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Patriarchy And Gender Discrimination In The Play *Silence! The Court Is In Session*

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Abstract: *Silence! The court is in session*, a play originally written in Marathi language by the playwright Vijay Tendulkar, depicts the tragedy of a young female character Miss. Leela Benare, a modern middle-class woman with a progressive outlook becoming a victim of male dominated society. The play portrays the rehearsal of a play in an untidy old room of a small village by an Amateur Theatre group which puts Miss. Benare to trial for the charge of infanticide. Miss Benare, cheated by a man who has left her pregnant and disowns responsibility is alienated by the group and is hailed as a slur on the face of the society. All the characters including a female character, Mrs. Kashikar gang up to deliberately torture her in the play's rehearsal. Tendulkar in this play has tried to comment on the rigidity and bias of the social and ethical standards existing in the society through the character Miss. Benare who represents the oppressed and marginalized women in the society. The play also depicts the condemnation on the Indian society and the prejudices it carries against women and highlights its ostentatious institutional social organizations.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Gender, Discrimination.

Vijay Tendulkar, the angry young man of Marathi theatre produced his Marathi play *Shantha! Court Chalu Ahe* in 1967. It was translated to English by Priya Adarkar. It incurred him the wrath of the censor and of the conservative section of society for criticizing the follies prevailing in the society. He was branded as a rebel against the value system of a fundamental orthodox society. Looking back from now it is not



difficult to imagine what a shock the play would have given to the male dominated tradition bound society. He shook the very edifice of the patriarchal system. He takes up the cause of sham and hypocrisy of lower middle class and middle-class society and the hostility against women.

Tendulkar set a new trend in Marathi theatre and introduced new themes to the theatre. He did not walk on the beaten track but created a new track leading to a modernistic movement in theatre. It was appalling for some, particularly for orthodox group, because it violated the set norms of society as well as of theatre. But the dynamism of Tendulkar's plays paved the way for him to emerge as the forceful voice of the social problems confronting the lower middle class and middle class of our society.

In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar has introduced a young female character who is a victim of male dominated society and a prey for the desire for bodily pleasure of men and is deserted at the end to her own destiny. The focal point of the play is the violent response of the male dominated society to pre-marital motherhood. The mock trial holds the mirror to our social response to such things. It is preeminently male biased.

The play is confined to the preparation of rehearsal of a play in which a woman is put to trial for the charge of infanticide. The actual show is scheduled at night. In the morning an Amateur theatre group comprising of eight individuals arrive at a small village to perform an awareness raising play on social issues. But the members of the theatre group deliberately introduce the idea of playing an imaginary case to pass the leisure time more pleasantly. Miss Benare who was in playful mood and was unaware of their intention welcomes their idea by telling "I'm even willing to play Hopscotch...."(P-17) Sukathme by rejecting all who come forward to play the role of the accused, proposes the name of Benare for the role of accused "let's have a really different kind of accused"(P-19). Without seeking the consent of Benare who does not volunteer herself for the role, Sukathme convinces her to agree for his proposal. Mr. Kashikar decides the charge to be of social significance and declares that Benare is arrested under the section 302 of IPC for the crime of infanticide. In this way the whole group gang up against her and exploit the opportunity of the mock-trial to dissect her private life and humiliate her in the name of game and by doing so try to show her licentious life and cook several stories of her affairs.



In the play Miss. Benare is the victim of men's lust and prejudice. When she was just fourteen years old she fell prey to incestuous lust of her own maternal uncle. She painfully recounts it when it is raked up by Karnik:

It's true, I did commit a sin. I was in love with my mother's brother. But in our strict house, in the prime of my unfolding youth, he was the one who came close to me. He praised my bloom every day. He gave me love...How was I know...if you felt that just being with him gave a whole meaning to life and if he was your uncle, it was sin!..I didn't even know what sin was...I insisted on marriage. So I could live my beautiful lovely dream openly. Like everyone else! But all of them—my mother too—were against it. And my brave man turned tail and ran. (P-63)

She convincingly proves that she was innocent and her impulse was natural at that young age and she was drawn into this affair by her maternal uncle. She shows her moral courage and integrity to admit the mistake she has committed in her childish innocence. But the onus of this act is imposed on her by Karnik, Mr. Kashikar, the judge, Sukathme, the advocate and all witnesses. It proves the male prejudice against a progressive woman. All the members of the theatre who are failure in their respective fields, to cover up their frustration perpetuate violence against Benare, a bold and successful working woman. She shows her moral courage and integrity to admit the mistake she has committed in her childish innocence.

After establishing herself as a teacher, as a grown up young lady in spite of her previous failure in love with her maternal uncle, she falls in love with a man called Prof. Damle. Prof. Damle who is a married man does not return true love to her. He exploits her and leaves her pregnant disowning responsibility. Her complete surrender to him yields her nothing except temporary illusions of leading a happy life. Benare says:

In dejection she turns to Ponkshe and requests him to marry her and give his name to her child in womb. But Ponkshe rejects her plea telling "it's an insult to have asked me this at all. Do you think I'm so worthless?" (P-54)

In the whole play nowhere we see Benare's maternal uncle as an accused for committing incest with her. The court does not accuse Prof. Damle for exploiting and abusing the life of a woman. Benare is condemned



for being licentious and for going against the traditional decorum of the society. All the responsibility of safeguarding the morality is expected to be performed by women and not by men. Prof. Damle who has to share the accusation equally, is allowed to enjoy life. This depicts the condemnation on the Indian society and the prejudices and double standards it carries against women.

The other female character Mrs. Kashikar who is a conformist and upholder of patriarchal ideologies is an accomplice of men in the persecution of Benare. She represents the typical Indian Housewife dependent on her husband for everything. She is conservative in nature and upholds the traditional values for women in the society. She comes down heavily on Benare for her unrestrained conduct with men and promiscuous behavior:

That's what happens these days when you get everything without marrying. They just want comfort. They couldn't care less about responsibility! Let me tell you—in my time, even if a girl was snub-nosed, sallow, hunchbacked, or anything whatever, she—could—still—get—married! It's the sly new fashion of women earning that makes everything go wrong. This is how promiscuity has spread throughout our society. (P-45-46)

Mrs. Kashikar being a conventional Indian woman, who has accepted all the norms framed by patriarchal society, does not come to the rescue of her own fellow woman Miss. Benare. Instead she as a representative of male dominated Indian society comments on her saying:

Just look at the way she behaves. I don't like to say anything since she is one of us. Should there be no limit to how freely a woman can behave with a man? An unmarried woman? No matter how well she knows him? Look how loudly she laughs! How she sings, dances, cracks jokes! And wandering alone with how many men, day in and day out! (P-46)

Sukathme who is the mouth piece of the orthodox society appears masochistic and sadist who takes delight in torturing a woman. In the mock-trial he plays the double role-of the counsel for the prosecution and also for the accused. But he seems more interested in prosecution rather than in defense. He adds:



Considering this what would we respectable citizens say if any woman were to take the life of the delicate bundle of joy she has borne, we would say, there could be no baser or more devilish thing on the earth. I intended to establish by means of evidence that the prisoner has done this same vile deed. (P-26)

His blasphemy leaves Benare morally and spiritually wounded:

The woman who is an accused has made a heinous blot on the sacred brow of motherhood—which is purer than heaven itself. For that, any punishment, however great, that the law may give her will be too mild by far. The character of the accused is appalling. It is bankrupt of morality. Not only that. Her conduct has blackened all social and moral values. The accused is public enemy number one. (P-60)

At the end of the play the judge Mr. Kashikar orders Ms. Benare to abort her child. According to him to have the child without marriage is against the tradition of Indian culture. Passing his judgment he says:

The crimes you have committed are the most terrible. The morality which you have shown through your conduct was the morality you were planning to impart to the youth of tomorrow...it must be said that the school officials have done a work of merit in deciding to remove you from your job...no memento of your sin should remain for future generation. Therefore this court hereby sentences that you shall live. But the child in your womb shall be destroyed. (P-64-65)

Here the society represented by the mock-court, orders her to murder the baby before birth. Ironically the court itself is attempting to do the crime for which she is prosecuted. The prosecution's logic is based on morality and social values and not on legal grounds. There is no reference to law. Again, it is a blatant sign of male's prejudice that in the same offence the woman is accused and the man is only a witness. While delivering the verdict Kashikar says:

Your sin must be expiated. Irresponsibility must be chained down. Social customs, after all, are of supreme importance...motherhood must be sacred and pure. This court takes a serious



view of your attempt to dynamite all this. It is the firm opinion of this court that your behavior puts you beyond mercy. (P-65)

The verdict makes humiliating charges against Benare and attempts to project her as the unforgivable villain of the society. The violence perpetuated by Mr. Kashikar and his associates on Benare can be traced to collective unconscious of men born and brought up in a patriarchal society. Consequently, they take a dig against her by outraging her modesty. Mr. Kashikar goes to the extent of prescribing the old system of child marriage saying:

What I say is, our society should revive the old custom of child marriage. Marry off the girls before puberty. All this promiscuity will come to a full stop. (P-44)

In the patriarchal society the sanctity of motherhood is accepted only when acknowledged by matrimony. The man-made society commands that motherhood is valid only within the bounds of marriage and it desecrates unwed motherhood as a curse for women. Simone de Beauvoir puts this aptly:

Maternity in particular is respectable only for married woman; the unwed mother remains an offense to public opinion, and her child is a sever handicap for her in life. (482)

The play clearly reveals that the social norms in practice are more stringent for women than for men. Men have all the rights to be sinful in the society. In the play Vijay Tendulkar has brought out this hypocrisy of the patriarchal society that excuses men and prosecutes women for the same offence. The double standard of our society is ruthlessly exposed in the play. The playwright in the play has highlighted the patriarchal discriminatory nature of Indian society against women and the ostentatious institutional social organizations.

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