

Women's suffering in Vijay Tendulkar's silence: The court is in session

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Abstract

In the patriarchal system of the society, women are treated inferior to men. There are many social institutes in the patriarchy that work against women and force them to be in the second position. Institutes such as court, education, language, and marriage create conducive atmosphere for men to exploit women. The patriarchal ideology set in such a way that generates power in men and simultaneously makes women weak. There is a long history that shows women's suffering in the male oriented society. Injustice is done to them. A number of ways are there that voice the oppressed women. Of these, literature is one. Many writers have depicted the women's suffering in their literary works. Vijay Tendulkar, a renowned Marathi playwright, focuses on woman's shrill voice in his plays. His *Silence! The Court is in Session*, is one of the masterpieces of his writing that focuses on the brutal practices of patriarchy. It describes the women's exploitation. This research paper is an attempt to focus on the commonly accepted modes of patriarchal system that work against women.

Keywords: women suffering, patriarchy, stereotype thinking, male power, sexual object, court trial, injustice, marriage institute, education institute

Introduction

Silence! The Court is in Session is a translation of the Marathi play *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* penned by Vijay Tendulkar, published in 1968. Priya Adarkar translated this play into English in 1978. The play opens with the travelling of an amateur group which intends to stage a play in a village. The group reaches the actual place in advance. One member of the group is absent, hence the group hires one person from the village and trains him for the role of the absent member. In order to train the local person as well as the part of the rehearsal, the group arranges a mock trial session. In the trial, charges are levelled against the female protagonist, Miss Leela Benare. Male characters – Samant, Mr. Kashikar, Rokade, and Ponkshe – self assign different roles and try to prove the charges. In the meanwhile, the mock trial brings Miss Leela Benare's private life into the light and that becomes the starting point of her suffering.

The play has several references of feminine stereotype thinking. In the patriarchy, a certain approach of looking towards women has been in practice. Tendulkar acutely focuses on the working of feminine stereotype. In the opening scene, Miss Leela Benare tries to attract Samant, a local boy, by saying that she likes him very much. Miss Leela Benare goes close to him when they are alone in the room. She becomes aware of the physical touch of Samant's body, whereas Samant does not react. It is a common practice of patriarchal society to consider woman in association with man. The common consideration is that a man protects a woman throughout her life. For example, the father protects his daughter during her childhood, the husband during her married life and her son during the old age. In the patriarchal society a single woman cannot do anything without getting help from a man. More than this, a woman cannot live alone.

Sukhatme, a lawyer, expresses philosophical views on motherhood. He considers that a woman has a valuable place in the society. They are always worshipped. Therefore, they are

adored for their patience and martyrdom. They accept a lower status by emulating the mythical images of Sita, Savitri, Meera, Gandhari, etc. He says:

SUKHATME. Motherhood is pure. Moreover, there is great-er-a-great nobility in our concept of motherhood. We have acknowledged woman as the mother of mankind. Our culture enjoins us to perpetual worship of her. 'Be thy mother as a god' is what we teach our children from infancy... to protect and preserve her little one (Tendulkar 5)

Women are taught to be shy, to be gentle, and to be delighted as a person. Men often consider women as goddesses, but whenever the matter of treatment arises, they simply exploit them. Though Sukhatme has sacred views about motherhood, he insults Benare several times. He discusses Benare's private life in the mock trial that hurts her a lot.

Mrs Kashikar, another female character in the play, also becomes the victim of the male dominated society. As she does not have a child, she receives many inhumane remarks. According to the patriarchal society, it is the worst failure of women. Childless woman does not have a respectable place in the family or in the society. Most probably, only a woman is held responsible for her infertility. The society puts the blame on women and treats the husbands as faultless.

In the male dominated society, women are prevented from speaking in the family as well as in the public places. They are not allowed to express their views on the domestic issues. It is the stereotype thinking that women do not have any knowledge of the outer world; hence they are not permitted to speak before her husband. In the families, if women try to say something, men always interrupt. Women's voices are always suppressed. There is no consideration of women's feelings. For example, Mr. Kashikar does not even think once about Mrs Kashikar's suggestion. He frequently uses insulting language and threatens her.

In the patriarchy, men disregard women's emotions and

feelings. Men insult women unnecessarily. It is a common experience for women than men pass some insulting comments on them and it results in the degradation of women. In the play a number of insulting comments are made by male characters, especially on Miss Leela Benare. For example, 'she runs after men too much', 'the prisoner sometimes acts as if she were off her head,' 'that is there's sometimes no sense at all in her action.' All these comments blacken Miss Leela Benare's character. In addition, Rokade only sees Miss Leela Benare in Professor Damale's house and this is enough for him to call her a woman of low character. Thus, feminine stereotype thinking works against women.

Working of male power against female is one of the leading reasons behind the exploitation. Miss Leela Benare becomes a soft target and is exploited by the men. There are several examples in which Miss Leela Benare suffers from the male power. The amateur group mentally and physically tortures her. For example, when she refuses to come and stand in the witness box, Mr. Kashikar pulls her forcefully into the witness box. Mr. Kashikar uses his physical strength against Miss Leela Benare. Under this circumstance, she succumbs to the group and finally becomes the subject to physical assault.

In Act Two, Mr. Kashikar resorts to all means to mentally harass her. When Miss Leela Benare does not have the required seriousness during the rehearsal session, Mr. Kashikar reminds Miss Leela Benare that the rehearsal will fail if she does not have the proper attitude. It seems that only she will be held responsible for the failure. On the other hand, all the male characters' casual attitudes seem acceptable. There is no group responsibility. Indirectly, it is obligatory on the part of Miss Leela Benare to be serious in the rehearsal. Being a male, Mr. Kashikar does not use his power against any other male counterpart, rather uses against Benare.

There are a number of torturous decisions taken against Miss Leela Benare. The amateur group blames Miss Leela Benare for everything. In reality, things are quite normal, but in the trial male characters forcefully described the thing excessively. In one scene, Mr. Rokade sees Miss Leela Benare in professor Damle's room in the college hostel. This is enough for others to conclude that Miss Leela Benare is immoral. According to the group, Miss Leela Benare has some unethical connection with Professor Damle. All of them force Miss Leela Benare to accept the blame. There is no evidence against her. Nevertheless, Rokade's statement is sufficient to label her as a woman with low character.

Whatever happens up to the third act is a part of the rehearsal. However, in Act Three, Miss Leela Benare is trapped. The rehearsal gets very close to Miss Leela Benare's private life. It tortures her mentally. Initially, she objects to all this, but all characters disagree with her feelings and continue the rehearsal that covers her private life. It discusses Miss Leela Benare's marriage. There are derogatory remarks pertaining to womanhood. In all this the weapon of male strength works successfully. Mrs Kashikar says:

MRS KASHIKAR. What else? 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 a girl was snub – nosed, sallow, hunchbacked or anything whatever, she – could – still get married! It's the sly new fashion of women earning of that everything that makes everything go wrong. That's how

promiscuity has spread throughout our society. (Tendulkar, *Silence* 9)

Karnik also passes some derogatory remarks on the character of Miss Leela Benare. His remarks are absolutely meaningless. In the witness box, Karnik discloses the conversation between Miss Leela Benare and Rokade. He says that Miss Leela Benare continued to compel Rokade for marriage. He also adds that despite Rokade's refusal, Miss Leela Benare tries to persuade him to reject the guardianship of Mr. and Mrs Kashikar. Karnik's decision to disclose such fact publicly underlines that a woman cannot do anything against a man if he does something wrong to the woman. Karnik's remarks show that Miss Leela Benare's character is bad. This callous remark pains her a lot. However, Karnik does not feel any bad about all this. In short, his behaviour shows that a male power works against women to disregard their feelings.

Moreover, in the male oriented society, women are treated as sexual objects. There are a number of literary works that portrays the image of the woman in such way that she is a sexual commodity for men. Prof. Damle impregnates her and refuses to have any responsibility. For Prof. Damle, she is just an object to be used. He loves Benare's body only. He utilises her body and moves away. In short, Prof. Damle does not consider Miss Leela Benare's feelings.

Women have been treated as a commodity to be used for entertainment and for sexual pleasure. Nana Phadanvis, from Tendulkars' *Ghashiram Kotwal* enjoys Gulabi's lavani show. At the same time, he wants to have sex with a teenage girl, Gauri. His behavioural pattern underlines that women are only for the entertainment of men. *Sakharam Binder* Tendulkar's another play, supports that idea that a man needs a woman for sexual pleasure. Sakharam does not believe in other responsibility, rather he wants to complete his body's hunger. In *Silence! the Court is in Session* Miss Leela Benare's body is used by her maternal uncle and Prof. Damle. Both the men do not want to carry further duties rather they practice the traditional approach of treating women as sexual object.

On the part of social institutions, the functioning of institutes has been always in the favour of male. The social institutes also contribute to make women's life pathetic. In the selected play, the court, part of the social institution, creates a conducive atmosphere for male to dominate female. It is the court that makes Miss Leela Benare's life more pathetic. It directly affects her life. The group charges Miss Leela Benare with 'infanticide'. The mock trial starts with the actions to prove the charge against Miss Leela Benare. Mr. Kashikar, the judge, has a considerable contribution to make Miss Leela Benare's condition more doleful during the mock trial. Though Mr. Kashikar is a judge, he does not show any respect towards his position.

Actually, a judge is expected to listen to both the sides and only then declare his decision. The judge's declaration finalizes whether the accused person is guilty or innocent. However, unfortunately Mr. Kashikar considers one side and declares his decision. The biased decision does injustice to Miss. Benare. There is also no seriousness in Mr. Kashikar's comments. In his comments he generalizes woman and underlines all women are equal and liable to be punished. Though he is a judge, his speech is irresponsible. He says, "If anyone has ruined our society, it's Agarkar and Dhondo Keshav Karve." (Tendulkar 52)

The proceedings of the court also have its own significance.

Throughout the proceedings, the court considers the evidences which are against Miss Leela Benare. It is injustice to Miss Leela Benare. The court considers ethics, morality, and fails to understand emotions and reality. At the end of the play, Miss Leela Benare recalls all the incidents of her past life. She also discloses that men cheated her. It means that her crime is not hers alone. There is a participation of men too. The court only discusses the issues that disturb Miss Leela Benare. For example, the court focuses on her age and marriage and ignores the involvement of men in her crime.

The court fails to pass the expected judgment. Though men are involved in Miss Leela Benare's so called crime, unfortunately only she is punished by the court and the men are exempted from the punishment. This reflects the failure on the part of the law for women. The failure of law is also shown in, *The Outsider*, written by Albert Camus. The novel has several references related to the failure of law and justice for women. In the novel, the police do not punish Raymond, though he severely beat his girlfriend. The Police only warn him in a soft manner and leave him without taking any serious action against him. In this way, the social institution, court, fails to stand by women.

Marriage, as a part of a social institution, too, has a momentous place in the play. The institution's role is quite diplomatic. Virginia Woolf in her literary work *A Room of One's Own* describes the marriage institution's role. She states, "The daughter who refused to marry the gentleman of her parents' choice was liable to be locked up, beaten and flung about the room. Marriage is not an affair of personal affection, but of family avarice." (44) The institution has enough force to make Miss Leela Benare's life worse. First, the lawyer, Sukhatme, harasses Miss Leela Benare by asking why she does not get married until the age of thirty-four. Sukhatme questions Miss Leela Benare's character. He asks for a clarification as how she managed to remain unmarried till such an advanced age. He tries to indicate that Miss Leela Benare must have some amorous relations with male candidates.

The unwritten codes of conduct of marriage institute are strictly observed in the play. Miss Leela Benare is unmarried but she is pregnant. The marriage institute does not allow this. It is not acceptable in the society. The law system does not consider this as a crime, but the society takes it as a severe crime on the part of the woman only. Nobody goes to blame the man who impregnated the woman. Hence the charge of infanticide is filed against Miss Leela Benare. Had she been married, the same charge would not have been filed. According to the social customs marriage is the permission for a woman to have a physical relationship and for motherhood. Whatever Miss Leela Benare has done is an outcome of her love, but the court and social institution do not consider Miss Leela Benare's love rather the institute focuses on the result of her love.

The education system, as a part of the institute, also contributes to the exploitation of women. By profession, Miss Leela Benare is a school teacher and hence the role of education system comes accordingly. When the school officials come to know about the crime and character of Miss Leela Benare, they dismiss her from the job. Though the original criminal, Prof. Damle, is also from the same educational institute, he is not fired from his job. It means the male culprit is set to be free and the innocent female gets punished. The system focuses only on Miss Leela Benare's forged crime, and ignores her skill in teaching. It proves that the system is blind to facts. The system

that teaches the lessons of justice and injustice itself fails to dispense justice.

Thus, the play focuses on the wrong practices of the male dominated society. It also deals with how the middle class and educated women become the victims of the society. The play proves that the patriarchal ideology is designed in such a way that underestimates women. Women are treated as a commodity for sensual pleasure. The institutes are responsible to make women's life pathetic. The court makes women's lives more miserable and the marriage institute questions women only. In the patriarchy, the educational institute does injustice to women. In short, the play acutely describes the women's suffering.

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