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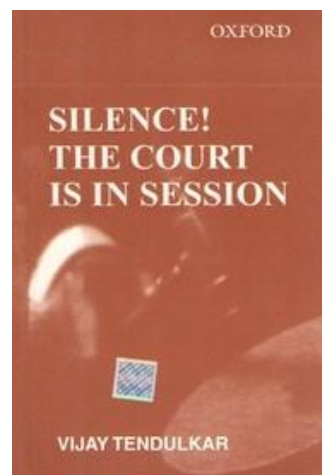
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## Individual Versus Society in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

Manjeet

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## Abstract

The present paper is concerned with irresolvable conflicts between an individual and his or her society. Through the play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Vijay Tendulkar reveals the fundamentally orthodox nature of society. The play discusses the problems of unmarried motherhood. The main character Miss Benare, who is self-determined and self-assertive, is cross-examined in the mock-court and her private life is exposed to everyone. Miss Benare is not only blamed but humiliated also by her own companions. The very men who give lectures on the dignity of women and motherhood are responsible for inflicting shame and indignity on her.

Tendulkar throws light on the inherent wickedness of human nature that neither allows anybody to be happy with life, nor endures others happiness. Through the rehearsal of the play, which is ostensibly a game, Tendulkar exposes the double standard of our society, which probes individual minds and forces its orthodoxical boundaries on individual wishes.

**Keywords:** Individual, Society, Patriarchal Dominance, Suppression, Orthodoxy, Culture, Assertiveness, Freedom, Self-realization.

## Vijay Tendulkar – Multifaceted Creative Genius

Vijay Tendulkar is undeniably a great Indian playwright, known for his multifaceted creative genius. As a versatile and prolific Marathi writer he has authored twenty-eight full length dramas, twenty-four one act plays and eleven plays for children. Besides being an acclaimed dramatist he is well known for his literary essays, political journalism, screen and television writing. Despite his interest and involvement in different social political and literary activities, his genius finds full expression only in dramas. It is the subtle and complex nature of his plays that gives him a place of pride in the international galaxy of playwrights.

All his plays such as *Silence! The Court is in Session*, *The Vultures*, *Sukharam Binder*, *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *Encounter in Umbugland*, *Kamala*, and *A Friend's Story*, reflect contemporary Indian society, its problems, and its challenges. Tendulkar is an individualist and,

as such, presents the individual versus society issues. Thus, he stands for individual freedom. As Wadikar comments:

His plays put forth several questions without providing any answer to them. The playwright seeks to present the modern man with his predicament, his challenges, his difficulties, and his complexities. The life seen around is projected as it is and the dramatist makes no effort to moralize or philosophise it.(2)

### ***Silence! The Court is in Session***

*Silence! The Court is in Session*, one of Tendulkar's finest dramatic works, is a play originally written in Marathi and later translated into English by Priya Adarkar. This play discusses the problem of unmarried motherhood through the conflict between an individual and society where innocence is ruthlessly crushed by cruelty. As Wadikar says in Preface to *Vijay Tendulkar*, "Tendulkar is interested in showing disharmony rather than harmony in the relationship between man and society. There is the tension between individual identity and social existence" (xiii).

### **Miss Benare – The Central Figure**

The play *Silence! The Court is in Session* is in reality a mock trial of a simple and straightforward school teacher Miss Benare. She is cross-examined in the court with full mockery. She is charged with infanticide and having illicit relations with a married person Professor Damle and in this way her private life is exposed. All the other characters like witness, Mr. Gopal Ponshe, Mr. Karnik, Rokde, Samant, counsel for the defense and counsel for the crown Mr. Sukhatme and judge, Mr. Kashikar and his wife Mrs. Kashikar behave in a way of mockery.

Megha Trivedi rightly says, "Tendulkar has tried to initiate the new form by commenting on the mendacity of the social and ethical standards existing in the society" (4). Benare wanted to live a free life, free from the patriarchal dominance and the conservative norms of the society. She displays self – determination, self – assertiveness and cynicism but is also receptive to the conventional norms of integrity. Reddy and Devi compare Benare with the heroine of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, "Benare, the principal character in the play is sprightly,

rebellious and assertive ...of course, Benare is a lovely spark from the thunder bolt of Tendulker. She is a new woman pleading for freedom from the social norms..." (quoted in Trivedi 4).

### **The Philosophical Doctrine of Determinism**

This play refers to the philosophical doctrine of determinism, which is opposed to the concept of free will. *The Dictionary of World Literary Terms* defines it as, "It is a doctrine which is based on the belief that man's choice plays little or no part in determining what happens to them, since their decisions are overwhelmed by natural or social forces" (80). Man is not free to choose his mode of behavior, his way of life for these things are decided by his background, surrounding, and other things over which he has no control.

### **The Witnesses**

Balu Rokde, Ponkshe, Karnik, and Samant appeared as witness for the trial against Benare. Samant, a village chap was forced to accept and act as the fourth witness in the play on behalf of Prof. Damle. Sukhatme suggested the theater artists to make Mis. Benare, the accused in the mock trial. Mr. Kashikar played the role of the judge, as he proclaims, "Prisoner Miss Benare, under section No. 302 of the Indian Penal Code, you have been accused of the crime of infanticide. Are you guilty or not guilty of the aforementioned crime"(Tendulkar 73).

Kashikar, Sukhatme and others formed a group to torture Leela Benare in the mock trial. She was even charged to have an illicit relationship with her maternal uncle and later with Prof. Damle.

In this context Megha Trivedi writes:

The character of Ms. Benare reminds us of Ammu, the protagonist in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. She is also identical to various female character presented by Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai in their books. They have also exposed the naked realities of women suffering at the hands of the male dominating society. (6)

### **Wickedness of Human Nature**

Tendulkar here throws light on the inherent wickedness of human nature that neither allows anybody to be happy with life, nor endures other's happiness. B. Wadikar is justified in saying,

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“Benare’s companions are themselves dissatisfied with life as they fail to achieve their desired aims in their lives. Sukhatme fails to be a successful lawyer; Karnik, to be a successful artist; and Ponshe, to be a scientist” (15). All the characters except Leela Benare are the representatives of the fundamentally orthodox society.

### **So-called Modern Society and Vilification**

Ms. Benare is disappointed by this so-called modern society. When she says, “My children are so much better than adults ... There’s no nonsense stuffed in their heads. They don’t scratch you, till you bleed, then run away like cowards” (Tendulkar 57). Surprisingly, at the end this fake charge turns in to a verdict, in to a punishment. This very rehearsal of the mock - trial takes a serious turn as the co - actors arrange it cunningly to discuss and dissect the private life of Benare. In the so-called game, her relationship with Prof. Damle, missing member of party, which has resulted in her pregnancy, stands exposed. According to Veena Das, in her “Women Characters in the Plays of Tendulkar”:

It is important here to note that these charges became verbalized only in absence of Damle. Miss Benare was thrown in to the dock and there she remained trying to joke herself out of it, but trapped too murderously the male vultures around her, witness after witness, charge upon charge was heaped upon her, the defense lawyer was so frightened that he only asked a little mercy on her behalf. (10)

### **Cruel Accusations**

Every member, except Samant, has something to say against the accused Benare. They all give their personal comments on life of Benare. As Mrs. Kashikar has problem with her not marrying at the age of 34 and her awkward living style, “Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men” (Tendulkar 100). She shows her concerns that there should be a limit to how freely an unmarried woman can behave with a man. These are not really, the way of living of an unmarried woman in our society. As Shailaja expresses her views in this context, “In the developmental process of culture and civilization, the natural way of life comes to an end. Biologically, and culturally too, human

beings are divided in to men and women, both of them suppress their spontaneity and loss their real joy of life” (70).

### **Entertainment Turns into Tragedy**

The game of mock court, which started for entertainment, turns in to Benare’s tragedy. Benare is totally devastated. She is also stricken with a sense of fear like a trapped animal, and has been dismembered morally and socially. While commenting on Tendulkar’s play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, G.P. Deshpande asserts:

Modernization costs of loss of individual freedom. In Freud’s words, civilization comes in to being from the suppression of Eros ... From conceptual point of view we think true, ideal individual freedom thrives only in the civilized world, but actually in practice, it implies that we should put up with tyranny. (qut.in Wadikar)

### **Cultural Distortions of Human Personality**

With the march of progressive civilization, the natural way of life comes to an end. Culture distorts human personality. As a result of distortion, everyone acquires a deformed personality. The character of Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, Ponkshe, Rokde, Sukhatme represents hypocrisy and inferiority complex. One can clearly notice a conflict raised by Tendulkar between the real self and the performed self in the play. Veena Dass says, “Tendulkar digs the inner self of all characters in the play, how they present themselves and what they actually are”(10). The last speech of Mrs. Benare is skillfully constructed by Tendulkar. It echoes the irony, sorrow and lampoon present in the Indian society. She says :

My life was a burden to me. But when you can’t lose it, you realize the value of it ... I taught them well! I know that life is no straight forward thing. People can be so cruel. I did n’t teach any of this to those tender, young souls. I swallowed that poison, but did n’t even let a drop of it touch them! I taught them beauty. I taught them purity ... My private life is my own business. For what sin are they robbing me of my job, my only comfort? I’ll decide what to do with myself; every one should be able to!(Tendulkar 117)

## **A Long Soliloquy**

Arundhati Banerjee points out, “Leela Benare’s defence 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”(ix). Sukhatme, the lawyer prosecutes his case against Benare, earlier when he was glorifying motherhood on the case of infanticide, now his last plea comes, “Infanticide is a dreadful act. But bringing up the child of an illegal union is certainly more horrifying. Woman bears the grave responsibility of building up the high values of society ‘Miss Benare is not fit for independence’” (Tendulkar).

## **Nora and Benare**

The judgment passed on Mss Benare seems to be absurd. She is held guilty by the court that asks the school authorities to dismiss her from the job, and further orders that the babe in her womb be destroyed. She screamed to this, “No! No! No! I won’t let you do it. I won’t let it happen” (Tendulkar 76). According to Arundhati Banerjee, “Benare’s monologue is reminiscent of Ibsen’s Nora’s declaration of independence” (40). Mrs. Kashikar does not help the helpless Miss Benare in the court inspite of being a woman. She is against Mis Benare, because she is a conventional Indian house wife who has accepted all the norms framed by the society. Megha Trivedi makes a remark, “Benare was a progressive contemporary woman, she was psychologically tortured but was still starving to search for her existence” (8).

## **Glaring Contrasts**

The character of Benare symbolizes simplicity, innocence, and straight forwardness and the characters of her fellow-companions symbolize meanness, crookedness, and cruelty. Her tragedy reveals the fact that, in the male dominated society, woman’s innocence is punished and man’s violence goes scot-free. That is why Prof. Damle, despite the fact that he wholly disowns his responsibility is summoned merely as a witness while, “Benare remains the prime accused, principally because contemporary Indian society, with all its roots grounded firmly in reactionary ideas, cannot allow the birth of a child out of wedlock”(Wadigar 45). According to N.S. Dharan, “It is Benare’s fear of such a code that makes her crave for marriage and forces her to beg the inferior men around her, one after another to marry her’ (40). Benare is denied both, the right of

living, as she is dismissed from the job, and the right of becoming a mother, as the baby in her womb has to be destroyed, for that is the sentence passed on her.

### **Double Standards Exposed through the Game**

Through the rehearsal of the play, which is ostensibly a game, Tendulkar exposes the double standards of our society. Her tragedy reveals that too much innocence is unpardonable even in the so – called cultured society. According to Jyoti Havnurkar, “The deeper implications of the play are to expose the way how inferior, mediocre persons – small men as Shakespeare calls them – trap superior individuals and fulfill their innate burning itch of publically denouncing them”(10). They cannot do it openly. Hence they take recourse to such subterfuges as a mock –trial. These educated civilized people become aggressive and violent against their fellow companion and entertain themselves at the cost of her honor and dignity. Benare suffers at their hands for the offence she has not committed. So she bursts out, “These are mortal remains of some cultured men of the twentieth century. See their faces, how ferocious they look! Their lips are full of lovely worn- out phrases! And their bellies are full of unsatisfied desires” (Tendulkar 117).

### **Blame and Humiliation Inflicted by Traditional Society**

Miss Benare is not only blamed but humiliated also by her own companions. The very men who give lectures on the dignity of women and motherhood are responsible for inflicting shame and indignity on her. Benare appears to be the victim of circumstances. In the depiction of the characters such as Prof. Damle and maternal uncle of Benare, the playwright exposes the excessive sexual lust of her male – counterparts. The tragedy of Benare bears evidence to the fact that in Indian society a mistaken innocent woman becomes helpless and suffers humiliation doubly first, physically on a personal level and then mentally on a public level. One can easily notice that Tendulkar, in his play, rejects idealized portrayal of life and attains complete accuracy in realistically presenting details. “He displays disinterested objectivity and frankness in depicting life as a brutal struggle for survival. He neither praises nor blames the characters for the actions with in or without their control” (Wadikar 68).



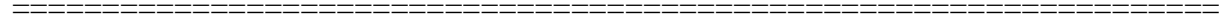
A traditional society cannot relinquish its paralyzed values and customs. The society does not like to perceive or receive any social change. Tendulkar presents a treatment of these ugly ways of society in this play, which probes individual mind and forces its orthodox boundaries on individual wishes and tries to block the ways through which one can breathe the air of freedom. What Rousseau says of man is perfectly applicable to Indian society, "Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains." This is so because each and every one tries his / her best to suppress others to establish power and authority.

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