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Rewriting Womanhood: A Study of Gender Roles, Feminism, and the Social Imagination in Plays of Vijay Tendulkar

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Abstract: Vijay Tendulkar, one of the most powerful dramatists in modern Indian theatre, has consistently explored the complexities of social structures, especially those rooted in patriarchal traditions. His works engage deeply with the themes of gender roles, power, and resistance, often revealing the systemic marginalization of women through cultural and psychological mechanisms. Feminist readings of his plays uncover not only the realities of gendered violence but also question the performative and socially constructed nature of gender identities. This paper investigates how Tendulkar's drama rewrites womanhood by challenging conventional gender roles and representing the female experience within a complex socio-cultural framework. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity and other feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Juliet Mitchell, this study aims to critique the deeply embedded patriarchal imagination within Tendulkar's works.

Keywords: Vijay Tendulkar, Gender Roles, Feminism, Social Imagination, Feminism, Gender.

Vijay Tendulkar, one of the most formidable voices in modern Indian theatre, occupies a unique position in the canon of post-independence Indian drama, particularly for his unsettling portrayals of gender relations, power hierarchies, and moral ambiguities. His plays, often controversial for their candid portrayal of social hypocrisies, consistently interrogate the structures of patriarchy and the invisible mechanisms through which society marginalizes and disciplines women. From *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)* to *Sakharam Binder* and *Kamala*, Tendulkar stages the female experience not as a secondary narrative but as a central, destabilizing force that confronts and questions the normative gender order.

Tendulkar's drama does not merely portray women as victims of oppression; rather, it examines how femininity itself is manufactured, regulated, and performed in a society steeped in patriarchal ideologies. His female characters become battlegrounds for competing ideologies—between submission and defiance, tradition and emancipation. These textual confrontations align with Judith Butler's assertion in *Gender*



Trouble that “gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 179). Tendulkar’s dramaturgy reveals how gender roles are culturally inscribed performances rather than natural or essential categories.

This paper undertakes a critical analysis of how Tendulkar rewrites womanhood through his dramatic representations, focusing especially on the social imagination that defines and confines gender roles. By engaging with Butler’s theory of performativity alongside seminal feminist voices such as Simone de Beauvoir—who famously declared that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 283)—and Juliet Mitchell, who identifies gender as a “socially conditioned fantasy” (Mitchell 55), the study positions Tendulkar’s theatre as a site of ideological resistance. His plays expose how patriarchal societies manufacture normative femininity through legal, domestic, and sexual control, and in doing so, dramatize the possibilities of subverting those structures.

Further, this paper contextualizes Tendulkar’s plays within the broader Indian socio-cultural matrix where caste, class, and sexuality intersect with gender, compounding the experience of female marginality. The project is not merely to highlight oppression but to interrogate how womanhood can be rewritten—as both critique and counter-narrative—within theatrical space. The aim is to analyze how Tendulkar utilizes the stage as a medium to reflect and reimagine the female condition, challenging the myths of passive womanhood and exposing the performative scaffolding of gender that sustains social inequality.

Theoretical Background: Feminism and the Construction of Womanhood

The redefinition of womanhood in feminist thought has evolved through a critical interrogation of how gender is produced, performed, and policed in society. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Juliet Mitchell, and Judith Butler have played a foundational role in shaping contemporary understandings of gender not as a biological given, but as a social and ideological construct. Their theoretical frameworks offer indispensable tools for analyzing the representation of gender roles and female identity in literary and dramatic texts, particularly in the works of writers like Vijay Tendulkar.



Simone de Beauvoir and the Becoming of Woman

Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), lays the groundwork for modern feminist thought by arguing that womanhood is not a natural condition but a result of cultural inscription. Her famous assertion—"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283)—captures the process by which women are conditioned through education, tradition, and ideology into performing specific roles within a patriarchal order. De Beauvoir critiques the ways in which women are 'othered'—made subordinate through social myths that confine them to domesticity, emotional labor, and sexual objectification. Her existentialist framework interrogates the structures of freedom and choice that are denied to women under patriarchy, which makes her insights particularly relevant to Tendulkar's female characters, many of whom struggle for self-definition in a society that denies them agency.

Juliet Mitchell: Gender as a Socially Conditioned Fantasy

Juliet Mitchell, a Marxist feminist, expands upon these ideas by analyzing how gender roles are perpetuated through cultural and psychological systems. In *Woman's Estate* (1971), Mitchell argues that gender is a "socially conditioned fantasy" (Mitchell 55), meaning that what society understands as 'woman' is a cultural production—constructed through language, ideology, and unconscious desires. Drawing from Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist materialism, Mitchell emphasizes how women are doubly exploited—as workers in capitalist structures and as emotional and reproductive laborers in the family unit. This dual oppression is mirrored in Tendulkar's works, where women like Kamala and Laxmi are commodified within both domestic and public spheres. Mitchell's theoretical contribution is crucial in understanding how cultural texts like plays can expose and challenge the fantasies that sustain gender hierarchies.

Judith Butler and the Performative Nature of Gender

Judith Butler, arguably the most influential gender theorist of the late 20th century, revolutionized feminist thought by proposing the theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). According to Butler, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 43). For Butler, there is no pre-existing identity behind gendered acts; rather, gender identity is constituted by those acts themselves. This perspective dismantles the binary opposition of male/female and reveals gender as a performative construct—something that is done rather than something one is. This concept



is especially useful in analyzing Tendulkar's female characters, such as Miss Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* who defies gender norms through her speech and behavior, yet is condemned for refusing to conform to the societal script of 'woman'.

Butler's emphasis on performance aligns with the theatrical medium itself, where characters enact roles within scripts—mirroring the way gender is performed in society. Her critique of the heterosexual matrix, which organizes desire and identity through compulsory norms, also allows a deeper reading of how Tendulkar's plays interrogate the heterosexual, patriarchal family structure as a site of violence and suppression.

The convergence of these theoretical paradigms—from de Beauvoir's existential critique to Mitchell's cultural psychoanalysis and Butler's poststructuralist performativity—provides a robust framework for re-reading Tendulkar's female characters. They demonstrate how womanhood is not simply lived but scripted, imposed, and enforced through a variety of social, psychological, and performative practices. Tendulkar's dramatization of these structures makes his plays fertile ground for feminist analysis. By invoking these feminist thinkers, this paper seeks to show how Tendulkar's theatrical imagination interrogates the very notion of womanhood, pushing the audience to reconsider what it means to be a 'woman' in a patriarchal society.

Gender and the Social Imagination in Tendulkar

Vijay Tendulkar's theatre constructs a trenchant critique of patriarchal society by dramatizing how gender is imagined, performed, and regulated within oppressive cultural systems. His plays—*Kamala*, *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)*, and *Sakharam Binder*—depict a world where women are not merely subordinated but symbolically manufactured through socio-cultural narratives that deprive them of voice, agency, and autonomy. These women are not merely characters; they become embodiments of how the social imagination enforces gendered expectations.

Juliet Mitchell's assertion that gender is a "socially conditioned fantasy" (Mitchell 91) is particularly resonant in Tendulkar's dramaturgy. Mitchell implies that femininity is not a natural or biological destiny but a fantasy manufactured by social structures such as the family, religion, education, and media. In *Kamala*, the eponymous character is literally purchased from a flesh market to be presented at a press conference as a symbol of journalistic bravery. The irony, however, lies in the fact that the protagonist, Jaisingh Jadhav, who aims to expose the exploitation of women, ends up commodifying his wife and Kamala alike. Kamala is



displayed as a spectacle, her silence underlining the erasure of her interiority and personhood. As Jaisingh boasts of his ethical inquiry, Kamala becomes what Michel Foucault terms the “object of knowledge and power” (Foucault 27)—she is known, categorized, and exhibited, but never allowed to speak for herself.

This symbolic silencing continues in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, where Miss Benare, a schoolteacher, becomes the object of a mock trial that soon spirals into a cruel interrogation of her morality. Her decision to remain unmarried despite being pregnant is condemned by the fictive court, which echoes the actual mechanisms of patriarchal society. The play illustrates how gendered imagination constructs the “ideal woman” as pure, submissive, and self-sacrificial, and anyone who deviates from this script is pathologized. Judith Butler’s theory of performativity becomes highly relevant here—Benare is punished not because she has done something unlawful, but because she performs a womanhood that deviates from normative expectations. As Butler contends, “Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler 190). Benare’s intellectual freedom and sexual autonomy violate the codes of cultural femininity, making her a target of social regulation and ridicule. In Introduction to *Collected Plays in Translation*, Bandyopadhyay comments on *Silence! The Court is in Session* by highlighting the fact that it is, “the first significant modern Indian play in any language to centre on woman as the protagonist and victim, locates its heroine Benare not at acquiescent receiving end, but at point of conflict where as aggressive-transgressor of the sexual mores of her community, she challenges or power in absentia” (Bandyopadhyay 2003: xliv).

In the play *Silence! The Court is in Session* Tendulkar points out that woman, in the eyes of man, is not more than the ‘body’; she is worshiped as goddess in myths and traditions but indeed she does not have will of her own; have no right on her emotions; have no identity of her own to decide, to act or even to think and to love. If she goes beyond of this hardcore reality of the patriarchal society she is beyond to be punished, subjugated and marginalized as victim. This harsh situation of Indian society is reflected perfectly when victimized female character of this play, Miss Benare, breaks down to say a lot to the men in her life and to the society at large:

Again, I fell in love. As a grown woman, I threw all my heart into it; I thought, this will be different. This love is intelligent. It is love for an unusual intellect. It isn’t love at all- it’s worship! But it was the same mistake. I offered up my body on the altar of my worship. And my intellectual god took the



offering- and went his way. He didn't want my mind, or my devotion- he didn't care about them! [Feebly.] He wasn't a god. He was a man. For whom everything was of the body, for the body! That's all. Again, the body! [Screaming.] This body is a traitor! (Tendulkar 1967:118)

In *Sakharam Binder*, Tendulkar further deconstructs gender roles by exploring the psychology of domination and submission. The titular character, Sakharam, justifies his practice of keeping discarded women as temporary partners, believing he is more honest than men who marry and then abuse their wives. However, his patriarchal rationale collapses when Champa, one of the women he 'shelters,' refuses to conform to his expectations. Her assertiveness is met with violence, exposing the fragile ego that patriarchy hides beneath the veneer of moral justification. The play starkly reveals how the social imagination naturalizes the male as the law-giver and the female as the receiver of protection or punishment. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "the representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view" (Beauvoir 143) becomes especially pertinent in this context. Tendulkar's plays confront that male point of view and expose the cultural myths it upholds.

Across these works, Tendulkar does not simply reproduce the structures of gendered oppression; rather, he exposes their ideological underpinnings. His characters operate within a cultural imaginary that punishes non-conformity, silences dissent, and equates womanhood with domesticity, chastity, or servitude. Yet, through the very staging of these tensions, his drama opens a discursive space where patriarchal constructs can be critiqued and challenged. By doing so, Tendulkar contributes to the feminist project of deconstructing essentialist definitions of gender and advocating for a more fluid, context-aware understanding of identity and agency.

Performativity and Female Identity in Tendulkar

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a radical shift from essentialist notions of identity to a conception of gender as a reiterated performance within a regulatory cultural matrix. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler famously states, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 34). This theory challenges the binary logic of man/woman and critiques the notion of gender as a stable, pre-discursive



identity. Instead, gender is seen as an ongoing social performance, constrained and reproduced by cultural norms and expectations.

This framework is particularly illuminating when applied to Vijay Tendulkar's *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe* (*Silence! The Court is in Session*), where the protagonist, Miss Benare, becomes a subject of both performative resistance and social policing. Benare's character disrupts the normative template of femininity by being outspoken, sexually autonomous, financially independent, and intellectually assertive. Her refusal to adhere to traditional roles—those of the nurturing mother, self-sacrificing wife, or submissive daughter—triggers a symbolic trial by her male counterparts. Although the trial is initially a rehearsal, it quickly evolves into a brutal inquisition of her morality, exposing the real anxieties of a patriarchal society threatened by female autonomy. In the context of performativity, Benare's identity as a woman is not simply a biological designation but a cultural construction that she actively contests. Her speech, gestures, and emotional expressiveness all constitute acts that deviate from the socially prescribed script of "ideal womanhood." The punitive reaction she receives mirrors Butler's assertion that deviation from gender norms invites regulation and correction: "Punishment is not external to the gendering process but is the very mechanism by which it is sustained" (Butler 190). Benare is publicly humiliated for having conceived a child out of wedlock, not because of the act itself, but because she disrupts the heterosexual, patriarchal script that inscribes sexual behavior within the institution of marriage. Moreover, the performativity in the play operates on multiple levels—the meta-theatrical nature of the courtroom drama itself underlines the idea that society performs justice, morality, and gender through theatrical rituals. The play stages a performative critique of how womanhood is constructed by others. The mock trial becomes a means through which the male characters, under the guise of "law," exercise ideological power over Benare's body and identity. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is also relevant here: "Visibility is a trap" (Foucault 200)—Benare, by becoming the object of collective scrutiny, is subjected to social discipline that seeks to normalize her behavior and reduce her to a cautionary example.

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist insight, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283), further supports the reading that Benare's gender is not a biological essence but a product of her social



context. However, unlike many women in traditional drama who passively accept their roles, Benare actively resists the imposition. Her final monologue, where she speaks with both rage and sorrow about her dreams and despair, becomes a moment of feminist defiance—an interruption in the narrative that seeks to define her.

Through the character of Miss Benare, Tendulkar dramatizes the politics of gender performance, where deviation from the norm is punished, but also where the very act of speaking—of refusing to be silenced—becomes an act of resistance. Benare’s fall may be tragic, but her articulation of selfhood destabilizes the cultural grammar of gender and opens a space for reimagining womanhood beyond imposed roles and stigmas.

Rewriting Womanhood through Resistance and Subversion in Tendulkar

Although Vijay Tendulkar’s dramatic universe is often steeped in gendered violence, emotional deprivation, and patriarchal tyranny, it also paradoxically enables spaces—however fragile—for resistance, defiance, and redefinition of womanhood. The women in his plays are rarely passive victims; rather, they occupy a complex space between compliance and rebellion, gradually transforming from objects of oppression to subjects of agency. Through these nuanced portrayals, Tendulkar’s theatre participates in what feminist critics call a rewriting of the feminine subject—not by offering utopian resolutions, but by revealing cracks in the structures of domination and the possibilities of subversive agency.

In *Sakharam Binder*, arguably one of Tendulkar’s most controversial plays, the characters Laxmi and Champa are brought into the home of Sakharam, a self-proclaimed reformer who offers shelter to women abandoned or abused by their husbands. Under the pretense of liberation, however, Sakharam creates a system of sexual and emotional exploitation. Laxmi conforms to the role of the docile, pious woman but ultimately collapses under the pressure of this moral double bind. Champa, in contrast, enters with fierce independence and sexual assertiveness—qualities that initially unsettle Sakharam but eventually provoke violent backlash. Her final rejection of Sakharam’s authority marks a pivotal moment of gendered subversion. As she chooses to walk away from the arrangement, she rejects not only Sakharam’s claim over her body and life but also the cultural codes that normalize such control.

This moment aligns closely with Simone de Beauvoir’s notion that womanhood is not an essence but a condition shaped by oppressive social expectations, and that emancipation involves “transcendence” beyond



those impositions (Beauvoir 295). Champa, though not a conventional feminist figure, enacts a kind of existential agency that challenges the traditional roles assigned to women within the patriarchal domestic sphere. Her refusal to accept victimhood—despite the risks of abandonment, poverty, and stigma—asserts a radical autonomy.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is also crucial to understanding these moments of resistance. By refusing to perform the submissive, docile role expected of her, Champa destabilizes the gender script that naturalizes male dominance and female subservience. According to Butler, "subversive performances" can expose the constructedness of gender norms and open up the space for new possibilities of identity (Butler 192). Champa's assertive sexuality and verbal defiance mark such a performance—one that challenges and unmask the performative codes that shape femininity in a patriarchal context.

Tendulkar's other female characters—like Kamala and Benare—also exhibit moments of resistance, though more symbolic than overt. Kamala's silent dignity, though misunderstood, critiques her husband Jadhav's journalistic opportunism and highlights the objectification of women even within so-called progressive frameworks. In *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Benare's final monologue refuses to yield to the narrative constructed by the male-dominated court. Her outburst transforms from a moment of emotional breakdown into a declaration of personhood. She reclaims her story, not by reversing the verdict of the fictive court, but by asserting a voice that patriarchy tried to suppress.

These instances of resistance are not triumphalist; they often end in ambiguity, exile, or continued suffering. Yet, Tendulkar's insistence on giving these women voice and presence reconfigures the theatrical space as a discursive arena where dominant ideologies can be interrogated and deconstructed. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, even when the subaltern cannot speak fully within hegemonic discourse, the very trace of their resistance destabilizes the structures of power (Spivak 294). Tendulkar's women may be silenced, but their gestures, refusals, and confrontations speak volumes about the possibility of rewriting womanhood.

Thus, resistance in Tendulkar's plays is not always radical or liberatory in a conventional sense—it is often precarious, symbolic, or incomplete. However, it is precisely in these fault lines, these subtle acts of non-conformity and reassertion of voice, that his female characters begin to reimagine themselves as subjects



rather than objects. They do not transcend their realities; they re-signify them. And in doing so, they challenge the ideological mechanisms that have defined and confined womanhood for generations.

Conclusion

Vijay Tendulkar's portrayal of women in his plays transcends mere documentation of patriarchal oppression; it constitutes a radical critique of the ideological, cultural, and performative apparatuses that produce and perpetuate gendered identities. His theatre becomes a space where the entrenched structures of power—family, marriage, morality, and social convention—are dramatically exposed, interrogated, and sometimes unsettled. The dramatic form, with its embodied performances and dialogic immediacy, allows Tendulkar to stage the social imagination of gender in real time, revealing how identities are assigned, contested, and sometimes reclaimed.

Tendulkar's female characters—Benare, Kamala, Champa, and Laxmi—each confront different facets of gendered subjugation: sexual morality, domestic confinement, commodification, and cultural silence. Yet, they also embody the cracks in the system, resisting in speech, in gesture, or in refusal. Their resistance, while often incomplete or tragic, is not insignificant. It constitutes what Judith Butler calls “a political act” that destabilizes the illusion of gender as natural and fixed: “The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (*Gender Trouble* 189).

Tendulkar's dramaturgy also aligns with Juliet Mitchell's notion of gender as a “socially conditioned fantasy” (Mitchell 91), and Simone de Beauvoir's existential declaration that womanhood is not a biological given but a role one is compelled to perform (Beauvoir 283). His plays illuminate the mechanisms of this compulsion—from public judgment to domestic coercion—and make visible the ideological work done to uphold gender hierarchies. The characters become sites of ideological struggle, but also of potential transformation. Even when they are silenced, their narratives demand that audiences confront their complicity in systems of gendered injustice.

Moreover, Tendulkar's contribution to feminist discourse in India lies in his ability to Indianize global feminist concerns without flattening the specificities of caste, class, and tradition. His plays reflect the complex intersections of modernity and tradition in postcolonial Indian society, where gender norms are both



deeply rooted and dangerously mutable. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, the voice of the subaltern woman is often mediated or muted by dominant structures (Spivak 294), but Tendulkar's stage provides a momentary amplification of that voice—even if through its distortion or tragedy.

In essence, Tendulkar's dramatic interventions offer not resolutions but critical provocations. They compel us to ask: What is a woman? Who decides? How is womanhood performed, judged, punished, or reclaimed? These are not only questions of theatre but of political urgency. By confronting the performative and contested nature of gender, Tendulkar challenges us to imagine a future where identity is not a prison, but a possibility.

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