

**SILENCING THE WOMEN: A STARK LOOK AT INDIAN
SOCIETY IN VIJAY TENDULKAR'S "SILENCE! THE
COURT IS IN SESSION"**

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Abstract:

The main trend of postcolonial writings is to exhibit the existing social follies and taboos that corrode the society from its very base, and shatter the social and cultural fabric of the society. The postmodern writers tend to reflect the spirit of their age or human experiences faithfully in order to ameliorate social order and make people aware about the concurrent social problems of the particular society. They expose the patriarchal based social structure and bourgeois oriented social and cultural fabric that hurl down one group of people into the deep trench of misery. In the present society, the murky aspects of life such as adultery, infanticide, infidelity, schism, alienation, unfaithfulness, segregation, suppression etc become the inextricable part of modern man's life in which women who are generally considered as the second class citizens become the birds of prey amidst these corrupt consuetude. The sole purpose of this paper is to depict the stark aspects of Indian society and how these murky aspects silence the women by suppressing their voice, and annihilate the social and cultural fabric of India.

Key Words: Patriarchy, adultery, infanticide, silence, second class, suppression, corrupt consuetude.

Each and every writer of any age tends to reflect the spirit of his age or human experiences faithfully in order to depict the concurrent social problems of the particular society by that he can make aware the people about the concurrent corrupt consuetude so that they can correct themselves. The postmodern writings illuminate its light not only on one sphere of life but it encompasses “whole arc of life, ranging from the material to the spiritual, the phenomenal to the transcendental and provide[s] at once relaxation and entertainment, instruction and illumination” (Iyengar, 1). But the main trend of postcolonial writings is to exhibit the existing social follies and taboos that corrode the society from its very base and shatter the social and cultural fabric of the society. The main concern of present writing is to exhibit the concurrent situation of women and how they are represented in the literature. Virginia Woolf opines that “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf, 7). In order to get the respite and dignity in society, she must establish her own room. But in Indian society, they fail to wield the position of human being that makes them a mere object and a silent observer. “Silence is considered to be proper grace of women as when they tried to raise their voice and to hold their heads high, they had been forcibly subdued to the point when they became completely benumbed” (Sattar, 525). Their true identity is camouflaged by the false taboos and ideologies stemmed from the structured patriarchal society. Liberal Feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Rebecca Walker etc also focus on the gender equality in academy and public spheres, and argue that some social taboos such as women are inferior to men in terms of physicality and intellectuality, women are born to serve the family, are prevailing in the society. They strive to change this myth of Indian society being a venomous critique of androcentrism. Like them being aware the corrupt social consuetude, Vijay Tendulkar embarks on the same track, and documents the burning problems of the Indian society such as infanticide, promiscuity, gender problem and lopsided nature of judicial system that make a woman a second class citizen and a victim patriarchal hegemony.

Having been the inextricable part of the Indian society, in ‘Silence! The court is in session’ Vijay Tendulkar depicts the problems of Miss Benare, protagonist of the play and how she ventures into the psychological trauma due to the prevailing of patriarchal values in the society. Through the character of Miss Benare, Vijay Tendulkar is able to throw light on the problems of Indian society in which women become the prey of victim and oppression.

'Silence! The Court is in Session' (originally, Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe) opens with protagonist Miss Leela Benare entering a village hall along with a local man, Samant. The play gradually reveals that 'The Sonar Moti Tenement (Bombay) Progressive Association', an amateur theatre group, has come to a village to present a play about a mock trial to show the bad impact of atomic weapons to the people. They reach to their destination before mean time, so they decide to act a new mock-trial other than the one to be staged as they rehearsed it many times to pass time of the drowsy afternoon and also to show how to perform on the stage to Samant, who is going to enact the role of fourth witness. Samant is assigned the role of fourth witness as at the mean time of their exhibition, they find that two or three characters are absent, especially Prof. Damle, and Rawte who is assigned the role of fourth witness. Samant is a rustic man and is fully unaware of the court and acting. In order to make him aware how the court functions and how to act in the drama, they decide to perform a new one.

In this mock-trial, Miss Leela Benare becomes the prey of victim and in this process she breaks down psychologically so much that, at the end, she becomes benumbed. She is a modern woman different from the traditional one, and possesses a natural lust for life and a spontaneous jollification. She is a robust character conforming not to the social norms and dictates. Being different from the others she is easily isolated, and is made victim of a cruel game cunningly planned by her co-actors. In this game, Leela Benare has been accused with a serious charge, and is arrested on suspicion of a crime that is grave in nature, eventually she is brought as a prisoner before the bar of court. The panic stricken statement is uttered by Ponkshe who has been assigned the role of witness. She is, then, placed inside the wooden bar, and is attacked in polemic by Sukhatme who poses himself as a lawyer of accused and as a lawyer of persecution. During the mock-trial game, Miss Benare's private life is publically exposed by revealing her pregnancy. This provides the mock-trial an incarnation of reality; therefore, the illusory story is converted into a real one that strikes Miss Benare so intensely that she becomes silent. She has been accused with a charge of infanticide that is considered as a grave social crime having social significance according to Mr. Kashikar. Later, she is asked to defend herself of the aforementioned charge, but she is unable to do so. Professor Damle is significantly absent at the trial denoting his total withdrawal of responsibility, either social or moral. During the trial he is summoned merely as a witness while Benare remains the prime accused as the unwed mother of his illegitimate child.

After the statement of Ponkshe one by one various characters such as Karnik, Rodke, Samant, and Mrs Kashikar come to the witness box to present their stories as a witness to consolidate the charge of infanticide going through the private life of Miss Benare. At first, Miss Benare raises question against the aforementioned charge as the very word 'infanticide' strikes the sense of discomfort to the heart of Miss Benare. So she suggests accusing her with another charge which is soft in sound like 'snatching', but it is refuted.

BENARE. Or how infanticide really works? Really, I don't like your word at all! Infanticide . . . infanticide! Why don't you accuse me instead of – um – snatching public property! That has a nice sound about it, don't you think? Sounds like 'snatching'! (29)

She also tries to defend herself by ascertaining that she is an innocent woman; even scares at the thought of killing a common cockroach, therefore, the thought of killing a newborn baby is beyond her thought. But when she tries to defend herself, she is undermined and suppressed by showing the legal punishment that leads to the trajectory of self.

KASHIKAR. Prisoner Miss Benare, for abrogating the authority of counsel, and for obstructing the due process of the law, a reprimand is hereby issued to you. (29)

Posterior time, she only becomes the silent observer, benumbed and speechless statue, and her feet glue to the earth. At that moment, she only feels to escape the situation and tense excoriation. At last, Ponkshe reappears on the stage, and is summoned to the witness box to ascertain the charge of infanticide. He discloses the story in such a way that he converts the illusory mock trial a real one by exposing the private life of Miss Benare. He presents her as a quean.

Here Vijay Tendulkar very tactfully depicts the stark side of Indian society i.e. marooned and degraded position of women in patriarchal society in which in every respect they are subjugated, down-trodden, and are subjected to acute torture. Infanticide is, no doubt, is social crime and in that case, motherhood of woman is questioned because she is supposed to take care and protection of her child from every problem and predicament. But in this play, it is observed that only Miss Benare is continuously excoriated while the equally guilty of her paramour who closes his fist from every responsibility, is acquitted from all charges as he is a man. This kind of

treatment in Indian society shows the lopsided nature of judicial system in which men get the upper hand position and enjoy all kind of privileges.

The second charge that falls on Miss Benare is promiscuity or adultery. In Indian society, the act of adultery or promiscuity is considered as a sinful act in which generally women have to suffer as they bear the witness of adultery. On the other hand, man who is equally guilty of the crime gets nothing but the bed of roses and his dignity is never sapped. Here Miss Benare's act of promiscuity is considered by all characters as the act of moral degradation which will not fetch the salutation on the society. So in the court, she is abased and is subjected to polemic by all the characters subsuming Mrs Kashikar, who being a woman is against the belief and values of Miss Benare as she upholds the traditional values of women as meek, mild and taciturn, and who always keeps herself distance from the shadow of men. On the other hand, Miss Benare's paramour, Prof. Damle who shares the equal crime is not humiliated a little bit though the cat comes out of the bag.

Vijay Tendulkar exposes the present scenario of middle class family of Indian society that bestows with moral codes and values in which women are supposed to follow all these values. If they deviate from this track, they are subjected to acute torture. Silence is considered to be the proper grace of women as when they have tried to raise their voice and to hold their heads high, they have been forcibly subdued to the point when they become completely benumbed. In patriarchal culture like India power is equated with aggression and masculinity; while weakness with compassion and femininity. Women are supposed to tolerate male chauvinism silently and meekly. Where they try to be different, they are branded as unusual, outcaste and crazy, therefore, they are punished. Both Benare and Mrs. Kashikar have fallen victims to male supremacy in Indian society when they try to be different from moral code of woman. They are bound to act and speak as desired by the men folk. When Benare attempts to lead an independent life of her own, she has been mercilessly crushed.

The very word of the title 'silence' does not only denote the restoration of order and decorum from the chaos and commotion by means of power bestowed with the honourable Judge, but also to establish the male chauvinism and to restore the traditional moral code and order in the life of women. It is observed that Indian society is lopsided and patriarchal, so what is wrong, immoral for a woman is not so for a man. Miss Benare is accused with a charge of

infanticide and is acutely attacked in polemic, but her paramour, Prof. Damle gets acquitted from such kind of thing. Similarly Benares maternal uncle nowhere appears as an accused for committing incest with her.

In Indian society, man is considered to be the hub of society enjoying all the privileges, and has all rights to be sinful in the society. All rights are supposed to be reserved especially for him. On the other hand, a woman who is considered as a second class citizen is deserted, ignored, thrown away, and is punished for her sins. Parrot in the play is used as a powerful symbol of illusion of her own self and sparrow as her reality. Here the rights of women are infringed, and are exploited emotionally, socially and physically. Miss Benare who has committed the act of adultery and infanticide is dismissed from the job. Though she admits all her crimes before all her fellow actors, she is excoriated and refuted by them. She has an innocent love affair with her maternal uncle and Prof. Damle, but both the men have deceived her as their prime intention and appreciation is not her beauty, but her body. She admits:

“It isn’t love at all. It’s worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered my body on the altar of my worship. And intellectual god took the offering.... and went his way” (75)

She pathetically states: He wasn’t god. He was a man for whom everything was of the body, for the body; That’s all ;(75)

The failure of resonance between written laws and practice in actual life is the root cause of failure of the Indian Judicial system. Through the play within a play, Vijay Tendulkar succeeds in depicting the real condition of Indian Judicial system in which rigid laws is acted only upon the poor, minority and helpless people. The elite class people get acquitted after being committed serious crimes, and verdict comes in favour of them. In this play, very hard verdict is pronounced against Miss Benare who is poor and is considered the second class citizen in the society. Her voice is constantly suppressed, and her identity is revamped as mere benumbed inanimate object. Prof. Damle who is equally guilty in terms of societal norms as he is the paramour of Miss Benare gets acquitted being considered as the impeccable person. Here the court fails to look into the hypocritical behaviour of elite class people by removing their mask wearing on their black face and black character. If Miss Benare belongs to the elite class, the verdict may take the opposite direction and the whole action may come in favour of her, but it

does not happens as she is poor and woman. Vijay Tendulkar also excoriates the whole judicial system in which the false statement gets prominence and fate of the accused depends on this false statement. The judge fails to judge the authenticity of the statement. The corrupt nature of Indian judicial is evident from the judgement of the judge without giving a chance for cross-examination by the defence-lawyer that 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” (Renuka, 55). The insert of chewing pan scene in the legal system is to show the chaotic nature of Indian court system that is discernible in the present society.

Thus it is observed that in Indian society many serious social taboos like gender discrimination, corrupt judicial system are predominant that are very carefully dissected by the playwright. In the democratic and socialistic country, women are treated as the second class citizens, and they fail to wield the equal social status. Men enjoy each and every privilege in the society, even the judicial system is in favour of them. The identity of the minority people is at stake, and in the name of equality; deprivation prevails everywhere. Some social taboos such as promiscuity, infanticide etc also prevail in dominant force in the Indian society, but in these cases only women get victimized for their silencing trait stemming from the patriarchal based social structure.

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Bio-Note:

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