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Silence as the Precariat: Reading Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* as a Discourse on 'Silence'

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Abstract: Silence as an idea or a concept has been used in both literary and theoretical discourses. There are representations of silence either through characters or situations or when silence is being personified, mostly in poetry where it is hailed as contemplative or rapturous leading to sublimity of emotion. Silence, therefore, has a language that is expressive through its nuances. It also is an impasse that leads towards rhetorical questions and throw challenges to the accepted norms. This paper shall engage into one such representation of silence in Vijay Tendulkar's play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*, primarily through the character of Leela Benare. Silence here works as both coercive and liberating when silence becomes a powerful defence to vanquish the 'new woman.' Even if it liberates, that comes as a scathing satire against the conventions that render people voiceless and muted.

Keywords: Silence, precarity, patriarchy, power, submission/resistance.

Silence is a word that has earned both denotative and connotative meanings. Particularly in literature, silence has been understood, sometimes misunderstood, as a state of being quiet, or certain calmness that might or might not unsettle thoughts and emotions, as wordlessness that pertains to either surprise and mutism or even as a sublime state of quietude. Tracing its etymology, the word is derived from the Latin *silere* meaning to be silent. In his discussion on the oblique relation between image and silence, Giorgio Agamben refers to Angerona, the goddess in Roman pantheon whose iconography of sealed mouth and finger raised to her lips spawns varied interpretations – either as a manifestation of silence who shall protect the sacred name of Rome or as the representative of fear and anguish (95). Perhaps, her raised finger to her lips marking a muted state of being signified concealment of the fact that she is herself the sacred name or that she hides anxiety. Believers

argue that she also protected people from *angina*, a cardiac ailment. Such iconicity seems perplexing – she expresses the impossibility of speaking with finger to her lips but ascertains the power of silence as that would be protective of both divinity and disease. Here lies the paradox of silence. Silence is both protective and precarious. It enforces wordlessness, objectifying and muting others. This can be exercised through a disciplinary action or a simple message through a signpost. Silence also stimulates response through the same wordlessness. In case of the former, silence entails submission, a passive acceptance of the action or message. In the latter, silence can communicate. This is, indeed, enigmatic. Silence has this exceptional capability to convey meanings, profound and philosophical while being unobtrusive. Silence is empowering because it enables quiet resistance. What is, perhaps, strange is to write about silence as it would defy the idea of being silent but engage into writing which is also a way of speaking that involves voice. And voice involves body while silence dwells in the realm of spirit. Indeed, meaning is contingent to the interplay of speech and silence, presence and absence. However, silence is seemingly the absence – absence of sound, sonority, vocalisation. But silence has a voice of its own that precedes speech, utterance. Not to highlight the Cartesian mind/body dualism, but one thinks before one speaks. One cannot ignore the hyletic, although sensory, formless and unintentional. Therefore, silence is not outside language; rather, it has a language of its own. The possibility of silence makes speech intelligible and aural without being gibberish.

In the 1759 exhibition at Paris Salon, the French artist Jean-Baptiste Greuze unveiled his painting titled ‘Silence’ (initially proposing two titles, *Le Repos* and *Le Silence*) that depicted a mother imploring her dishevelled son not to blow the toy trumpet as her other children are sleeping. This state of calmness as the painting intends to express point to a state of repose, hinting at the preliminary title, and because the mother beseeches her child, the latter is, therefore, muted to the purpose of peaceful sleeping of the rest. Edgar Allen Poe in his sonnet, “Silence,” speaks of the two-fold nature of the same as sea and shore, corresponding to the physical and the metaphysical: “There is a two-fold Silence – sea and shore/ Body and soul....” When Macbeth shudders to see King Duncan quietly sleeping in death, that also comes as a manifestation of silence. Indeed, death brings silence. Wordsworth, as he addresses silence as a personified entity and not an abstract form, visualises it as a ‘venerable majesty’, as ‘guardian of contemplation and love.’ He adds to his description how the voice of silence reverberates in nature and appeals to the senses, particularly to the eyes.

Significant to note how silence as non-verbal message fascinates the beholder. His wisdom and philosophical speculation enables to imagine silence to be profound yet immense. Silence, thus, offers sublimity to the imaginary minds treading territories unknown, exploring spaces and boundless ways. These are, however, how the poets/thinkers have understood silence to be; these are interpretations. But as readers, in order to recognise the nuanced metaphor of silence, we aim to decipher the ‘meaning’ of silence and in the process treat silence as both subject and object. This dynamicity, according to Thomas Gould whose elaborate discourse on silence in modern philosophy and literature, points to what he calls a ‘prepositional quandary’ and also an ethical perplexity hinting at the interface between self and other (2). Gould begins his argument with reference to Wittgenstein’s statement on silence as an example of ‘metalinguistic negation.’ He quotes from *Tractatus* and points how the German philosopher had considered silence as purely an absence, an apophatic negation when the latter retorts that that which one cannot speak about must be effaced silently, i.e. to pass over in silence (2).

Gould’s Enumeration

Thomas Gould enumerates four binary criteria to understand the signification of the negation of silence, each with relatable implication with the other. When he talks about plenitude and vacuum, he refers to the presence of an absence and the absence of a presence. Intriguing as the chiasmic expression may sound, silence is presumed to be the ‘zero degree of perception or intellection’ which translates into the second binary of silence as both transcendence or immanence. As transcendence promises imperceptibility, human silence oscillates between divine silence and animal silence. Here, as he decodes, human silence connotes voluntary suspension of speech but animal silence marks the ontological incapacity to speech or language. The last binary is that of paradigmatic and syntagmatic silence applicable to human silence. While silence can work as a punctuation in a written text or as any sign which is paradigmatic in nature, the syntagmatic rests on language and recovers silence from ‘negative determination’ as it marks the ‘exposures to silence’ (Gould 3). This reminds one of Pinter and his early plays where silence becomes a language as he skilfully threads silence through voluntary suspension of speech or through ellipses that signifies pause. Indeed, one cannot *not* communicate (Wolf 6). In Pinter, therefore, silence works as communication. To tally with Gould’s

proposition that Beckett's prose conjoins a demand of silence to a necessity of relation (4), so is Pinter in his plays where silence is nuanced. Gould strategically reads Wittgenstein's phrase of 'passing over' as protecting language from being exposed to silence as it would then entail a complete 'not knowing' of silence. Knowing involves language, and to know silence is to not know language for silence has, seemingly, no language. This leads silence to be a precarious entity in the discourse of knowledge, power and language.

The Idea of Being Precarious

So far as has been discussed, silence is understood as absence, a lack, a void. Again, scholars have argued how silence generates potentiality, possibility and power. However, silence, by virtue of being 'unspeakable,' becomes tricky. It is prone to injury through forceful muteness while it is resilient through its subdued resistance. Therefore, as silence undergoes a condition of loss and lack through absence, it is predicated on both internal and external forces establishing the fact that silence is relational. Pramod Nayar elucidates on the idea of precarity and precariousness as a social, cultural condition that can induce emotional stress, pointing to the damage of the social identity as an outcome of disruption of social order or norms which he links either to great ecological disasters or to neoliberal market economy and its ruthless exploitation of labour force. Translating this concept of precarity to a cognitive reading of silence, the dialectics of silence renders it to be precarious in both literary and theoretical discourses. This idea of the precarity of 'silence' shall be the key argument in this paper, looking primarily at the use of silence as a verbal command and as an objectified entity – captivated, cornered, battered and marred.

Reading Silence, Reading Benare

This section of the paper shall engage into looking at the negative ideation of silence as 'not' language, fragile and precarious, as impossibility of speaking, an oppressive dictating tool, as objectified entity regressive in nature with reference to Tendulkar's play, *Silence! The Court is in Session*. As said earlier, silence works through binaries of which plenitude and void being primary. Even before reading the play, the name ('Shantata' in Marathi means peace/silence) itself gives us a sense of silence as a monolithic absent presence (Gould 2) while the full title seems perplexing. If silence comes as an apostrophic 'being' without body producing a sense of both awe and anguish, reference to the court in session leaves us astray. Silence is the

obvious pre-condition of a court in session because court is representative of a legal and even repressive apparatus that calls for discipline, order and legitimacy. Here, legitimacy becomes a significant pointer of social dictum that views human behaviour under certain set parameters laid down by society which is structured through language (of the Father). Indeed, as Catherine Godart in her discussion on Irigaray and the notion of silence begins by probing how silence is both an efficient and vicious weapon of phallocentrism (2). As a matter of fact, her article sets out to subvert phallocentrism using silence as both concept and tactic (2). She retorts, if patriarchy uses silence as a weapon against woman, she claims that silence can be productive.

The play in question revolves around a mock trial, a play within a play, a game that involves all the characters. As the drama becomes intense, we find Leela Benare – an ambitious, intellectual and independent woman – is being marginalised by the adjudicators with the help of witnesses who desperately try to curb her voice, silencing her in the process. The power dynamics at work which suppresses a woman's voice, putting fingers on her lips, vehemently protective of the otherwise violent and oppressive customs and practices in the name of sanctity, is well expressed. Samik Bandyopadhyay begins his introduction to the collected plays of Tendulkar stating, "a strong ethical concern exploring and critiquing the relations of power in all their complex ramifications is the hub around which Tendulkar's plays evolve" (xli). He adds, Tendulkar's preoccupation with the emerging patterns of violence (xli) gets well expressed in this particular play. Significant to note how power and violence emerges in the performative space in the play for *Silence* works through a 'play within a play' structure where Leela Benare is the exploited. This is, perhaps, the result of Tendulkar's keenness to know aspects of power and violence as he had been exploring violence in both individual and institutional level, political forces, judiciary and had found how violence is latent in human behaviour and human psychology. Interests such as these have led Tendulkar to delve deeper into human behavioural aspects, through characters which he believed to be one of the most essential elements for a playwright (the other being structure). Interestingly, the institutional body embodies power while power asserts itself through the institutional body, a reciprocity that enables power/violence to navigate through, and in this network of power dynamics the woman's *body* gets mutilated as it is in collision with the institutional *body*. In this context Bandyopadhyay quotes Tendulkar who then expresses his fascination of the

exploited/exploiter relationship clarifying that such hierarchical relation, although pernicious, is everlasting which perturbs his sensitive mind.

Out of his many lectures delivered on multiple occasions, Tendulkar once said that playwriting begins with the ‘germ,’ the idea which he might have gathered from multiple sources – whether an incident narrated by someone, or a newspaper report, anything that would trigger his mind to think. *Silence* too is the outcome of his travels with his troupe to Vile Parle when he overhears the conversations between actors of a troupe and his impressionistic mind immediately gets the subject matter of his play. Benare is a woman full of life instinct; she believes in the pleasure principle, the gratification of one’s own life through the fulfilment of desires, wishes, aspirations. She aims to drink life to the lees while acknowledging that she is a ‘living woman,’ a school teacher, member of a ‘progressive’ theatre group and also the one who had committed a sin. She accepts her clandestine affairs with her uncle at the tender age of fourteen without even knowing what sin meant. This reminds us of Kamala Das and her unhappy early marriage expressed in her remarkable poem “An Introduction” – “when I asked for love . . . /he drew a youth of sixteen into the bedroom . . ./. . . my sad woman-body felt so beaten” (lines 27-30). For Kamala it was a harrowing experience but Benare was exhilarated for she was a young girl looking for love, not knowing what love is. But as is the convention, a woman cannot express love as love is the prerogative of man. Her experience, whether euphoric or otherwise, had to be muted to live up to the societal expectations, gendered as they are. To quote Das again, “I shrank pitifully” (line 32). Now that Benare is the ‘new woman,’ she assertively claims her right to live, “My life is my own . . . my will is my own. My wishes are my own” (Tendulkar 58) much like Kamala who expresses how every distortions or queerness and even language becomes her own. This agency that Benare develops in due course becomes visible as the play begins. She is flirtatious with Samant, the otherwise compassionate and naïve individual, but later on dissociates herself from him, removing him from her thoughts. Benare’s gestures, opinions that she expresses through her intermittent whispering asides, makes her vulnerable to the domineering practices of patriarchy while her objectification by those who themselves are equally objectified by the same ‘normative’ conventions renders precarity. Intriguing to note how Mrs. Kashikar’s violent abusive words, her desperate attempts to ‘expose’ Benare is predicated on how the former herself is subordinated by Mr. Kashikar. Indeed, her accusations towards Benare is not to other-ise the latter, but is to

inflict pain upon herself. To say the least, this patriarchal system that hierarchizes man over woman only appears to be a great panopticon where *only* a woman is under continuous vigilance, so is her body, and her being. Benare is almost incapacitated in terms of language and body, leaving her destitute.

Any woman who refuses to conform becomes a deviant. As we read through the play, we discover that heterocentrism comes with a condition – the only acceptable holy marriage which legitimises any heteronormative relation and makes it sacrosanct, however unpleasant and even distressing it might be for both a man and a woman. Here, Benare becomes a threat to this citadel of conservative myopia that endorses subjugation in the name of tradition and practice. The phallogentric dogma, however, refuses to assent to any alterity to the systematic subordination of woman as stereotypes. Therefore, Benare falls an easy prey to the indictments like ‘misconduct,’ ‘unlawful maternity,’ ‘heinous blot to sacred motherhood’ and many more. As Catherine Godart points to women’s plight and how women are silenced against any phallic oppression, Benare too is silenced through continuous persecution in the mock-trial which then becomes a personal vendetta. One can see how the game unfolds into a shocking revelation of Benare’s past, present and a dystopic future. She is left jobless, homeless, and above all voiceless. Reading through the first two acts of the play, Benare is found to be vocal, vivacious and participatory, cheerfully interacting with immense self-confidence. She embodies the dramatic space with her emphatic presence. But in Act three, Benare is seldom heard while the other characters express their disgust through verbal lacerations. The mock-trial not only discloses Benare’s personal life to public ridicule, but seems to be a mockery of justice. Being locked in the room with that defective door, both Benare and even silence are taken as hostages, locked and alienated from the rest of the world into a void. Like Benare, silence too melts into the abyss of agony, humiliation, voicelessness and death. She is transferred in the realm of the ‘unknown’ because silence is *lack/loss* of language and therefore not known. Benare’s fate is sealed into unknowability, incommunicability and absolute impossibility of speech. Hence, act three becomes pertinent. As the stage direction implies, Benare’s silence is deliberate, she flinches, she stiffens, she can barely withstand the continuous provocation in the name of justice that denies voice to the exploited-transgressor. Tendulkar in his discussion states that silence has a language of its own. Much like other writers, he too believed that silence can be expressive like dialogues,

‘pauses’ can be a device to enhance the power of the emoted word. In the last act, Benare’s silence, apparently demotivating and devastating, finally empowers her to transcend into an elaborate monologue, a dreamscape,

a disembodied text (Bandyopadhyay xlvi) which leaves others frozen and muted, while Benare hears her own singing voice from a distance. The Living Courtroom then reveals the banality of mundane ordinary existence and the preposterous value system that confines individual freedom into a nexus of moral codes and manners. One cannot ignore the last confession by Benare. It is in tandem to the disciplinary technique that work through a decentralised capillary network where every individual exercises power to discipline others. Therefore, the characters, albeit oppressed, collectively force Benare to remain silent. The mockery is directed more to Silence itself than ‘frivolous’ Benare who should be tamed to the norms of patriarchy. If confession is liberating like Christian confessions, here too after prolonged silence, Benare spurts her heart out, gradually becoming oblivion of her surroundings. Just as she becomes a victim-prisoner in that game, so does ‘silence,’ both a hostage and a victim as silence is at the mercy of the language of others because it is wordless.

Inference

Isn’t it imperative that a court in session will be silent? If so, why does the title need to assert this power of silencing while the court is in session? Why does Benare remain silent when she is severely attacked by the ‘imaginary’ impeachments by Karnik, Rokde, Ponkshe, Sukhatme, Kashikars and even Samant? These are rhetorical questions raised by Tendulkar. In that elaborate monologue, penned much out of theatrical necessity, Benare is transferred to the fantastic to liberate her soul from the claustrophobic ambience that gazed at her to the core. Bandyopadhyay aptly described, her spoken words tread on the unspoken because it remains unheard by others (xlv). Thus, the power politics, vehemently trying to suppress the woman’s voice, leads Benare to profound silence where she fantasises her own voice singing of the loss of nest, the lack of home, space, shelter and love. A woman taking life as pulsating and exhilarating, succumbs to the wounds inflicted, reducing human life to its skeletal form, sans meaning, purpose, love and hope. Thus Silence, as a reprimand, becomes an operating tool to only discriminate and criminalise. It becomes a precariat, vulnerable to pain, to repressive politics, simply a disciplinary manoeuvre that manifests itself through the adjudicators. Silence becomes captive in that locked room with faulty bolt, helplessly negotiating with language and remain under trial. No matter how hard it asserts itself through Benare’s silent resistance and that last flight to the

phantasmatic, its nest is gone and now silence is left at its own mercy. That last peace for Benare when she has that auditory pleasure of listening to her own voice is tormenting, reminding T.S. Eliot's words: "At such peace I am terrified. / There is nothing else beside" (Silence, lines 15-16).

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