock trial by the members of the amateur theatre group called 'The Sonar Moti Tenement Progressive Association'.

The Troupe

The play begins with the troupe entering the room in a village. Leela Benare, a school teacher, a member of the troupe who is bold and talkative, enters at the very beginning when other members fall behind. She feels happy with Samanth, a villager, who is new to Benare. . The conversation goes on like this;

Benare : I thought, and go somewhere far, far away with you:

Samant : [in confusion] with me?

Benare : yes, I like you very much.

Samant : (terribly shy and embarrassed) tut-tut Ha ha !

I am hardly ...

Benare : You are very nice indeed. And shall I do something?

You are a very pure and good person. I like you.

Trial against President Johnson

The troupe has come to perform a play that is a trial against President Johnson for producing atomic weapons. They have performed this seven times in Bombay and now they want to perform in the village.

Characters – Benare and Others

Benare, the protagonist, reveals that she is very good at teaching, but because of a bit of slander, the management is not happy. She says, “Life is not meant for any one- also it is one’s own life. It must be free; it is very very important thing, every moment, any bit of it is precious” These words reveal the intension and desire of the middle class woman for a free life.

The members are Kashikar, a social worker who plays the role of a judge, and his wife Mrs. Kashikar, Balu Rockde whom Kashikars give shelter as they are childless, acts as the witness, Sukatme as barrister, Mr. Ponkshi who fails in Inter Mediate, enacts as a scientist, and Karnik as second witness in the mock trial they are going to perform. Prof. Damle has not arrived. This character who doesn’t appear on the stage, plays a significant role in the play.

Mock Trial

Benare speaks about other characters sarcastically, and Ponkshi sneers at Rockde; all others jeer at Mrs. & Mr. Kashikar. This clearly shows the middle class mindset of feeding good in their hearts by ridiculing others. When Benare comes out with a fresh look after washing her face, the mock trial starts with Ponkshi’s words:

“Miss Leela Benare, you have been arrested on suspicion of a crime of an extremely grave nature and brought as prisoner before the bar of this court”

The judge of mock trial Kashikar asks Benare

“Prisoner Benare, under sec 302 of the IPC you are arrested of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the afore-mentioned crime?”

Benare’s World

Benare is stunned with the sudden charge of infanticide and the atmosphere becomes serious. It becomes a real trial and the private life of Benare is indecently exposed. At the very first Benare is bold because she has faced many bitter experiences in real life.

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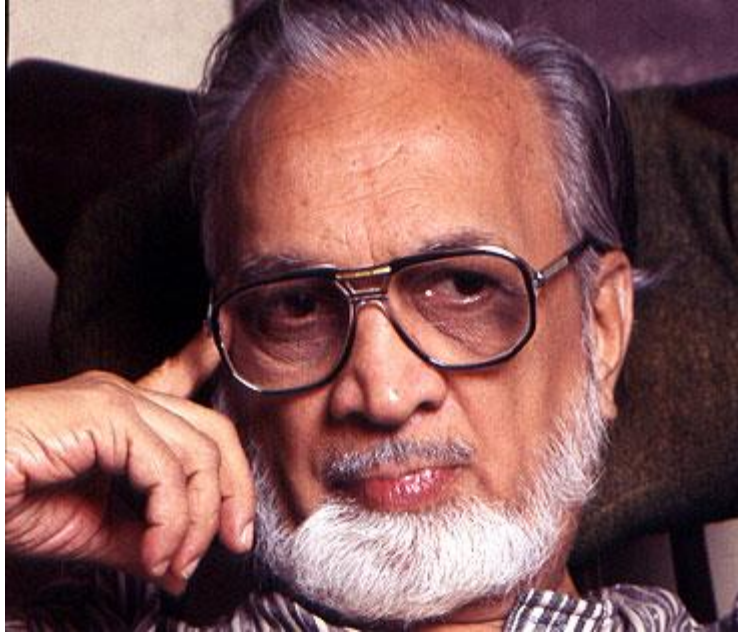
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When fourteen, Benare was deceived by her maternal uncle whom she loved and dreamed of marrying. He turned away not giving any importance to her love. She attempted suicide. She now worships Prof Damle for his genius and he uses her body and turns away, escaping from his responsibilities.

Even though she has faced bitter experiences, she commits the same mistake again with Damle whose intelligence attracts her. This is still the real picture happening always around us. This is human nature, ready to face failure again and again in an effort at getting love.

Baseless Charges

In spite of these things, charges against Benare are baseless. Kashikar puts forth the charge of infanticide under sec 302 of IPC. Sukatame's words as reaction reflect male domination. He says "she runs after men too much." The witness Karnik, is persuaded to say that Rockde has seen Benare in a closed door situation and Rockde says that he saw Benare in Prof. Damle's room in the hostel. He emphasizes the responsibilities of a woman, but the words reveal the inner psyche of that man regarding women. He refers to the words of Manu that women are not fit for freedom. These are the narrow minded opinions of men that a woman should be responsible, but at the same time she should not be free. She should be under the control of men. They recite proverbs to speak about the greatness of motherhood but they behave rudely with Benare whom they think has become pregnant with Prof Damle's child. This is portrayed by Tendulkar in an exquisite manner. Ambiguity can be observed here.



Vijay Tendulkar

Courtesy: www.outlookindia.com

Speaking about Tendulkar's insights into human condition, Nishikant D. Mirajkar says:

Vijay Tendulkar has remained the representative of the contemporary modern drama, not only in Marathi, but also on a pan - Indian level, for a long span of last thirty seven years. The fact that majority of his plays became the most controversial, mostly from an ex-dramatic point of view, and have almost churned up public opinions, inviting violent responses and reactions, does not dilute this statement; but on the contrary, strengthens it. Tendulkar symbolizes the new awareness and attempts of Indian dramatists of the last quarter century, to depict the agonies, suffocations and cries of man, focusing particularly on those of middle class. He has been vocalizing different human relations and the tensions implied therein, through his plays, which depict the tragic consequences of confrontations of egos in these relations¹.

Bitter Past and Present Predicament

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Benare recollecting her bitter past, speaks out about the present predicament

“Life is so and so. Life is such and such; life is a book that goes ripping into pieces. 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 something that’s nothing or nothing, that’s something” (p.33)

Benare was firm at the beginning but cannot maintain the same spirit when she faces atrocity. Everyone, including Samant, the new villager, attempts to make her out to be an evil woman in the court by their own sadistic imagination. Samant the next witness in the mock trial, says in reply to Sukatme’s questions, that Damle has refused to accept responsibility for Benare’s pregnancy. Benare says “It’s a lie, complete lie; you are all deliberately upon me, you have plotted against me”

Even Mrs. Kashikar, being a woman doesn’t help her. Moreover, when Benare is unable to bear the words, and tries to go out, the bolts are drawn, and she is rudely dragged back by Mrs. Kashikar. It proves the old proverb ‘a woman is an enemy to another woman’.

Atrocious Blame and Response

The members atrociously blame Benare for her pregnancy out of marriage. They blame her freedom also. These clearly show that when a woman wants to be free, no man can bear it and other women who do not have freedom, also do not seem to like it. Her life has become a heavy burden to herself:

“My life was a burden to me..... But when you can’t lose it, you realize the value of it. You realize the value of living. You see what happiness means. How new, how wonderful every moment is! Even you seem new to yourself. (p.72)

When she understands the reality of life, she tells the bitter truth even though it is bitter to her:

life is no straightforward thing. People can be so cruel. Even your flesh and blood don't want to understand you. Only one thing in life is all-important - the body! You may deny it, but it is true. Emotion is something people talk about with sentiment. It was obvious to me. I was living through it. It was burning through me (p.73).

Truth Revealed

Sukatme readily explains how she has compelled Rockde to marry her. Kashikar, the judge tells that she has crossed the boundaries of customs and she is a stain to motherhood, and so she deserves no mercy. His cruel verdict is that she must destroy the fetus in her womb. Benare is unable to tolerate the pain and cries, "No No I won't let you do it, I won't let it happen. I won't let it happen" (P 119). She collapses with sobs. Then silence reigns. Elizabeth Cady rightly remarks:

"Thus far women have been mere echoes of men. Our laws and constitutions, our creeds and codes, and customs of social life are all of masculine origin. The true woman is yet a dream of future."²

Hypocrisy of Human Life

The playwright boldly uncovers the hypocrisy, complexities of human behaviour, urge for violence, inferiority, utilizing the opportunity to satisfy the urge for violence, urban middle class mentality and also the plight and suffering of a woman in a male dominated society. Speaking about Tendulkar, Gowri RamNaryan says:

"with his exposure to Marathi theatre from childhood, and journalistic background, Vijay Tendulkar turned contemporary socio political situations into explosive drama"³

Contrasting Benare and Kashikar

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The playwright portrays two women characters; one is Benare and the other one Mrs. Kashikar. Mrs. Kashikar does not have anything to do with modern thinking, but she doesn't accept Benare's life style even though she herself is not happy with the traditional behaviour of her husband. When Benare tries to go out, Mrs. Kashikar rudely drags her back to the witness box. This is a very revealing portrayal of the mindset of women. He shows that when a woman is in a terrible predicament, another woman does not help her; rather, she gives her more trouble, or adds some more grief.

After resistance, Benare collapses and suffers silently. The pain of a woman is pleasure for some other people. This brutal behaviour reflects masculine domination, and suppression of women. The play also indicates that it may be the conclusion of the playwright, that women repeatedly face failure, yet remain silent showing great patience, without harming anyone else.

Hard-hitting Reality of Tendulkar's Plays

Hard-hitting reality in his plays makes people think seriously about the plight of women in a male-dominated society. His depiction of his characters is outstanding and with that kind of talent, he has a special place in the history of Indian Drama. Chandrasekhar Barve rightly says:

The depiction of life in Tendulkar's plays has an invisible but solid foundation in his philosophy of life. His philosophy includes man, his body and soul, his ego, his associations, the futility in the relations between men, the resultant sense of loneliness, the ideas of sin and virtue, the uncertainty of all these; in short the individual identity of man and his social existence, the harmony and disharmony between the two - these form the essence of Tendulkar's thinking. Tendulkar's plays don't appear to carry the burden of intellectual speculation. And at (perhaps because of this very reason), they remain beyond the shallow, hollow and the cheap, telling us silently, something original, beyond words. Considering all this it can be observed that Tendulkar's plays tend towards existentialism.⁴

Tendulkar unfolds the actual middleclass activities of life, way of behaviour, way of living, way of thinking, way of giving and solving problems, way of creating problems for others, way of acting, way of responding, way of co-operating to hurt someone, way of getting satisfaction, way of understanding others, way of harming others, way of exhibiting false pride etc. To say it in one sentence, the play mirrors middleclass morality and mannerisms. Vijay Tendulkar succeeds in constructing the unique plot, creating classic characters and achieving amazing success. Hard-hitting reality in his plays makes people think seriously about the plight of women in a male-dominated society. His depiction of his characters is outstanding and with that kind of talent, he has a special place in the history of Indian Drama.

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