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Breaking Free from the Stringent Fetters of Patriarchy: The Discourse of Resistance in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

By Oliva Roy¹

Abstract

For centuries, the Brahminical social order in India has endorsed hegemonic masculinity and reinforced as well as legitimized a pseudo-equal relationship between men and women in Indian traditional, orthodox society, where men exercise coercive power, authority and dominance over women. Throughout the past centuries, women have experienced marginalization, suffered exploitation, discrimination and subjugation in every sphere of life, notably in economic affairs, political activities and decision-making processes. Women have been labelled as the 'inferior strata', the 'voiceless other' and the 'subaltern' in our society. Vijay Tendulkar, the doyen of Marathi theatre, has portrayed women, not as weak and submissive victims of patriarchal whims, but as strong bold, aggressive and strong characters having a rebellious spirit. Vijay Tendulkar's women characters are all victims of patriarchal social order, but instead of suffering in silence, they choose to fight against wrongful gender stereotyping. His social plays deal with the controversial issues like - gender inequality, Hegemonic masculinity and the violence against women, pervasive in India. He has unmasked the brazen hypocrisy of the so-called cultured men of the 20th century India. His plays candidly portray the vicious forms of violence, abuse and discrimination prevalent in Indian society. Tendulkar's magnum opus, *Silence! The Court is in Session* deals with the various intricacies of patriarchal code and the subjugation of educated women in a traditional male-dominated Indian society where women are destined to dwell in the peripheral region. The objective of this article is to bring to light the persistent struggle of twentieth century educated Indian women to break free from the stringent fetters of patriarchal society and attain complete emancipation from all forms of exploitation and oppression, as delineated in Vijay Tendulkar's astutely crafted satirical play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*.

Keywords: Subaltern resistance, Male hegemony, Patriarchal domination, Gender inequality

Introduction

Vijay Tendulkar, one of the pioneering figures in Modern Indian theatre, was an acclaimed avant-garde playwright and a rebellious voice, who had exposed through his drama, the brutal reality of patriarchal ideological hegemony and the sham moral standards of the twentieth century 'progressive' Indian men. During his prolific writing career spanning over almost five decades, Vijay Tendulkar has penned a number of revolutionary protest dramas and social satires dealing with the ills of modern Indian society, like—persistent gender inequality, emotional abuse and psychological violence latent in interpersonal relations, and the patriarchal politics of social control. Tendulkar's plays mirrored the hypocritical attitude of Indian patriarchal society towards women. For centuries, women have been suppressed and given a subordinate position in Indian patriarchal social structure. Women have been coerced to live on the fringes of society for ages, because men always want to reassert their dominance over women in every aspect of life, to perpetuate their authoritarian stance in society. All the patriarchal societies in the world are in the grip of this wrongful male domination, and

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everywhere women are engaged in a perpetual struggle for liberation. The post-independent twentieth century Indian social milieu reflects a somewhat similar realistic image of an unjust social system where men exploit, oppress and subjugate women. Vijay Tendulkar's explosive plays have strikingly portrayed the hardships of women in an Indian Society that is dominated by the ethos of patriarchy. Tendulkar has also realistically rendered women's endless struggle for liberation and equality and their heartfelt yearning to enter the mainstream society from the periphery where they have been residing for ages because of their ideological belief in the naturalized social system. Tendulkar has vociferously asserted his position and role as a trailblazer of feminism, who has written plays with a strong social consciousness:

As an individual—or rather as a social being—I feel deeply involved in the existing state of my society (because I am affected by it though not immediately in some cases or not as much as others are) and in my own way brood over it. . . .

As a writer I now find myself persistently inquisitive, nonconformist, ruthlessly cold and brutal as compared to the other committed and human me. As a social being I am against all exploitation, and I passionately feel that all exploitation must end.

As a writer I feel fascinated by the violent exploited-exploiter relationship and obsessively deep into it instead of taking a position against it. That takes me to a point where I feel that this relationship is eternal, a fact of life however cruel, and will never end. Nor that I relish this thought while it grips me but I cannot shake it off. (Tendulkar xliii)

Tendulkar has exposed the evil nexus existing between patriarchy and the hegemonic caste system in India, that has created a fertile ground for the perpetration of gender-based discrimination, violence and exploitation. Patriarchal hegemony has fostered a culture of oppression and violence against women. Tendulkar's social satire, *Silence! The Court is in Session* revolves around the emotional abuse and psychological violence of a young educated unmarried working woman, Leela Benare, who boldly asserts her independence, instead of being constrained by patriarchal control. Tendulkar poignantly depicts the dire plight of women in a patriarchal social milieu, their endless struggle for liberation and equality and their heartfelt yearning to enter the mainstream society from the periphery where they have been residing for ages because of their ideological belief in the naturalized social system. The culture imbued in patriarchal creed in the society has effaced the individuality or individual identity of women. Women like her don't even have a congenial atmosphere in which they can express their views and opinions to build up the foundation for their self-reliance and self-assertion in the society, but, on the contrary, they have got the claustrophobic family and society in which their dreams are severely crushed, and they are forced to live the life of subordination and subjugation by the male constructed principles. Through his profound characters, Tendulkar has shown the patriarchal outlook of Indian men who consider women - commodity, liability and objects of exploitation, not as individuals.

Vijay Tendulkar, better known as a contradictory and revolutionary theatre thespian, penetrated deep into the dark recesses of human nature, and has brought to the fore, the grim

reality of modern urban life. His plays vehemently exposed the dreadful deformity of Hindu society and culture. Dinesh Thakur, a veteran director who has produced a significant number of Vijay Tendulkar's controversial plays, rightly stated in this context:

Vijay Tendulkar continues to be my favorite Indian playwright because of the sensitivity and accuracy with which he depicts social issues. The astonishing range of his plays, be it the victimization of the individual by society in *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe!*, or the moral collapse of a family in *Gidhade*, or the ruthlessness of the media in *Kamala*, provides a director a very large thematic canvass to choose from. At the same time, the lack of moralizing gives the plays a very open-ended feel, leaving ample scope for directorial interpretation. (Wadikar 43)

Silence! The Court is in Session is a gripping play by Vijay Tendulkar that deals with the timeless theme of female subjugation in a patriarchal social structure. The play reflects the harrowing image of a woman chained and restrained by centuries-old patriarchal traditions and customs. In a patriarchal society, men hold a dominant position, while the women are always kept in a subordinate, marginalized position. To put it in Sylvia Walby's words:

In this system women's labour power, women's reproduction, women's sexuality, women's mobility and property and other economic resources – are under patriarchal control. (Walby 20)

This penetration and institutionalization of patriarchal dominance is something that reverberates throughout the play. Leela Benare is an independent, free-spirited and strong-minded woman with a dynamic personality, one who cannot be cowed down by patriarchal constraints and societal norms. She is a lively and vivacious young woman with an innocent jovial personality, who is never afraid to speak her mind. She boldly asserts her individual identity and refuses to accommodate sexist code of social norms, or the restrictions set by the long-standing biases and gender stereotypes. She cleverly and rationally outwits all the other male members of her dramatic troupe and confidently asserts her independence:

Benare: My life is my own—I haven't sold it to anyone for a job! My will is my own. My wishes are my own. No one can kill those—no one! I'll do what I like with myself and my life! I'll decide . . . (Tendulkar 58; Act 1)

Leela Benare clarified her position at the very beginning of the play that she would not be constrained by the conservative patriarchal social norms. But after an unexpected turn of events, she finds herself trapped in a vicious game that rips away her last shred of feminine dignity towards the end of the play. Patriarchs view independent, empowered women with voice, a direct threat to patriarchal social structure, and they take every measure to drown out their voices.

A group of amateur theatre artists arrives in a suburban village to perform a play based on the impeachment trial of the American President Lyndon Johnson for producing nuclear weapons. The prime objective of this dramatic troupe was to raise awareness of the common people and enlighten them regarding the contemporary social and political issues of the country as well as the world. Mr. Kashikar, the chairman of theatre group, is a pretentious social worker and a dominant spouse who embodies hegemonic masculinity to oppress and severely circumscribe the fundamental rights of his wife. Kashikar legitimizes and perpetuates his power

and dominance over his wife by presumptuously silencing his wife whenever she dares to open her mouth to give an opinion or make a suggestion. Mrs. Kashikar is a traditional Indian housewife who has internalized the patriarchal ideologies. Rokde is a young man who was adopted by the Kashikars. Then there is Ponkshe, an Inter-failed Clerk; Sukhatme, a mediocre, egotistical barrister, Karnik, a failed theatre actor. Leela Benare, the central character of the play, is an epitome of feminine power. She is the “New woman” of Modern India, struggling for liberation from the established traditional norms of the Indian patriarchal society. Her defiant nature surfaces evidently in her valiant assault on the worn-out traditional attitude of men towards women’s behaviour and code of conduct, when she boldly asserts, “I’ll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can’t be anyone else’s business; understand? Everyone has a bent, a manner, an aim in life. What’s anyone else to do with these?” (Tendulkar 117; Act 3). Benare is an assertive figure who rebels against the patriarchal conservative values and the oppressive restrictions of an egocentric, orthodox society.

The small cluster of amateur actors represents the urban middle-class society of India. In this protest drama, Tendulkar has employed the dramatic convention of a play within a play to viciously attack the orthodox mindset of the people in India. Professor Damle and Mr. Rawte, two important members of this theatre group, couldn’t make it to the performance because of some personal reasons. So, the group decides to hire Samant, a local villager, to play the role of Prof. Damle. Since the novice has never visited a courtroom in his entire life, the group decides to stage an improvised trial to give Samant, an opportunity to get acquainted with the judicial proceedings and to while away the lazy afternoon. Hence, the members of the group create an imaginary court scene, where Benare is to play the role of the accused. They decide that Benare will be tried for the grave offence of infanticide. And then the rest of the dramatic roles are assigned selectively. At this stage, the presentation of a mock-trial seemed to be a harmless activity devised to lighten the mood of the cast before their actual performance. However, the mock trial soon assumes a grim aspect when it becomes clear that the ulterior motive of the cast, behind presenting the game of a mock trial is to intentionally and cunningly dissect the personal life of Benare and to publicly smear her character by exposing her love-relationships with other men. Throughout the trial, the other co-actors of the performance keep insisting that the charge is an imaginary one, but soon it becomes an evil scheme plotted against Benare to punish her for deviating from patriarchal norms and for choosing to lead an independent life unencumbered by all the savage whims of patriarchy. Hence, in order to reinforce patriarchal social code and women’s subordination, and to punish Benare for challenging hegemonic masculinity and discriminatory gender norms, the hypocritical male chauvinists beneath the façade of a harmless game, brutally persecute her and at the end, pass the savage verdict that ‘the child in your (Benare) womb shall be destroyed’.

In *Silence! the Court is in Session*, Vijay Tendulkar has inefficaciously employed the dramatic convention of a play within a play to viciously attack the orthodox mindset of the Indian population as well as to present the unvarnished truth regarding the gratuitous violence and emotional distress inflicted on women for centuries, in a male-dominated power structure. The dramaturgical device of a play within a play, which has its roots in ancient Greek tragedies, has been used as an effective tool by playwrights, throughout history, to suit their specific dramatic purposes. Tadeusz Kozwan, in his theoretical treatise, *Theatre Miroir - Metatheatre De L'antiquite Au Xxie Siecle*, has expounded that ‘the play within a play is like placing two mirrors on the stage: if one mirror is enough to observe one’s face, two mirrors are necessary to observe the neck. If theatre is a mirror placed on the stage showing to the spectators themselves, then, according to Kowzan, the play within the play is the second mirror permitting the spectators to see the invisible’ (Kowzan 11). Vijay Tendulkar has used the play within a play as a powerful tool to uncover the true self of Indian traditional culture and the prevailing patriarchal social system. Tendulkar has adroitly employed the ploy of a makeshift mock-trial

to deliberately blur the lines between fiction and reality and to exhibit the deep-seated patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes prevalent in Indian society. The mock-trial also provides an opportunity to the audacious protagonist of the play, Leela Benare, to express her dissent against the norms of patriarchal society.

Benare's mock trial starts on a lighter note, with a series of comic mishaps making a blatant mockery of the judicial proceedings. However, things turn serious soon. The trial begins with framing of the charges, Benare is fictitiously charged with the grave offence of infanticide, that is, the crime of killing an innocent infant. The accusation startled Benare and made her terribly uncomfortable, but in spite of her repeated attempts to break free of this patriarchal trap, her apathetic co-actors keep insisting that the trial is nothing but just a game:

Karnik: The crime itself is imaginary. What more do you want? It's all imaginary... that's what it is.

Ponkshe: Only the accused is real! (Tendulkar 90; Act 2)

Throughout the trial, the members of the dramatic troupe keep hinting that the trial is just a game, but at the same time, but the game keeps fluctuating between reality and illusion, making it really very difficult for Samant to distinguish reality from fantasy. To prove the imaginary crime of Benare, her co-actors keep bringing evidence from her real life. Throughout the supposed 'game' of the mock trial, the male counterparts of Benare keep reinforcing the values of an established orthodox society and punishing her for her contemptuous defiance. Sukhatme, who is playing the role of Counsel for the Prosecution as well as the Accused, commences the trial with his opening statement glorifying motherhood. He exalted mothers to the status of goddesses and questioned women's choice to defy motherhood. Kashikar too joins Sukhatme in this superficial deification of motherhood, by quoting the Sanskrit proverb, "Janani Janmabhumishcha Swargadapi Gariyasi", meaning "Mother and the Motherland both are even higher than heaven." (79) According to Sukhatme, since motherhood had been given an exalted status in Indian society, infanticide is considered to be the most "devilish thing on earth," a 'vile deed'. Ironically, these same people who glorified motherhood and considered it sacred, end up committing the same vile deed of killing an innocent infant by the end of the trial. As soon as the cross-examination starts, the co-actors of Benare start making jibes at her personal life. Sukhatme summons Ponkshe as a witness to give evidence that would smear Benare's character. When Sukhatme asks Ponkshe if Benare is married or not, Ponkshe makes the contumelious remark that Benare is unmarried, 'to the public eye', hinting at some deep dark secrets lurking under the surface of her outwardly jovial demeanor. He further insinuates that Benare is a flirtatious woman who seduces men a lot: 'she runs after men too much', criticizing her frank behaviour with other people and accusing her of polyamory. Hence, through his bitter comments, Ponkshe makes it clear that young, unmarried women should behave strictly according to the norms set by patriarchal society and any person who dares to challenge the traditional gender norms, will be persecuted and punished accordingly. Benare, oblivious to the evil motive of her fellow actors, keeps playfully intercepting the court proceedings and shrugging off the spiteful banter of her friends in a casual manner. However, the latent schadenfreude inherent in human nature soon surfaces during the trial when the fellow members of the theatre group start posing as vultures of patriarchy to prey upon her innocence and resolute courageousness.

The mock-trial, which started as an ostensibly fictitious game soon transforms into a brutal, cold-blooded character assassination of Benare, as all the co-workers of Benare take the witness stand one after another, to reveal every single bit of sensitive information about Benare's personal life. After Ponkshe, Sukhatme summons Karnik, 'the great actor' as the next witness. When asked about Benare's behaviour, Karnik gives a shrewdly worded statement:

“It’s strange! Sometimes we feel we know someone. But in fact, we don’t. Truth is stranger than fiction” (Tendulkar 83; Act 2), again intentionally raising suspicions about her personal life. At this moment, it is quite obvious that Benare’s coworkers know some secret about her relationship and the fictitious harmless game is nothing, but a wicked scheme contrived against her to tame her spontaneity and to punish her for defying the patriarchal social order. Instead of investigating the alleged offence of infanticide, the Prosecutor embarks on an exploratory journey to make Benare’s private life public. And that’s why, instead of asking direct questions related to her fictitious crime, Sukhatme, keeps grilling the witnesses to provide information regarding Benare’s marital status, moral conduct and romantic relationships. This line of questioning is quite inappropriate and offensive, but whenever Benare tried to raise objections, she was reprimanded and systematically silenced. Throughout the course of the trial, the court never paid any heed to Benare’s concerns and her justifications. Never once, she was given a fair chance to say something in her defense. But, till the last moment, she remains resolute and undefeated.

When Karnik failed to provide substantiate information to smear Benare’s character, Rokde takes the witness stand to contribute to the ongoing concerted and morally untenable assault on her fundamental right to freedom. Although Rokde was reluctant at first to speak, but when Mrs. Kashikar exhorts him to ‘give a marvelous, unbroken bit of evidence!’, he vented out his personal vendetta against Benare, like the previous witnesses, by narrating a true incident that he witnessed a couple of days ago. He revealed the truth that he saw Miss Benare in Professor Damle’s hostel room when night was falling, few days ago. Rokde’s assertion entirely dissolved the boundaries between reality and imagination. He deliberately violated her privacy by revealing details of that night, only to join hands with other tormentors in persecuting Benare for challenging men’s hegemony. Although Rokde never admitted to having seen her in a compromising situation, but his statement surely corroborated the suspicion of the other people regarding Benare’s alleged relationship with Prof. Damle. To further support his claim, Rokde states that Prof. Damle didn’t even invite him to his room that night, only because Benare was there. Upto this point, Benare was smartly outmaneuvering other witnesses, in a casual manner. But Rokde’s revelation perturbs her, because her personal affairs have nothing to do with this fictitious case. She has the freedom to visit whoever she wants, and nobody is entitled to interfere in her personal life. Hence, she loses her temper and bursts out into vehement protestations:

Benare: I don’t agree. I’m telling you! What’s all this got to do with the trial?

Mrs. Kashikar: But why are you getting into such a state, Benare? [to Kashikar] Go on.

Benare: There is no need at all to drag my private life into this. I can visit whom I like. Damle wasn’t eating me up. (Tendulkar 87; Act 2)

Benare’s objection is rational and valid, because Sukhatme’s prosecution was in breach of her fundamental right to privacy and of her right to respect for her private life. The mock-trial was supposed to be an improvised trial involving fictitious crime. But as the trial proceeds, Benare finds out that the trial was a subtle wicked scheme devised by the other members of her troupe to impugn her character in front of everyone. The charge of infanticide leveled against Benare was a fictitious one, but her personal life was deliberately dragged into the mock trial and was ruthlessly dissected in public, only to humiliate and victimize her for defying patriarchal social order. The hypocritical male chauvinists of Benare’s troupe unethically intruded into her private space and her intimate personal affairs to prove their claim that she has sinned. This intrusion and public shaming staged by her co-actors, was extremely offensive for Benare, but

unfortunately for her, there's no escape, neither in this meeting hall of a suburban village nor in the outside world, which is dominated by patriarchal values. Hence, ignoring the repeated protestations of Benare, her co-actors proceed with the trial, in order to publicly expose Benare's personal life and her failed relationships, in the name of 'just a game.'

From Balu Rokde's confession regarding seeing Benare in Professor Damle's room when night was falling, Sukhatme deduces that 'Miss Benare's behaviour is certainly suspicious' (Tendulkar 87; Act 2). No matter how many times, Benare tried to logically override Sukhatme's argument with a more reasonable one, but it appears that everyone on the stage has already made up their minds to pay no heed to Benare's reasonable objections. A woman's character is being assassinated in public, while her co-actors like Ponshe keep insisting, "This is just a game. A game, that's all! Which of us is serious about the trial? It's fun, Sukhatme! Do go on." (Tendulkar 88; Act 2)

The defamation trial of Miss Benare continues, and to put the final nail in coffin, Sukhatme summons Samant as the fourth witness. Samant has known Benare only for two hours and has subsequently formed a favourable impression on her. But Sukhatme refutes Samant's opinion as inadmissible in court. In order to obtain more relevant information regarding Benare's personal affairs, Sukhatme exhorts Samant to continue Rokde's story from the point where he has left off. Although Samant hesitates at first to give a testimony, since he hardly knew anything regarding Miss Benare's personal affairs and also because he didn't want to tarnish her image, but Sukhatme somehow convinced him that his testimony was crucial to the case, and that some things are needed to be taken for granted for the sake of the trial. Assuming the trial to be 'just a game', Samant starts narrating a fictitious story derived from a book he was reading previously. Surprisingly, the fictitious tale of Samant provided a fitting closure to Rokde's incomplete story. Samant went to Professor Damle's house, half an hour after Rokde's departure. Professor Damle didn't want to have a conversation with him, so he slammed the door of his room shut and went inside. Samant wanted to invite him for a lecture, but since he didn't get a chance to talk to him, he decided to wait outside. At this time, he heard the sound of someone crying secretly, probably a woman. The vague sound of sobbing was coming from inside Damle's room. He got confused and for some time, he stood there in silence considering whether he should leave or wait a little longer. And then he heard conversation between an unnamed woman and Prof. Damle. The mysterious woman threatened Damle to commit suicide and kill her unborn baby, if he abandons her. While Sukhatme and the other members of the troupe are deriving sadistic pleasure by inflicting pain and misery on hapless Benare, she gets increasingly frantic. The meeting hall has turned into a sheer inferno of unbearable torture for Benare. Unable to bear the pain anymore, Benare storms out of the wooden dock, in vehement protest:

Benare: It's all a lie! A complete lie! This has got to stop! Not a word of it is true! You're telling barefaced lies! You've all deliberately ganged up on me! You've plotted against me! (Tendulkar 93; Act 2)

A sudden sharp feeling of emotional distress overwhelms Benare. In tearful defiance, she picks up her bag and makes a move towards the door, only to find to her horror that the door is stuck, and it has been locked from outside, bolted shut. She vehemently bangs on the door, but it would not open. Unless someone unbolts the door from outside, Benare is trapped in this mock courtroom. The closed room becomes symbolic of patriarchal confinement and the locked door serves as a symbol of restrictive patriarchal ideologies and the inability of the Indian women to transgress the rigid patriarchal dictates. There are no escape routes for women like Benare who dare to defy the antediluvian regressive patriarchal mores and assert their freedom of choice. Tendulkar has projected a somewhat similar image of entrapment in all his plays, to

convey the brutal fact that women can't escape the restrictive confines of the patriarchal society. As Kalindi Deshpande posits:

Tendulkar has of course put before the world the frightening truth about life but what disturbs me is the signal that his plays send out: they seem to say that there is no escape from this frightening reality. (Deshpande 92)

Benare fought with unflinching courage and conviction to subvert the oppressive limitations of the patriarchal order, but she failed. In the face of overarching patriarchy, she strived very hard to break the suffocating confines of a patriarchal society. But, at this juncture, she feels utterly powerless caught in the intricate web of traditional patriarchal values. She feels like a trapped animal, who is about to be brutally dismembered and mutilated both morally and socially.

Samant, the only person who seemed to stand outside the patriarchal power system, eventually becomes an appendage of the conspiratorial and oppressive machinations of patriarchy, set in motion to ensnare and subjugate women. His perturbing deposition connotes that the outrageous exploitations and multiple betrayals faced by Benare are universal psychological experiences suffered by women in all parts of the world, regardless of their caste, ethnicity, nationality, class, and religion. Women in all walks of life feel confined within the world of patriarchal ascendance and exploitation. And lamentably, there's no way out for any of them. They do not have freedom of any sort; they are nothing more than the willful slaves of men. To reinforce men's social dominance and to unethically persecute a woman who dared to challenge regressive social norms and strived to break free from gender stereotypes, the co-actors of Benare's troupe decide to continue with the farce of a trial. Perturbed and frustrated, Benare stands in the witness box silently, wracked with fear, while her apathetic persecutors start to rip her apart. Kashikar cynically suggests that the age-old custom of child marriage should be revived to put an end to promiscuity. Benare's heartfelt yearning to live life on her own terms get labelled as 'promiscuity' in a society that upholds the discriminatory patriarchal norms. Mrs. Kashikar further adds to Benare's character defamation, by stating that women like Benare defy the sanctity of marriage because they get everything and enjoy all comforts of conjugal life without getting burdened with marital responsibilities. She further adds that, "It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. That's how promiscuity has spread throughout our society." (Tendulkar 100; Act 3). Mrs. Kashikar also discloses that Benare once went with Prof. Damle after a performance some days ago and that she made overtures to Rokde once, as proof of Benare's promiscuity. To prove Mrs. Kashikar's claim, Rokde is once again summoned to take the witness stand to shed some light on Benare's unchaste behaviour. Disheartened Benare stands in silence, while Rokde accuses her of holding his hand in the darkness of night after a performance at Dombivli, eight days ago. Benare repudiated his claim as untrue, but taking undue advantage of Benare's hapless situation, Rokde goes on to falsely claim that he slapped her on that occasion and threatened to tell everyone about what happened between them. After Rokde, Ponshe grabbed the opportunity to further humiliate Benare by revealing another incriminating secret about her personal life. Ponshe claims that Benare carries a bottle of TIK-20, a deadly bed bug poison, in her purse. He further adds that Benare wanted to marry him because she went through a "shattering heartbreak" (107). Although Benare repeatedly objected to Ponshe's denigration of her character, Kashikar provoked Ponshe to disclose the minute details of his conversation with her, on account of the issue being "a matter of social importance" (Tendulkar 106; Act 3). Hence, Ponshe goes on to testify about his private conversation with Benare. According to him, Benare had a relationship with Prof. Damle, that resulted in her pregnancy. She worshipped

him, loved him deeply, but he only used her for his own sexual gratification. When Damle refused to accept parental responsibility, Benare approached Ponshe as her last resort. She wanted to raise her unborn child, give him/her a bright future. Benare craved for marriage only because she didn't want the society to label her child as illegitimate. In order to obtain legal status for her unborn baby, she pressed and literally begged all the inferior and undeserving men around her to marry her, so that her child could live with dignity.

After Ponshe, Karnik grabs the opportunity to gratuitously disclose another distressing secret about her personal life, which was ferreted out by one of the cousins of Benare. The person revealed that Benare tried to commit suicide once at the age of fifteen, after a failed relationship with her maternal uncle. This shocking revelation persuades Sukhatme to reach the illogical conclusion that "The present conduct of the accused is totally licentious.... But it now seems that her past, too, is smeared in sin. This shows it as clear as daylight." (Tendulkar 111; Act 3). The incident that Sukhatme cites as evidence of Benare's sexual promiscuity, corroborates the widespread prevalence of child sexual abuse in India. And the so-called progressive men of Benare's troupe, instead of prosecuting Benare's uncle for sexually molesting his own niece, subject her to social stigma and public humiliation. To put it in Professor Subha Tiwari's words:

The whole responsibility of morally upright behavior is bulldozed on women. Men are by nature considered to be willful, wild, childish, innocent and mischievous. Their sins are no sins at all. The society has a very light parental and pampering sort of attitude when it comes to sexual offences of men. In case of women the iron rod gets hot and hotter. No punishment is actually enough for such a woman. There is no respite, no shade and no soothing cushion for a sinning woman. She must be stained and abandoned. Her femininity, her needs, her very existence must be ignored or rather destroyed. She must be cornered and brutally killed both in physical and psychological senses. This play is about the pathetic position of women in the male dominated Indian world. (Tiwari 35)

Benare cringes in horror and utter impuissance as she witnesses her fellow actors slinging mud at her. Feeling utterly devastated, she once again strives to free herself from the deadly grasp of the flagrant trial, but Mrs. Kashikar, an embodiment of patriarchal control, pulls her forcibly from the door and drags her to the dock.

In a repressive patriarchal society, if a woman remains unmarried beyond the usual age for marriage, she is considered odd and rebellious and as a potential threat to the strident misogynistic social mores. In Indian orthodox milieu, marriage is not an option or a choice for women, it's a necessity set by society. Marriage is a social construct devised by the patriarchal powerholders to subjugate and enslave women. John Stuart Mill has called marriage, "the only form of slavery permitted by law". He observes:

Marriage being the destination appointed by society for women, Society, however, both in this, and, at first, in all other cases, has preferred to attain its object by foul rather than fair means: but this is the only case in which it has substantially persisted in them even to the present day.... Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband: no less so, as far as legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called. She vows a lifelong obedience to him at the altar and is held to it all through her life by law. (Mill 54)

Marlene Dixon, the renowned sociologist, feminist thinker and activist, considered marriage to be a tool of exploitation: "The institution of marriage is the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of the oppression of women; it is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained". The institution of marriage curtails the individual liberty of women and infringes on their fundamental rights in every sphere of life. As Andrea Dworkin stated: "Marriage as an institution developed from rape as a practice. Rape, originally defined as abduction, became marriage by capture. Marriage meant the taking was to extend in time, to be not only use of but possession of, or ownership." Hence, in Indian society, the institution of marriage is an instrument of oppression wielded by a patriarchal state to trap women and disempower them. Benare is an independent and emancipated woman, who chose to defy the oppressive social institution of marriage, because she intended to live her life independently with a semblance of dignity and self-respect, free from patriarchal dominance. But for this very choice, she got branded as "a sinful canker on the body of society" (112). She marches as a valiant rebel who raised a voice against the deeply engrained hostile sexism that pervades Indian society. But unfortunately, her voice of dissent was brutally stifled, and the patriarchal society condemned her to suffer in isolation.

Wrongful gender stereotyping and discrimination are firmly entrenched in the collective psyche of Indian men and women. The blatant hypocrisy and the sham moral standards of the middle-class society come to the fore when Mr. Kashikar recounts the telephonic conversation, he overheard at the residence of Nanasaheb Shinde, the Chairman of the Education Society:

Kashikar: Nanasaheb was talking angrily to someone on the phone. 'It is a sin to be pregnant before marriage. It would be more immoral to let such a woman teach, in such a condition! There is no alternative—this woman must be dismissed,' he was saying. (Tendulkar 113; Act 3)

Benare has always been deeply committed to her teaching profession and has wholeheartedly enjoyed her job, but the Education Society has decided to censure her for deviating from the mores of the society. In a conservative patriarchal socio-cultural milieu, Benare gets stigmatized as a fallen woman, and hence, Nanasaheb deemed it necessary to dismiss her from services, so that her moral depravity does not corrupt the minds of the young children.

Throughout the entire session of the improvised trial, Benare is never once given a fair chance to defend herself against the venomous attacks of patriarchy. Sukhatme, as counsel for the accused, makes no real effort to prove Benare's innocence. He called three persons as witnesses to testify in the court, but surprisingly, all of these people were absent. And his request to cross examine the witness for the prosecution gets denied by Kashikar. Before pronouncing the chilling and draconian judgment, Kashikar asks the Prosecutor to plead his case. Sukhatme argues that Benare has "made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood—which is purer than heaven itself" and has defiled the sacred institution of marriage. Hence, he contends that for committing such heinous offences, Benare should be given the severest punishment. He also upholds the traditional patriarchal values of Indian society and gives the final misogynistic verdict that 'Woman is not fit for independence'. According to him, the freedom of women should be severely curtailed, because these emancipated, educated women are a threat to hegemonic masculinity. He believes that the empowered women like Benare will subvert the traditional gender norms surrounding masculinity and femininity, and if the court lets her off scot-free, her free inhibited spirit will shake patriarchy to its core. Mary Wollstonecraft argued in this context:

Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her NATURAL cunning and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a SWEETER companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. He carries the arguments, which he pretends to draw from the indications of nature, still further, and insinuates that truth and fortitude the corner stones of all human virtue, shall be cultivated with certain restrictions, because with respect to the female character, obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour.

What nonsense! When will a great man arise with sufficient strength of mind to puff away the fumes which pride, and sensuality have thus spread over the subject! If women are by nature inferior to men, their virtues must be the same in quality, if not in degree, or virtue is a relative idea; consequently, their conduct should be founded on the same principles, and have the same aim. (Wollstonecraft 23)

In a patriarchal society, women are often judged based on their subservience to patriarchal norms and values. As Lois Tyson has observed, “If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a 'good girl'; if she doesn't, she's a 'bad girl.' These two roles—also referred to as 'Madonna' and 'whore' or 'angel' and 'bitch' - view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order” (Tyson 88). Benare gets branded as a ‘promiscuous woman’ because of her defiance of patriarchal authority and social conventions.

As the Defense Counsel, Sukhatme argues that Benare has committed a very serious crime but considering that young people are prone to make mistakes, he appeals to the judge to treat the accused with mercy. Kashikar, the presiding judge, then gives Benare a chance to defend her position and confute the allegations levelled against her in just ten seconds, before the final verdict is pronounced. The atmosphere inside the meeting hall changes and the everyone in it, freezes. Benare, who was sitting like a statue, motionless and speechless, pounces upon the opportunity to break her long silence and unleash her long-suppressed agony. In the long heart-wrenching rhetorical soliloquy, Benare expresses in eloquent terms the psychological trauma and mental anguish she has undergone in the past years. When Kashikar finally gives her an opportunity to defend herself, Benare grabs the opportunity to pour her heart out. The fairly long, heart-rending speech serves as a passionate defense of herself against a string of defamatory allegations and also serves the distinct purpose of unmasking the hypocrisy and essential immorality of the so-called cultured and progressive urban middle class male chauvinists. By incorporating the emotionally moving soliloquy of Benare into the play, Tendulkar provides the first true insight into Benare’s inner turmoil. The piercing soliloquy unfolds her traumatic past and pitiful present and provides justification for her deviant behaviour.

Breaking the prolonged silence imposed upon her by the patriarchal forces of her community, Benare stands up straight to finally open up and talk about her deepest thoughts and feelings:

Benare: Yes, I have a lot to say. For so many years, I haven't said a word. Chances came and chances went. Storms raged one after another about my throat. And there was a wail like death in my heart. But each time I shut my lips tight. (Tendulkar 116; Act 3)

Benare pours her heart out when she reminisces about the psychological abuse and coercive control, she has suffered over a sustained period. She concedes that she has been through countless bitter disappointments and emotional upheavals in the past decades. But every time, she swallowed her excruciating pain and choked back her tears, assuming that nobody can possibly understand her pain and agony. When she was struggling through the dark phases of her life, no one stood by her, even her own flesh and blood, even the man she worshipped, everyone just deserted her, left her to suffer in isolation. She soon realized that there is no place for emotions in this inhumane world, it is only the body that matters. Feelings of disgust and resentment soon overwhelmed her, and she started to feel like her life was 'a very dreadful thing' (Tendulkar 116; Act 3). She went through an emotional roller-coaster every single day of her life, and subsequently she started feeling anxious and depressed. She began to feel as if her life has become oppressively burdensome and there's no end and no escape from it. She once tried to end her life. But she failed and the failed suicide attempt changed her perception about life. She was blessed with a new lease of life and for a brief period, she appreciated every little beautiful moment in every day of her life, she was hopeful. She started believing in the good of humanity and that life is worth living. However, the oppressive patriarchal society robbed her of all hope, happiness and positivity, utterly shattered her strong beliefs and rammed stringent social mores down her throat in no time. Being an unconventional and vibrant woman, Benare refused to live within the confines of a society circumscribed by patriarchy and its interlocking oppressions. She constantly struggled to defy patriarchal convention and subvert the restraints of social acceptability by trying to do things her way, which subsequently landed her in severe psychological distress. She was brutally persecuted and publicly humiliated by the hegemonic masculine forces. But this time, instead of ending her life, she decided to fight back.

Benare confesses that she had a fledgling relationship with her maternal uncle and later with a married man, Professor Damle, both of which drastically ended in a fiasco. Her loved and trusted maternal uncle seduced her when she was in early adolescence. She was just an innocent, uninhibited teenage girl, who had no knowledge of right or wrong, of good or evil; the awareness of sin had not yet taken roots in her mind. Her uncle forced his way into her heart and life, and she blindly followed her heart. She loved him with all her heart and soul, unaware of the repercussions of her immoral relationship. When she asked her uncle to marry her, so that she could truly live her dream life openly, her uncle rejected her proposal straightaway and left her to suffer all the revilements and social slights alone. When the relationship ended, she fell apart. In a regressive patriarchal milieu, women are consistently blamed for whatever wrong happens to them. In this instance too, Benare was unfairly maligned and ruthlessly persecuted for her supposed promiscuity, while her maternal uncle was allowed to get off scot-free. The blatant hypocrisy of the male chauvinists embittered her perception of humanity. But as destiny would have it, she fell in love again. She worshipped him as a god, loved him blindly and unconditionally, because she strongly believed that he had a pure heart and that he truly loved her. But again, her hopes and dreams got brutally crushed, when she realized that Damle was no different than other men. He brazenly objectified her and used her to gratify his sexual needs, and then he abandoned her unashamedly without feeling a pang of regret, when she got pregnant. Her selfless love, wholehearted devotion meant nothing to him. Benare was once again left to suffer alone in silence. To further aggravate her misery, the orthodox misogynist society ruthlessly hunted her down like a helpless prey, using the façade of a savage mock trial. She was put on trial and her personal life was nakedly exposed to the public gaze, only to punish her for breaking the social taboo of unmarried pregnancy, while Prof. Damle was allowed to walk free. He didn't face any ramifications for having an illicit relationship with Benare, despite being married and for impregnating her and abandoning her in her most vulnerable condition. Damle has the advantage of being a man in a patriarchal

society, while Benare is subjected to inhuman treatment. Being a woman, there's no respite for her from patriarchal tyranny in a conservative, male-dominated society. Shailaja Wadikar has inferred:

In most of his plays Tendulkar highlights woman's suffering and senseless wastage of brutal irresponsible behaviour of man. However, he neither praises, nor condemns men as well as women. But he has a silent sympathy for women who suffer at the expense of men. He is highly objective and incisive in his criticism of life and society (Wadikar 116).

As if the barbaric public humiliation was not enough, the Education society is now robbing her of her only solace—her job, for the same offence. She recounts how much committed she was to her teaching profession; she loved her students dearly. When her soul was being torn apart, she silently endured the pain, and taught her students how beautiful life is. But despite of all her hard work, she is now being dismissed from her services because she defied the patriarchal norms of the society. She boldly voices her resentment and asserts her individuality:

Benare: For what sin are they robbing me of my job, my only comfort? My private life is my own business. I'll decide what to do with myself; everyone should be able to! That can't be anyone else's business; understand? Everyone has a bent, a manner, an aim in life. What's anyone else to do with these? (Tendulkar 117; Act 3)

Benare firmly and justly opposes the grave injustice being committed against her. She keeps her personal and professional lives separate; her relationship status or marital status has nothing to do with her ability to perform her job well. She loves her job; she puts her heart and soul into her work. She is truly committed to her teaching profession, and she always has her students' best interests at heart. Despite her wholehearted devotion, she is now being dismissed from her employment, solely because she got pregnant before marriage. Although she raises a vehement voice of protest against the Education society's decision to terminate her, but the society seems to pay no heed to her reasoned argument. Kate Millet argues in this context, "Since woman's independence in economic life is viewed with distrust, prescriptive agencies of all kinds (religion, psychology, advertising, etc.) continuously admonish or even inveigh against the employment of middle-class women, particularly mothers" (Millet 41). Empowered and independent women are considered a direct threat to patriarchy. And that's why, the patriarchs of the Education Society seized the opportunity to take away her financial independence.

Quite unexpectedly, all the words of Benare fall into deaf ears and frozen hearts, symbolic of the apathetic nature of patriarchal society. Arundhati Banerjee rightly points out in this regard:

Leela Benare's defense of herself against the onslaught of the upholders of social norms in a long soliloquy, has become famous in the history of contemporary Marathi theater. It is important to note here that Tendulkar leaves us in doubt as to whether or not Benare at all delivers the soliloquy, thus, suggesting that in all probability what she has to say for herself is swallowed up by the silence imposed upon her by the authorities. In fact, during the court proceedings, on several occasions, her objections and protestations are drowned by the Judge's cry of

silence and the banging of the gavel.... It (Benare's monologue) is poignant, sensitive and highlights the vulnerability of women in our society. (Banerjee ix)

Benare's prolonged soliloquy speaks volumes about her persistent struggle against the injustices inherent in a patriarchal system. Through her long speech, Tendulkar has provided the audience a disconcerting insight into his inner psyche, her inner turbulence. Her passionate soliloquy not only chronicles the traumatic experiences of a woman caught up in the whirlpool of tradition, convention, exploitation and subjugation, but also displays her female self-assertion against patriarchal authority. But ironically, her just rebuttal of a string of allegations levelled against her and her valiant defiance of patriarchal oppression isn't heard by anyone. Through her apparently fictitious soliloquy, Tendulkar tried to convey the fact that in a conservative male-dominated society always suppresses the woman's voice. Hence, Benare never gets a chance to give voice to her valorous resistance for real. And Kashikar also makes it crystal clear that Benare's defense of herself against the onslaught of patriarchal ideology would have made no difference at all, because they have already made up their mind that she is guilty: "The accused has no statement to make. In any case, it would be of no use." (118). However, the allotted time for her defense is over and the stage is now set for the final verdict. Mr. Kashikar, a custodian of patriarchal values, delivers the final judgement: "... you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed." Kashikar strongly believes that Benare doesn't deserve any leniency as she has committed the heinous offence of subverting traditional masculinized norms. He idealizes motherhood as a sacred and noble vocation and contends that Benare has desecrated its sanctity by getting pregnant before marriage. Hence, to ensure that her promiscuity doesn't get transmitted to the youth of tomorrow, the mock-court condemns her unborn baby to death, violating Benare's agency over her own body. The verdict reinforces the gruesome fact that in a patriarchal gender system, men get to control women's creative power of reproduction and to decide what should happen to their bodies. L.S. Deshpande states:

The punishment meted out to Miss Benare speaks volumes of the ways of our so-called cultured society. The story of Miss Benare's innocence is a long-drawn-out tale of woman's suffering at the hands of man. As usual, the man is left scot-free, and the woman is made a scapegoat by all those around her. Needless to add, however, that all this is just a play and, hence, not to be taken seriously. The height of the irony lies in the final utterance of the play: "The show must go on!" exposing the moral and intellectual snobbery of the white-collar, educated middle class Indians. (Deshpande 330)

However, Benare is not yet ready to give up, to passively submit to patriarchal norms. So, instead of terminating her pregnancy, she opts to fight the system and as her last act of defiance, she resolves to nurture the life growing inside her:

Benare: I despise this body—and I love it! I hate it—but it's all you have, in the end, isn't it? It will be there. It will be yours. [...] And now it carries within it the witness of that time—a tender little bud—of what will be a lisping, laughing, dancing little life—my son—my whole existence! I want my body now for him—for him alone. (Tendulkar 118; Act 3)

Tendulkar clearly articulates the firm determination of Benare to stand against all odds, in order to bring up her child. Through Benare, the playwright has attempted to portray here the endless struggle of women in conservative patriarchal socio-cultural milieu, to reclaim their absolute right over their bodies. Patriarchal norms deny women the right to make decisions about their own bodies. They don't even get to exercise their fundamental reproductive rights. It should be the sole right of a woman to decide on her reproductive choice, a man should have no say in this matter. Men should not have any legal rights over women's pregnancies. Women carry a child inside their body for more than nine months, ergo, they should have absolute authority to decide what happens to the unborn child in her womb, neither a man, nor the society. Benare knows well that the conservative patriarchal society will never confer a legitimate status on her offspring, but, at this juncture, it doesn't really matter to her.

Vijay Tendulkar's ambitious work, *Silence! The Court is in Session* delves deep into the inner turmoils and conflicts that rage in the psyche of empowered women in a society steeped in patriarchal values. The play also offers a profound insight into the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset of the Indian society, and brings to the fore, a harrowing image of savage exploitation and oppression of the non-conformist women who rebel against male domination and set out to establish a forceful and independent identity that could defy all the patriarchal and societal notions of a woman. Leela Benare, the upright and chivalrous protagonist of the play, embodies the spirit of freedom against patriarchal conventions. She is a modern, independent unmarried, progressive woman, who falls prey to the vicious trap set by the spiteful, morally corrupt and sexually frustrated urban middle class male chauvinists, to persecute her for defying the constricting norms of morality and righteousness prescribed for women by a patriarchal culture. Tendulkar projects Benare as the voice of the new modern, independent, self-asserting and self-defining Indian women, who choose to fight for their rightful place in a man's world, instead of passively submitting to patriarchal ideology. She is resolute in her determination to dismantle hegemonic masculinity and to carve out a sphere of freedom for herself in an overly masculine environment. Vijay Tendulkar has used the literary device of soliloquy to great effect in order to express the psychological turbulence of Benare and to candidly expose the blatant hypocrisy of the so called 'progressive' urban middle class male chauvinists. However, it appears that Benare's prolonged soliloquy is more of a self-justification, than a relentless assault on the hypocrisy and sham moral standards of the pretentious, self-important Indian men. As critics have pointed out that in this protest drama, Tendulkar has focused more on delineating the traumatic experiences of women trapped in a whirlpool of patriarchal exploitation, than exhibiting their aggression and steadfastness to fiercely tear to pieces the long-established social norms. Tendulkar, a trailblazer in women's rights, delves deep into practices and norms of the patriarchal system that restrict women's agency, autonomy and social or economic independence, and candidly lays bare the gritty reality of hostile sexism and negative cultural stereotypes of women prevalent in every stratum of society. In his social realist drama, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar poses as a subtle observer of Indian social reality, and not as a social reformer or a feminist. As Tendulkar tells Sumit Saxena in an interview:

I have not written about hypothetical pain or created an imaginary world of sorrow. I am from a middle-class family, and I have seen the brutal ways of life by keeping my eyes open. My work has come from within me, as an outcome of my observation of the world in which I live. If they want to entertain and make merry, fine go ahead, but I can't do it, I have to speak the truth. (Interview with Sumit Saxena: 2006)

In *Silence*, Tendulkar has blatantly exposed the sadism, hypocrisy, greed, immorality and dubious double standards latent in urban middle-class men, he has revealed the true face of a traditional patriarchal society, degenerating under the veneer of modernity. He simply holds a mirror up to the depraved nature of the traditional, orthodox society of modern India, without suggesting any viable solution to the problem of patriarchal domination. In the context of this open-ended nature of Tendulkar's plays, Asha S. Kanwar has observed, "By leaving the ethical questions open, Tendulkar is perhaps inviting his audience to think about the solutions for themselves." (Kanwar 33). Tendulkar is famous for penning down thought-provoking plays that instils a spirit of defiance in the minds of the audience.

As a sensitive and sensible human being and a responsible writer, Tendulkar has penned down the deplorable plight of Indian women trapped in a vicious cycle of violence and abuse, in an emphatically realistic manner, and he leaves the rest to the readers to decide according to their own discretion. Tendulkar never judged his characters, neither he intended the characters to become his mouthpiece:

The one characteristic of my plays which I can legitimately boast of, is characterization. My characters are not cardboard characters; they do not speak my language; rather I do not speak my language through them; they are not my mouthpieces; but each of them has his or her own separate existence and expression. (Tendulkar x)

Tendulkar portrays the unpleasant realities of the human condition as he perceives it, from different perspectives without moralizing and philosophizing in any way. For this very reason, he has not shown Benare as an aggressive character. However, her bold decision to give birth to her child against the decision stamped on her by the self-proclaimed moral guardians and custodians of patriarchal values, speaks volumes about her revolutionary zeal to achieve a complete emancipation from all forms of patriarchal bondage.

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