



Unmarried Motherhood as an Act of Social Transgression: Leela Benare in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*

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Abstract:

"Matrudevobhava" (mother is god) is considered central to any discussion on mothers or motherhood in India. Indian culture in its various avatars has glorified motherhood and mothers. Motherhood in India has been venerated since antiquity. The significance and centrality of Mother goddesses in Hinduism is well-known. Motherhood occupied the center stage and was integral to the nationalist discourses in the colonial phase. The image of the nation as mother is widely prevalent in the country's cultural imaginary. Indian culture and thought have assigned great significance to the institution of motherhood. Motherhood is seen as the summum bonum of female existence in dominant discourses. While it is true that motherhood is privileged, it is important to understand whether motherhood per se is privileged or if certain conditions are prerequisite to respect and honour motherhood. An interrogation of motherhood as portrayed in various dominant cultural and religious myths, literature, cinema and other narrative forms, it is evident that maternity is indeed privileged and glorified but within the precincts of matrimony. Unmarried motherhood is still largely frowned upon even in the current millennium in the globalized India despite claims of having made progress in different domains.

*This paper examines the implications of unmarried motherhood and its repercussions for a woman as depicted in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session* through the character of Leela Benare. The play *Silence! The Court Is In Session* is an English translation (by Priya Adarkar) of the original in Marathi, *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe!* in 1967. In this play as in most of his other plays, Tendulkar explores unconventional themes. And the spirit of questioning received notions is central to most of his plays. In his plays he examines the rapid changes that were taking place in the society of his times and yet how certain social and cultural mores remained the same. *Silence!* became the first Tendulkar's play to be part of the New Indian Drama movement of the nineteen sixties and the first significant modern Indian play in any language to focus on woman as protagonist and victim. This play became the center of a general controversy. Tendulkar had already been known as "the angry young man" of Marathi theatre and this play distinguished him as a rebel against the established values of an orthodox society.*

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There is only one supreme culture in the world, and it is the men-centric culture, which is all-powerful and omnipresent in all societies. This patriarchal culture and its rules are so ingrained in people's souls that they reduce women to a marginal or subordinate status.



In India, where patriarchy has deep roots in society, it appears to be extraordinarily difficult to achieve harmony and equality in power systems. Patriarchy has bound Indian middle-class society with its stereotypical chains, and its hold on society is unyielding and strong, negatively impacting the lives of women. In his play *Silence! The Court is in Session*, Tendulkar focuses on the patriarchal society, which is the cause of the torment women endure. He described the relationship between a society centred on men and women's liberty and how male dominance leads to mistreatment of women. Men hold all the power in Indian society, which ultimately results in the pitiful condition of women. Power, when gets inappropriate results unquestionably in persecution and dominance, whether it is the mastery of man over women or the reverse. The Indian middle class has the same unbalanced power structure, and male dominance exists as a result of a society ruled by men.

The dominant male perspective casts women into a pit of persecuting of all kinds. Tendulkar depicts this state of women in '*Silence! The Court is in Session*,' which is a result of the patriarchal structure of culture in which women must battle and endure great hardship to establish their place in society. As observed in the cases of Miss Benare, a woman is discarded and must overcome insurmountable obstacles to maintain her presence in society. However, the plight remains unchanging and continuous.

Meenakumari strongly concurs with Tendulkar's assertions.

The Indian culture has an unchallenged tradition of seeing women as secondary selves who must dance to the man's melody in terms of their choice, religion, and lifestyle.... In patriarchal culture, aggressiveness and masculinity are associated with power, while compassion and femininity are associated with weakness. Women are expected to endure male domination in silence and submission. (140)

The severe aspect that Tendulkar demonstrates in this play is that the exploited women hold themselves accountable for this indecent treatment. Vijay Tendulkar appears to present the female protagonist in a different perspective, compelling us to find the concealed privileged insights of a feminine substance and causing us to comprehend their challenges in a male-dominated society. Moreover, he appears to incorporate the Darwinian concept of the struggle for existence, which enabled Miss Benare to fight for her advantages and therefore become the



survivor of the fittest. But her miserable existence will never end. Tendulkar's subsequent piece depicts the same wretched and agonising existence as Miss Benare.

Silence! The Court Is in Session by Tendulkar is an inquiry about the silence of women in patriarchal societies. Women are explicitly sexually exploited, and our Indian culture has subjugated women for a long time, whereas men are permitted to have relationships inside and outside of marriage. However, women are expected to carry the weight of so-called societal norms and values alone, which restricts their freedom to live their lives as they see fit, since they are bound by these shackles. This irony of women's lives is illustrated in Tendulkar's play, which binds their independence. In this regard, Simon de Beauvoir writes in her book '*Second Sex*' (1976):

The advantage man enjoys and which expresses itself from childhood onward is that his vocation as a human being does not in any way conflict with his destiny as a man. However, for a woman to achieve femininity, she must be an object and prey. (Beauvoir 815)

In the play '*Silence! The court is in session*,' Benare is subjected to a sham trial to reveal her own life. The male chauvinists attempt to bring her down by dissecting her personal concerns, and she is severely tormented as a result. All of the men in the play, Sukhatme, Ponshe, Rokde, Karnik, and Mr. and Mrs. Kashikar, are unfinished and unsuccessful in their professions and in life, but they analyse the life of Miss Benare with great fervour and pleasure.

In the practise fake trial, Miss Benare is portrayed as the suspect for the crime of child murder. Initially, everything appears to be positive, but Miss Benare focuses her attention on a subsequent development that turns out to be quite cruel. She was locked in the courtroom on purpose so that she would never be able to escape, even in her lifetime. Before putting up the trial, Benare is advised to remain silent while others scrutinise her life.

Constantly, for the sake of accusation, these men cast unfavourable light on Benare's character. As she is unmarried in her 30s, they assume she is continuously chasing after men. It is quite startling that Mrs. Kashikar, despite being a woman, is incapable of feeling the anguish and suffering of a lonely, wretched lady, is completely unreasonable as a woman, and causes males to perpetuate this stereotype. Miss Benare urges that they refrain from discussing



her personal life during the sham trial, but men were particularly captivated and delighted by it.

Everything she offers in her defence and attempts to clarify her situation is interpreted negatively. The witnesses indicate that she was observed alone with Professor Damle in his room, and the conversation between Damle and Benare is depicted.

Benare exclaims, "You've ganged up on me on purpose!" You have conspired against me!" (93).

Kashikar states, "Our culture should accept the age-old practise of child marriage." Wed the females before they reach puberty. This promiscuity will cease immediately." (98)

Mrs. Kashikar holds herself responsible for every misfortune that has befallen Benare due to the fact that she has a career that has given her a great deal of freedom and because she is unmarried, she moves freely with men.

In this context, Simon de Beauvoir writes,

"...her wings are clipped, and then she is blamed for being unable to fly." (315)

Benare is deemed responsible for the murder of a child, and a finding of guilt is rendered against her. She is a single lady who conceived the child outside of wedlock, and as a result, she has a guilty conscience. The perpetrator of this offence is not responsible for anything if he shares equal responsibility for it. Regardless of whether the assault is against a child created by an unmarried woman, only the woman is targeted, tormented, and made to feel responsible. Tendulkar addresses this assumption in culture regarding why a woman must face this type of attack alone and surrender peacefully. The administrator of the education society, Nana Saheb Shinde, had decided to expel Benare from school. He says, "Being pregnant before marriage is a sin. It would be immoral to allow such a woman to teach in such a state!" (113).

In his arraignment, Sukhatme states that Benare has committed a heinous crime and that rearing the offspring of an unlawful relationship is much worse. Sukhatme, in levelling the allegation against Miss Benare, stated,

The nature of the charge against the defendant, Miss Leela Benare, is very terrible, Your Honor. The culpable woman has tainted the heavenly purity of parenthood with a



heinous stain. Her actions have tainted all social and moral standards. If these socially damaging inclinations are allowed to develop, our nation and its culture will be annihilated. The accusation against the defendant is infanticide. However, the accused has committed a significantly more severe offence. I refer to single motherhood. Our religion and traditions have long regarded unwed motherhood as an extremely grave sin. Milord, infanticide is a horrific deed. However, raising a child from an illicit union is unquestionably more terrible. If it is promoted, the institution of marriage will cease to exist. Unmorality will thrive. Our wonderful vision of a society controlled by tradition will disintegrate before our eyes... The woman holds the weighty duty of fostering the noble values of society. Na 'striswatantryamarhati'. "Women are not prepared for freedom." With the urgent request that the court show no sympathy to the accused and give her the most severe penalty possible for her heinous crime. (Tendulkar 115)

Here, the male-centric societal structure defines the way and serves as an example for women, but is indifferent to men's actions. This approach just exacerbates gender prejudice in society. Again in this play, Tendulkar conveys his position that, according to man, women are nothing more than the "flesh"; she is revered as a goddess in myths and conventions, but in fact she has no free will, no control over her emotions, and no identity of her own to choose, act, think, and love. If she challenges this hard-core truth of the male-dominated culture, she is rebuffed, oppressed, and undervalued as a victim. When misled Miss Benare breaks down to speak a great lot to the men in her life and the community at large, this terrible aspect of Indian culture is depicted magnificently:

"I fell in love once more. As an adult, I put my whole heart into it; I believed this time would be different. This love is clever. It is affection for a peculiar intellect. It's not even love; it's worship. And my intellectual god accepted the sacrifice and departed. He was uninterested in my intellect or my devotion.

[Feebly.] He was not divine. He was a man. For him everything was physical, physical! That is it. Once more, the body! This body is a traitor!" [Screaming] (Tendulkar 118)

Consequently, through this expression, it is clear that woman is socially moulded in such a way that she cannot override the social standards made for her by the male-dominated



society; even her body is controlled to make her feel that she is optional in the society; and she has no control over her body; if she exceeds the limit, she is rejected.

Moreover he says, "You and no one else should never do anything similar again. No trace of your sin should be preserved for posterity. Consequently, the court orders that you shall live. But the child conceived in your womb shall perish" (119).

Benare desperately cries out" No!No!No!- I won't let you do

Kashikar, assuming the job of the Judge in the mock trial insists the social control on the women by saying:

Prisoner Miss Benare, play the closest attention. Your sin requires expiation. Social conventions are of the utmost importance; therefore, irresponsibility must be restrained. Marriage is fundamental to the stability of our society. it - I won't let it happen - I won't let it happen!" (119). The simulated trial has therefore concluded. Motherhood must be holy and untainted. This court takes your attempt to demolish all of this very seriously.... Moreover, the arrogance with which you carried yourself in society after committing all of these offences is the most despicable act of them. The morality demonstrated by your actions was the morality you intended to convey to the young of tomorrow. Consequently, not only today's but also tomorrow's civilization would have been jeopardised by your behaviour. By God's mercy, everything was stopped in time. (Tendulkar 118-119)

From all appearances, Tendulkar's play is prepared to speak the unseen cries and screams of women who are perpetually relegated to the background: "from a hidden location, her own voice is heard singing softly."

"And the wound that's born to bleed
Bleeds on forever, faithfully
There is a battle sometimes, where
Defeat is destined as the end.
Some experiences are meant
To taste, then just to waste and spend" (Tendulkar 74)

Here, through this song, Miss Leela Benare communicates not just her own desire to live fully and pursue her dreams, but also the yearnings of Indian women to tackle the world



and its challenges, regardless of the outcomes. The most remarkable aspect of this trial is the accused individual's silence.

Benare's insistence on remaining silent is indicative of her servitude and vulnerability. She is compelled to admit her guilt, but her traitor in the wrongdoing is released. This is how the culture is designed so that men may control women. "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the creation of men; they depict it from their own point of view, which they mistake for absolute reality," as said by Simone De Beauvoir.

"Their lips are full of magnificent worn-out phrases!" expresses Benare's all-encompassing description of the society's dual perspectives: "Their lips are full of lovely worn-out phrases! And their tummies are stuffed with unfulfilled desires" (117).

Benare is a well-educated, direct, and independent thinker. Since she is a woman, her independent lifestyle is criticised. Tendulkar is criticising the alleged current society, which he claims approves of nearly everything and generally stifles the free will of women. Only Benare is fired from her teaching position after an investigation into her moral character, but Mr Damle, who has an illegal relationship with a woman despite being married, is permitted to continue as a professor.

Thus, sufferer Benare has capitulated to authority and been suffocated terribly by the male-centric hypocrisy wall.

Benare, heartbroken and crushed by the accusations and court verdict, declares, "Life is not worth living" (Tendulkar 73). She discusses the meaning of life in terms of why individuals talk about optimism and ignore the sorrows and concerns of others. What she has endured is disregarded, and she is punished for the evil she unwittingly committed."(73)

In the climax, Benare delivers a magnificent monologue that debunks the chauvinist's faulty beliefs. She describes her melancholy and desolation, her condition of freedom and servitude, and her love-hate relationship with life. Leela Benare's self-protective speech reveals her mental anguish. During court proceedings, the judge's cries of "quiet" suffocate a few of her arguments. Benare is exemplified by sparrows, and more vividly by the devastation she feels at the prospect of losing her child and her career. Benare sings the same music twice in



the performance, which she presumably learnt as a child and now teaches to her kids. Why, oh why are your eyes so red? asked the parrot to the sparrow.

Oh, my dearest friend, what am I to say? Someone has robbed me of my nest. Sad little bird, poor little bird... "Oh, brother corvid, oh, brother corvid, Were you there? Did you see it go?" "No, I have no idea. I didn't see. What do your woes have to do with me?" cried the bird. (Tendulkar 74)

The melody expressly depicts Benare's hardships in life. Benare, like the sparrow, has had a significant portion of her security (or home) taken away; she has lost her work and has little chance of finding a mate. In addition, throughout the trial, when Mr. Kashikar renders his judgement, she must terminate her pregnancy. Despite the fact that this trial has no legitimate legal basis, it will proceed. The prospect that her pregnant child's life is at danger distresses Benare and parallels the theft of the sparrow's house.

Through his plays, Tendulkar criticises how the destinies of most women are identical, regardless of whether they are educated or not, from rural or urban region, or from a high or low social class, with varying degrees of contrast. They are defenceless against men's tactics and lack the strength to oppose unjustified standards. In addition, they must control their emotions, which influences their choice, because they must continue delaying their decision. According to social norms, a guy should be a strong leader, should not listen to his woman, and should use violence to dominate her. Unknowingly, man does this to prove his manhood inside the power structure. Man, continuously views woman as "other" and assigns her subordinate tasks. With this twisted, power-hungry mentality, women are deprived of all their rights. As we see in the play, miss Benare is punished for satisfying their sexual needs in quest of true love and a true man.

Benare fought valiantly but was ultimately vanquished, resulting in a life full of hardship. Regardless of how hard Benare struggles as a woman who has not followed the conventional path for women by electing not to marry and pursuing a new career, The play represents the lives of more traditional women as undesirable alternatives. Kashikar shows little regard for his spouse, regarding her as his property whom he expects to be subservient to him. He constantly criticises her, speaks condescendingly to her, and grants her minimal autonomy. When she proposes being accused for the bogus preliminary, Kashikar tells her



"No!" and complains that "she can't get among a couple of individuals without flaunting." Kashikar, who is a highflier himself, presumably despises being occasionally eclipsed by a woman he disdains. When Benare refuses to reveal her age in court, the men and Mrs. Kashikar taunt her by exaggerating her age as an insult. Mrs. Kashikar determines based on her appearance that she is "more than 32," but when she refuses to answer, they record her age as "at least 34." The men of the court also ridicule her by asking "how [she] managed to remain single till such an advanced age?" They despise the fact that she is unmarried after the normal age for marriage and attempt to embarrass her for it. The men dislike Benare's liberty. They complain, "She's free in every way," implying that she is a physical floozy, which they associate with her unmarried status and profession. In the meantime, Sukhatme asserts that "women are not good for autonomy," saying explicitly what the assembled group has been dancing around.

Benare is a liberated woman whose autonomy is rejected. In a society that is moving away from traditional gender roles, she is a pioneer who fights to pave the road for herself and her pregnant child. Despite being troubled and degraded, Benare is shown as strong and just. Tendulkar had executed a brilliant stroke to conclude the play. Anita Singh (2009) opines, "'Her stories' or women-centered drama hinges on disclosure and understanding of the preconceived notions regarding the disparities between men and women. These techniques, as well as a propensity for non-linear narratives and open-ended finishes as opposed to climaxes, are a few of the characteristics of feminist theatre." Tendulkar demonstrates the psychological cruelty which renders a woman as powerless as tearful. The drama illustrates the pervasive insensitivity to the plight of women in contemporary society. The author has effectively resisted the desire to create a play in which the topic is suitable for sermons on the struggles of a woman with independent thought. However, Tendulkar adds a fresh layer by exploring the silence areas throughout the play's production. He combines the major idea with unique staging techniques. The purpose of the mock court is to distinguish the thin boundary between illusion and reality. In the play, Tendulkar has shown the cruel middle-class morality that suffocates Benare's longing to be a mother. Tendulkar does not propose a remedy to the issue. Mr. Kashikar, the judge who muzzles his own conscience, is a representation of the middle class, who keep silent in the face of all obstacles. Ironically, the troupe is named "progressive," but their acts are astoundingly retrograde.

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